

EASY ON YOURSELF



The original intent of this article was to focus on how to handle fertility issues during family holidays, particularly the ones coming up – Mother’s Day and Father’s Day. It makes more sense to me, however, to focus on handling the emotions associated with “infertility” all days of the year so that the holiday ones don’t seem so difficult. This is about proactive practices– learning to walk through each day with a greater sense of balance and equanimity and to walk through what seem to be “family only” days with much strength and hope.

With the diagnosis of “infertility” (I prefer to say one has “fertility issues”) comes sadness, anger, confusion, impatience, feeling out of control, questioning God or the powers that be, and too often a feeling of being different or “defective”. It is a diagnosis that is not “fair” (as in, “Who deserves this???”) and sometimes not even accurate. As I write this, my greatest hope for all of you is the pregnancy you desire.

I have worked with hundreds of women with fertility issues over the past 13 years, and I have learned that the most helpful thing I can do is to teach them methods for remembering that their lives have big pieces other than “infertility”, while at the same time continuing to focus on creating a family. There are many practices and techniques for surviving this balancing act.

Here are some of the practices:

1. Get off “Hold”
2. Find ways to manage your stress – elicit the Relaxation Response through meditation, prayer, deep breathing
3. Find a way to move your body that moves your mind and spirit – dance your way to less stress, or just take long walks
4. Focus on gratitude for all that you do have, and de-focus on what you don’t have – celebrate what you have
5. Choose Optimism over Pessimism
6. Have good social support
7. Think a Different Thought and Harness your Emotions
8. Find a profound connection with your Self, Others and with Spirit/the Divine/God, or whatever you call that higher power
9. Create “family” with spouse and friends

One caveat is important to mention. There is a tendency to think that if a practice or method is not “hard”, it’s not valuable. The truth is that some of the most obvious and easy things we can do are the MOST valuable and helpful in handling fertility issues.

A first easy practice is to get off “HOLD”, i.e., go ahead and buy clothes, go ahead and take a trip, go ahead and buy a car or house or boat – don’t keep waiting and thinking that you can’t do anything because you “might get pregnant”. My question to the women in my groups has always been “What

sense does it make to be trying to create life when you're not having a life??" Life needs to and does go on while you're trying to create a family.

One of the most important practices for handling stress, whether about fertility, job, health, money or relationships, is the Relaxation Response. The Relaxation Response is defined as a "physiological change in the body elicited by such techniques as yoga, meditation, guided imagery, centering prayer, and/or repetition of a word or phrase." In all the mind/body groups I have facilitated over the years, we have always practiced yoga and basic meditation – quieting the mind and body to deal with anxiety, depression and anger. Regular practice definitely works!! Check out a yoga or meditation class, or Qi Gong and Tai Chi – listen to a beautiful meditative music CD – all are practices to slow and relax body and mind.

Getting the old endorphins going is a major way to handle stress and in particular the stress of "infertility". In many of my groups we have danced to fabulous music, whether we could dance or not, and sometimes we have taken long mindful walks. Moving the body is a Very Easy way to feel better about what's going on that is bothersome in life. So, choose an exercise you love, or at least one you can learn to like, and get moving – but no extreme exercise like marathoning or washboard abs!

I believe that it is very important to make a regular practice of being grateful – for our health, for our friends and family, for our pets, for food to eat and a house to live in, for being able to travel, for great jobs and great spouses, and for much that is in the glass half-full. Each day take time to write down 5 things for which you are grateful - try each day to add one or two new ones. Even the act of being grateful keeps you out of the negative and all that seems to be wrong.

A corollary to being grateful is choosing Pessimism over Optimism. The research shows that optimists are healthier and tend to live longer. One can learn to be more optimistic by giving up the "three Ps" of Pessimism – that everything is Personal, Pervasive and Permanent. What this means on the fertility front is that the problem is not limited to just you, it does not mean that everything in your life is wrong, and the situation is not permanent for most people. Now, having said that, sometimes the resolution of fertility issues is in a way that is not planned, but there are many ways to have a family and the issue can be resolved.

One of the most critical elements to handling the "infertility" diagnosis is having social support – from those who are going through the same experience – but also from those who are not and who care about you and want to understand. It does get frustrating when people say things like "Just relax, you'll get pregnant", or "If God wanted you to be pregnant, you would be" or "Your time will come" – most of the time people really don't know what to say, but they think they're helping by saying some of this dumb stuff. What I know for sure is that women supporting women with similar issues is an amazing process – Resolve is a great place to do just that, as are mind/body groups for fertility.

"Cognitive Restructuring" is one of the basic tools used in almost all mind/body groups. The idea is that our thoughts create our emotions and our emotions create our behavior. In cognitive/behavioral therapy, the premise is that we can change our thinking – see the situation in a different way – and therefore change our emotions and behavior. For example: rather than thinking and saying "I'll never have a baby", change that to "Right now I'm having a fertility challenge; I'm doing everything I can

to address that; I don't know what the future will bring. I'm leaving it open." This is a very simple, though not easy, process which takes a lot of practice but which can really help you go through fertility issues with more balance and not being the victim of your own emotions.

For many women, and men as well, dealing with fertility issues often brings up a questioning of or loss of faith – in God or the Divine, in others and often a big loss of faith in self. The thought process can go from "I can't get pregnant" to "I'm a failure"

in 10 short seconds. However, this is a time when trust or faith is even more important because the issue of fertility is often so unpredictable, and who or why people have the problem is not always knowable. Trust in others for support and love is very necessary, but most of all to remember to trust one's heart and intuition about what is right for you and your spouse is foremost. Sometimes this means taking a break from social activities where there are a lot of pregnancies or babies, and sometimes it means missing religious services because of the focus on families. That does not mean you have to give up your personal relationship with God, with yourself, or with family and friends.

When it feels right or important to separate from public activities, it is really helpful to see yourself and your spouse as family, and to plan activities that nurture the two of you. Sometimes this may mean including close friends who understand what you're going through, but if not, create a celebratory time just for the two of you – perhaps in your own home, or perhaps in a get-away place. You are family already and one day you will have additions in the form of children, one way or another.

So, the upshot is to go easy on yourself and nurture yourself as you go through these fertility challenges. Fertility is about so much more than forcing a physical pregnancy – it is about preparing oneself physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually for pregnancy – or if for some medical reason that is not possible, then creating a family in an alternative way. Keep the faith, dance 'til your heart sings, cry when you need to, and then move on!!

Mary Jane White, MS, LMSW

Mary Jane White is a psychotherapist in private practice who specializes in mind/body groups and retreats for women experiencing fertility issues. She is also available for individual therapy/consultations and for speaking engagements. She can be reached at 713.787.9675.