

Stress Reduction Program for Infertility

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Infertility, Stress, and Depression

"Just relax – if you're too worried about it, it won't happen."

"My friend Jennifer had a hard time getting pregnant, and all she needed was a vacation – two weeks after Myrtle Beach, she was pregnant!"

Unfortunately, infertile women hear these kinds of comments all too often. The message from well meaning others is that getting pregnant is simple and natural, and that women who have difficulty with it are just making it too complicated. Women are told they "just" need to relax, and things will happen naturally. These kinds of comments can provoke anger, resentment, and even increased stress in the infertile woman, who often long ago realized that having a healthy pregnancy would not come simply or naturally to her, despite her best efforts. Overcoming infertility is NOT as simple as "just" relaxing.

And yet, stress and infertility are related. Infertility is a stressful experience for most couples, and there is growing evidence that stress makes infertility worse. This handout is designed to summarize the available research on the relationship between stress and infertility, so that you can begin to make informed decisions about how to cope with infertility.

First, infertility is a stressful experience. Most women don't anticipate that having a baby, which seems so easy for so many others, will be difficult or impossible for them. Any time we find a major life goal is blocked, it's natural to respond with anger, frustration, and sadness. These are common reactions in both men and women dealing with infertility. The longer infertile couples have been trying to conceive, the more stressed they become as they experience month after month of disappointment. Research indicates that infertile women are much more likely to be depressed than fertile women, and that that depression peaks in infertile women after two to three years of attempting to conceive. The stress of infertility can affect multiple aspects of your life, including your relationship with your spouse, your relationships with friends and family, your performance on the job, your spiritual life, and your financial well being. A study of 200 couples considering in vitro fertilization (IVF) found that 48% of women and 15% of men described infertility as the most upsetting experience of their lives. Another study compared levels of depression and anxiety in infertile women with patients who had heart disease, cancer, HIV, or chronic pain. The infertile women were every bit as depressed and anxious as all the other patients except chronic pain patients, who were the most depressed.

Second, stress makes infertility worse. Stress has a measurable impact on the body's functioning, wearing it down over time. Our bodies react to stress with increases in adrenaline and other hormones that tend to speed us up, make us more alert, and allow us to respond to danger quickly. This was adaptive when we lived in a time when we had to be on the lookout for attack by wild beasts as we foraged for food. However, in modern life the stress we encounter rarely requires us to get up and run. Yet, our bodies respond in the same way. When stress is chronic, as in the case of infertility, our bodies

are continuously responding to stress. Over time, this takes a toll on us, and creates imbalances in our hormone system that can have an impact on fertility. Recent research indicates that hormone changes caused by stress can interfere with ovulation and can also interfere with fertilization of the egg.

Depression is associated with chronic stress, and there are several studies that show that symptoms of depression are related to increased problems with infertility. One study found that women who had been depressed were more than twice as likely to have problems with infertility than women who had never been depressed. In another study, women who had experienced one unsuccessful IVF cycle were evaluated for depression. Those who had symptoms of depression experienced a 13% pregnancy rate in subsequent IVF cycles, whereas women who were not depressed had a 29% pregnancy rate. Stress affects men's fertility too. One study found that men with previously normal sperm counts were eight times more likely to have low sperm counts after a year or two of dealing with infertility than men who had not encountered infertility.

Third, reducing your stress and depression may improve your fertility. The good news is that there are strategies that have been shown to be effective in reducing stress and depression associated with infertility. Even better, there is evidence that these strategies can actually improve your chances of conceiving and maintaining a healthy pregnancy. Researchers at Harvard have studied the effects of a stress reduction program for infertile women. One study of women who had been trying to conceive an average of 3 years found that after the 10-session program, women demonstrated significant decreases in anxiety, depression, and stress. Further, 38% conceived viable pregnancies within six months of the end of the program. The women who were most depressed and stressed prior to starting the program were actually the most likely to conceive at the end of the program! Another Harvard study included women who had been trying to conceive for 1 to 2 years. They were randomly assigned to either a stress reduction group, a support group, or to a control condition where they received no psychological intervention. Within one year of entering the study, 55% of women in the stress reduction group and 54% of women in the support group had conceived pregnancies that resulted in live births. By comparison, only 20% of the women who had no psychological intervention had viable pregnancies over the next year.

Finally, there are resources available to help you. If, after reviewing this information, you have decided that you would like to work on reducing stress and depression, there is help available. Here at MCG, you can inquire about the Stress Reduction Program for Infertility. This 8-week program is designed to reduce stress and depression and improve your overall sense of well-being. The program is similar to the stress management program at Harvard, and incorporates the use of mindfulness-based strategies. Contact Dr. Amy House at 721-6710 for more information.

There are several books available that you may also find useful. Two books based on the Harvard stress management program are listed below.

- Six Steps to Increased Fertility: An Integrated Medical and Mind/Body Program to Promote Conception, by Barbieri, Domar, & Loughlin
- Conquering Infertility: Alice Domar's Mind/Body Guide to Enhancing Fertility and Coping with Infertility, by Domar & Kelly