

You and Your Partner: Becoming Team Players while Struggling with Infertility

Quick Tips:

- Infertility can strengthen your relationship if you have effective coping skills
- Make talking to each other a priority
- Actively listen to your partner so that he or she feels heard
- Take responsibility for anger you may feel without blaming your partner
- Nurture your relationship with romantic and intimate gestures
- Humor can reduce stress, elevate your mood, and decrease tension

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The American Society of Reproductive Medicine names infertility as “one of the most distressing life crises that a couple has ever experienced together.” Relationships are challenged as the process of infertility is rarely certain and it can be fraught with a host of medical, ethical, and moral decisions. Disruption of lifestyles, priorities, careers, and finances occurs as infertility becomes all-consuming. You and your partner may begin to isolate each other which affects your level of intimacy, communication, and ability to work together as a team. Thus, the infertile couples’ relationship begins to break down. However, research shows that infertility can strengthen a relationship if couples have effective coping skills.

FOLLOWING ARE SOME TIPS FOR COUPLES IN LEARNING TO MEET THE CHALLENGES OF INFERTILITY AS A TEAM:

Talk to Each Other. Taking the time to talk to one another can be challenging in the midst of infertility treatment, careers, commitment schedules, and the surfacing of painful infertility issues. Discover and eliminate the barriers that prevent you and your partner from talking with one another then make communication a priority. Talking for twenty to thirty minutes a day allows you and your partner to reconnect and lessens the chance that distance will grow between both of you.

Listen to Each Other. When people want to talk, they are usually seeking understanding; not necessarily solutions. Active listening can help your partner to feel more understood. To actively listen to what your partner is saying, look into their eyes, acknowledging when they say something by nodding your head, and sitting forward in your chair as they speak. Paraphrasing, out loud, what your partner said, so that you are clear about what you heard, is also part of active listening.

Avoid Blaming Your Partner. Infertility is a couples issue no matter where the physical problem lies. Remember that you are working toward a common goal to have a family and that blaming won’t allow you to have a baby more quickly. Get rid of blame by talking openly about the way you are feeling with your partner. If you are angry, say so. Take responsibility for the way you are feeling by saying that, for example, you are angry as opposed to blaming.

Care for Your Relationship. Due to the rigors of infertility, often romance and unscheduled intimacy fall to the bottom of a couple’s priority list. Decide to spend time together to nurture your relationship by having a romantic dinner at a restaurant you’ve been dying to try, taking up a new hobby together, scheduling a vacation together, or talking about anything other than infertility. Becoming intimate with your partner doesn’t always mean having sex. Simply holding hands means that the two of you still feel connected even though stress may prevent you from saying so.

Quick Tips:

- Recognize you and your partner are fighting for the same result; to have a baby
- Social support is needed to cope with infertility; who will your support system be?
- Understand and have compassion for the different ways you and your partner cope with stress
- Actively look for behaviors you like and let your partner know how much you appreciate them
- Seek information about infertility. Education can help you regain a sense of control
- Consider joining a support group or attending couples counseling to learn new coping skills

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Take Time to Laugh with Each Other. Research shows that humor reduces stress and tension. Even in the toughest of times, it is important to find humor in those situations. Humor between the two of you can allow for sharing something common between the two of you, elevate your mood, and decrease tension in your relationship.

Reflect on Your Goals. Each of you has similar goals as you go through infertility treatments. Most likely, these goals include having a family of your own. Keep your goals in mind when the two of you disagree on infertility issues. Even though you may despise the way your partner handles insurance companies, recognize that your partner is fighting for the same result as you: to have a baby.

Expand Your Support Network. Solely depending on your partner for emotional support can cause him or her to feel pressure and put undue strain on your relationship. Obtain support from outside sources such as from family members, infertile friends, a support group, or co-workers. Choose support persons with whom you know you can discuss your situation and feelings.

Discuss Your Coping Styles. Knowing the ways in which you cope under stress, as well as your partner's, will lessen conflicts and tension when stressful infertility situations do arise. Recognize that there are differences in coping with stress and emotions between males and females but that those differences do not mean that your partner is wrong. While having many similar thoughts and emotions as you, he or she just deals with them differently.

Positively Reinforce Your Partner. During infertility there are many opportunities to point out the things you don't like about each other's actions, thoughts, and feelings due to the high level of stress each of you endure. Actively look for partner behaviors that you do like and let your partner know how much you appreciate them. Your partner will be more likely and willing to act in similar ways the next time if you accentuate the positive.

Educate Yourselves. The saying "Knowledge is Power" holds truth as the more knowledge you gain about your infertility and related issues, the more in control you will feel. Investigate the infertility issues you face and discuss your findings as a couple. As so many couples feel powerless and out of control during the infertility process, education can allow you to anticipate some of the more difficult issues and to regain some control.

Seek Counseling. Support groups for infertile couples can be beneficial. As you listen to other couples struggle with many of the same infertility issues as you, you will feel less isolated and more normal in how you progress through and react to the infertility process. Couples counseling can also help you and your partner learn to communicate with each other and cope more effectively, with important issues, as you endure the infertility process.