

INFERTILITY AND INFERTILITY TREATMENT

STRESS

COPING STRATEGIES OR WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL

- UNDERSTAND AND ACKNOWLEDGE what helps you and what does not help you.
- UNDERSTAND AND ACKNOWLEDGE (and remember) what does and does not help your partner.
- ACCEPT that some of this may differ for each of you.
- ACKNOWLEDGE YOUR FEELINGS and accept that what you are feeling is very difficult but is likely to be completely normal.
- SHARE YOUR QUESTIONS AND FEARS with those with relevant and accurate knowledge – clinic staff (embryologists / nurses / doctors), counsellor. Other folk who have experienced infertility / treatment, support group, family, friends can be really supportive and of great value but this is not the same as clinical information. Allow yourself to be well informed about the treatment process. Do not allow yourself to carry a fear about procedures, or to have questions which, if answered, might reduce your anxiety or stress.
- ACKNOWLEDGE FEELINGS – allow yourself to be upset – to cry, to feel envy, anger / rage, sadness – feeling it is “unfair” – all feelings which are sometimes hard to bear but quite normal. How you behave around others matters, of course, but acknowledging feelings for yourself or with your partner (or someone else you trust) is important.
- BE AWARE OF DIFFERENT LEVELS OF DISTRESS. For partners, there is sometimes a fear that you might be “losing” your partner’s normal personality and some fear that expressions of bitterness, envy, rage or sadness will be permanent – either you or your partner will “stick” as this unrecognisable, wounded person. This is highly unlikely but it can be a very uncomfortable and prolonged, period of being overwhelmed by the situation. Try to keep your nerve and carry on. Have an outlet which helps you to do this or someone with whom you can let off steam, if you are struggling with your partner’s distress. Do keep on reminding your partner that you will “get through it.” The message can be reassuring even when it appears to be having no impact or induces some retaliation e.g. “How do you know?” How you behave with each other matters whatever the outcome of treatment. How you’ve looked after each other matters. Kindness matters. Having successful treatment and a much longed for baby will not sort things if you have begun to feel contempt for each other.
- ALLOW YOURSELF TO GRIEVE – feelings of shock, disbelief, anger, bargaining are normal grief reactions – do not bury them. They do not happen in a tidy order e.g. you can go back to feelings of shock at any time – “Is this really happening to me?”. This too is normal and is a way of making sense and adjusting to what is happening.

- **LEARN TO MOVE THROUGH A DIFFICULT MOMENT OR DAY.** Recognising some of the feelings you are having and that they are normal can help you to cope with the situation i.e. you are not just reacting to the situation but acknowledge instead that you are having the difficult feeling and you are going to **move through it.** Trusting that you will “move through” a challenging moment or day, can help – this can create a fluid feeling rather than feeling trapped or stuck (or panicky) when an overwhelming moment arises. Finding a phrase which helps you do this can often be helpful e.g. “This will pass.”
- **KEEP YOUR CONNECTIONS WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS.** You may have to help them to understand more about infertility, more about what helps you and what doesn’t. You may have to give particular family members or friends a “wide berth” at certain stages if they are not getting things right in what they say or do but do not become isolated. There are often high expectations of one or both partners’ mums, for example, and that they should really understand and say the right things but this is uncharted territory for them too and they can feel paralysed by not being able to take the pain away or help you resolve the situation. The mother-daughter relationship can be particularly tested at this time. If you are being very private about the situation or have told only one or two key people, do review this now and again and see if being private is still working best for you. It may well be but, if it starts to feel more of a pressure and secretive rather than private, you may benefit from talking or widening out who knows what’s happening.
- **COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR PARTNER** – this is probably the most challenging time of your relationship – accept **DIFFERENCE** in how you feel and how the feelings present themselves. Gender plays a big part in this, as does family background/childhood shaping and family culture in how emotions are dealt with. Difference is also useful. Can you imagine what it would be like if you were both dealing with the process in exactly the same way? Try not to blame the other for dealing with things differently – **REALLY LISTEN TO WHAT YOUR PARTNER IS SAYING.** For male partners – you cannot fix this (normal problem solving strategies often do not work), just be alongside if your partner is distraught, crying, for example. Simply acknowledge she/he is having a sad or overwhelming moment/day. Seek support/counselling as a couple if you feel stuck. This is a couple crises, even if one is feeling more resilient than the other.
- **15 MINUTE RULE** – Quite commonly, one of you may want/need to talk about infertility/treatment/feelings more than the other. This is often a gender issue – a female partner often wants to talk and the male partner sometimes dreads the subject coming up again . . . and again. Neither is having her/his needs met. Make an agreement that you will talk about infertility for 15 minutes (however many evenings you decide – possibly every evening at crucial times) but it is time limited and means that both can feel some relief. One partner is not chasing the other with a net (feeling distressed because the other partner won’t talk about it) and the other does not feel trapped because the subject is raised constantly.

- **FIND WAYS TO REDUCE STRESS** – be kind to yourself. Be self-centred (not the same as selfish) and find activities or outlets which help. Some will be tried and tested and work for you in other stressful situations or you might explore something new.
- **DEVELOP RITUALS** which help – maybe it is a regular yoga class, swimming, cycling or just walking regularly. Maybe it is doing a relaxation exercise, meeting a friend on a particular day of the week, regularly, in a particular place – but do the ritual often in a regular way. It helps to anticipate this ritual as a safe and comforting “prop” whilst enduring the disruptive and invasive experience of infertility and treatment.
- **KEEP A JOURNAL** – a simple, pleasing notebook, kept in a private, quiet place. Write it regularly (does not have to be every day but often in the week). This is a particularly good strategy for those who internalise (are private and don’t vocalise) feelings and can reduce a sense of being overwhelmed, confused and struggling.
- **BREATHE** – Practise a deep breathing exercise. Sit or lie somewhere comfortable and quiet. Close your eyes and take long, slow, deep breaths. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Control your breath. Do this 10 times (or 5 if needing a quick fix) and feel yourself releasing the air – slowly and in your control. This can be useful if a working day is particularly stressful – find a quiet room at work or even your car or (at a push) a toilet at work. It interrupts feelings of stress which might be building or may be a sense of dread is developing. It can also be used effectively prior to a challenging event – a social occasion or heading to the hospital for treatment or a scan, for example.
- **RELAXATION EXERCISE** (readily available as a free app on iPhones or download from iPad etc) – also from some health food stores, bookshops (also Glasgow Buddhist Centre or buy online). Find a simple, deep muscle relaxation exercise with a guided fantasy which pleases you e.g. a walk on a beach, through a forest. Use the relaxation exercise regularly – preferably each day. It is very effective if you have “held it together” all day at work and feel a tension/sadness/stress when you drop the brave face when arriving home. Do the exercise quietly before beginning your evening. This is also useful if sleep is disturbed.
- **DIET AND EATING** – Apart from the eating habits you might choose whilst trying to get pregnant (some healthy and sensible, some pretty bonkers), it is helpful to plan to eat little and often. This helps blood sugar levels to balance and can have a beneficial effect on mood. Not eating for long periods or suddenly having a large meal is not good for balancing mood.
- **SMALL ACTS OF KINDNESS** towards yourself and your partner can have a huge impact during the challenging time – **LIKE A SMALL PEBBLE IN THE WATER, THIS CAN CREATE A BIG RIPPLE.** Big gestures are not necessary here. Be creative and keep it simple (a note left somewhere, an unexpected, spontaneous, funny or gentle text in the day can make a difference).

A MINDFULNESS IDEA

ACCEPTANCE

ACKNOWLEDGE – AND ACCEPT – WHAT YOU CANNOT CONTROL

(e.g. treatment process, treatment outcome – rehearsing and being preoccupied by what may or may not happen uses a lot of energy)

TAKE CONTROL OF WHAT YOU CAN REALISTICALLY INFLUENCE

(e.g. how you look after yourself, your partner, which family members or friends you choose to see or not at crucial times, whether you go to social events and how long you stay – popping in to a child's birthday party can be bearable and a good compromise but staying for the whole event might not)

Focussing on learning what helps and what doesn't is good use of energy and will be nourishing for you and your partner during the waiting time and the treatment process.