

FACTSHEET

A GUIDE FOR FRIENDS AND RELATIVES OF PEOPLE WITH FERTILITY PROBLEMS

When someone you care about opens up to you and tells you that they have problems conceiving a child, they are likely to be distressed and extremely sensitive to comments made by others. You may be embarrassed and not know what to say, you may be worried about making them feel worse, or you may not appreciate the implications of this problem for those concerned and the effect it will have on them. A caring attitude can make all the difference, yet it is often hard for people who have not been in the same situation to understand what someone with fertility problems is experiencing and to feel confident about saying the right thing.

Unfortunately, even the most well meaning comments can be hurtful or cause misunderstandings. This article was compiled by a group of people experiencing fertility problems in order to communicate their needs to those who wish to help.

Asking questions

In general, people prefer it if friends and relatives show an interest in their problems and ask how their investigations/treatment/adoption are going and how they are feeling. It is better to ask (or ask if it is okay to ask) than to say nothing because you are afraid of upsetting them as this can give the impression that you don't care.

Acceptance and advice

It is very important that you accept that the person or couple concerned really do have a fertility problem if they tell you so. They may already have been trying for a baby for many months or years, so dismissing their problems by saying that it's only a matter of time, for example, does not help. There is probably a genuine medical reason, even if it hasn't yet been discovered. Advising them not to think about it, not to try too hard, not to get stressed, or offering advice about how their lifestyle may be causing the problem, may make them feel you are suggesting that it's their 'fault', which it is not. It is best to leave advice to the medics.

Reassurance and encouragement

There is little reassurance you can give to a couple about whether they will eventually have a baby. Once they have been trying to conceive for two years or more, the chances of a natural pregnancy each month are very low. Insisting that they will succeed because someone you know did after several years, is like telling someone they WILL have a big win on the lottery. It would be very nice, but you have no way of knowing for certain. They may want to explore alternatives such as adoption to achieve the family they long for.

Fertility treatment offers hope for many people. However, success rates per treatment are not brilliant and fertility patients who eventually get pregnant may need several attempts. Sadly, some people will not have a successful outcome, no matter what treatment they receive. No one can predict the outcome of each treatment cycle or who will eventually succeed. Going for fertility treatment is not like going for a job interview; a positive attitude does not improve the chances of success, so advocating 'positive thinking' is not necessarily helpful. Please try to understand that people may want to be more realistic about the chances of success, as this may help them prepare for a possible negative outcome.

Empathy and support

Infertility is like a bereavement, although there is nothing to focus the grief on as people are painfully aware of what they have lost when they see others with their families, or when fertility treatment is not successful. The grieving process is long and drawn out because they may find it hard to start to come to terms with their loss until they are satisfied they have tried all the options they are prepared to undergo, or can afford.

Infertility is be one of the worst things that people will experience during their life, and trying to cheer them up by telling them that things could be worse or how lucky they are not to have the responsibility of a family, for example, may make them feel you regard their problem as trivial. As a rule, do not say anything to a couple that you wouldn't say to someone who has lost a child. Offering a sympathetic listening ear will probably be the most supportive thing to do. Finding out more about the treatment and how much people go through during a treatment cycle can help to show that you care about what they are experiencing.

Other people's pregnancies

It is impossible to protect them from other people's pregnancies, as having babies is a fundamental part of life. Most would prefer to know about a new pregnancy as soon as possible. They want to be happy for the people concerned, but need time to get used to the idea. Some appreciate it if a friend tells them when they are planning a pregnancy too. Surprise pregnancy announcements in public can be upsetting and it would be kinder to let them know beforehand. Generally, you can make things easier by keeping them informed, but not labouring the subject of pregnancies and babies. Leave it to them to ask for more details if they want to know.

Other people's families

Some people wish to get involved with other people's children as much as possible, especially when they are beginning to think that they may never have children themselves. Others find contact with children and pregnant women a painful reminder of their own inability to have a baby. Therefore, it is hard to know how to treat them. Please do not assume that they will not want to join in and get involved with families, but then do not condemn them if they appear reluctant to socialise in large groups - they may prefer to meet one individual family at a time, when they are not in a minority.

Secrecy

Infertility is often regarded as a failure by those who experience it and it erodes their self-esteem. They may not wish to admit their problem or may only want close friends and family to know. Others prefer it if everyone knows so that they don't put their foot in it. Please respect their wishes in this respect.

Jokes

They are unlikely to see the funny side if you make jokes about their situation or use derogatory terms for men and women with fertility issues. Unfortunately, this does happen sometimes. They may make a joke about their problem at some time if they feel ready to do so, but don't initiate the joking yourself.

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