

FACTSHEET

COPING STRATEGIES

Coping with infertility is challenging, but at certain times of the year, for example Christmas or Mother's Day, it may be particularly difficult. This factsheet gives general advice as well as suggestions for looking after yourself when things are tough. There is no one solution, but having a tool box of resources available will provide some assistance to help you to cope better.

1. Diet and Nutrition

Making sure that you are eating a well-balanced diet with regular meals will help ensure that your blood sugar levels remain stable. This helps to control your energy levels and will keep the blood sugars that control your energy levels stable. Eating healthily will also help you to feel better about yourself and improve your overall sense of well-being.

2. Exercise

Exercise can help to relieve stress, tension, and anxiety. By expelling your excess negative emotions and adrenaline through physical activity, you can enter a more relaxed, calm state of being from which to deal with the issues and conflicts that are causing your anxiety. You can make the time doubly effective by using your exercise as a time for meditation, visualisation or prayer. Start with an affirmation about yourself ("I am loved," "I am okay," "I am a survivor").

It is entirely up to you whether you want to take out frustrations on a punch bag, go for a swim, get on a bike, go to the gym or even go for a daily walk. Any exercise safely releases stored up adrenaline, which is what causes the symptoms of anxiety associated with not coping. This means you'll feel more relaxed and less on edge after you've finished.

3. Breathing

Learning to breathe deeply can help you to keep calm, particularly if you ever experience feelings of panic. During a fearful moment or panic attack, people tend to take frequent shallow breaths. This style of breathing may cause you to experience tingling in your hands and feet and to feel light-headed. Practising breathing deeply when you are coping well will enable you to use this as a resource if you are feeling anxious.

Try this once a day for five minutes:

- Sit down, or lie down on your back. Make sure you are comfortable, loosening any tight clothing.
- Become aware of your breathing, its rhythm, depth or shallowness, and its speed.
- Put one hand on your upper chest and one just below your ribs on your abdomen.
- Slowly let out your breath.
- Gently breathe in, so that you feel your abdomen rise slowly under your hand.
- Breathe out again, feeling your abdomen fall, and make sure you exhale a little longer than you inhaled.
- Pause for a few moments and then repeat the process again.

If you find that only the hand on your abdomen moves, then you are breathing correctly; the abdomen is moving as your diaphragm rises and falls rhythmically. There should be little or no movement in your upper chest; your hand should stay still.

4. Creative Visualisation

Creative visualisation allows you to escape the stress of the moment and create a different reality. You can practice the example below when you are coping well. As with deep breathing, the more you practice, the better you will be able to use this technique as a coping tool.

Try this once a day for five minutes:

- Think of a time you were in control and coping well. This can be a recent event or something from years ago; for example if you were sitting in a school class and knew the answer to a question, it didn't therefore matter if you were going to be asked. The event is almost irrelevant; it's the feeling of coping and of being in control that is important.
- Think for a few minutes about how you felt when this happened; knowing that you were okay, that whatever happened you'd be fine. It can have been for the briefest moment, which is enough to remember the feeling.
- Spend a few minutes allowing the feeling to grow and feel it around you now. It can feel very unfamiliar especially if you've got used to having little or no control over coping and managing infertility.

It may take a few goes, or even weeks of practice, but over time you will start to find that you can recall this feeling quickly. It can help to give yourself a trigger - when you get to the point in remembering your event that the feeling comes to you, try squeezing your index finger with your thumb nail. Begin to associate the pinch with the feeling of being okay, of coping and of being in control. In the future when something catches you off guard you can use your trigger to recall those coping feelings, for example when a pregnancy announcement is made at work.

5. Progressive Relaxation Exercises

If you find it difficult to recall an event to assist in your visualisation, another idea is to practise feeling relaxed so that you can then recall this feeling in the midst of a stressful situation. To progressively relax yourself, find a quiet corner of your home and lie on the floor. Beginning with your toes, tense and relax each muscle group in your body - from your toes to your head. When you are completely relaxed, take a moment to notice how you feel. The more you practice this, the better you will be able to recall this feeling.

There are relaxation exercises you can practise discreetly too:

• **Fast Progressive Muscle Relaxation**

While seated, tense yourself all over, one part at a time.

Pull your toes up to tense some of your leg muscles, tense your thighs, your buttocks, take a deep breath and hold it, tense your arms and fists, your jaw, close your eyes tightly. Hold it for 5 seconds, then let go all at once, and feel the tension leave your system.

• **Quick Relaxer**

Close your eyes and draw your attention and concentration inward.

Smile inwardly with your mouth and eyes.

Say to yourself "Alert mind, calm body."

As you exhale, let your jaw, tongue, and shoulders go limp.

Feel a wave of warmth and heaviness sweep down to your toes.

Enjoy the feeling of peace and relaxation that this brings.

Open your eyes and resume normal activities.

• **Shoulder Shrug**

Try to raise your shoulders up to your eyes.

Hold for the count of four.

Now drop your shoulders back to a normal position.

Repeat three times.

• **Shoulder Rotation**

Rotate your shoulders back, down and around, first one way, then the other.

Do one shoulder, then the other.

Now do both at the same time.

6. Writing

Writing can provide a wonderful space in which to express your feelings. The first step is to find a notebook you feel you would enjoy writing in. It may be important for you to make a ritual of buying a notebook you like or perhaps individual sheets of paper - even sticky notes will provide the most inspiring space for you. You may want to find a small notebook you can carry around with you.

There are many types of writing which may help to channel anxiety or stress. Here are just a few suggestions:

• Free Writing

Free writing can take away the fear of the blank page and of knowing what to write. Start with a thought or a word and write anything that comes into your head for the next five minutes. The aim is to try not to stop writing for five minutes, even if you have to write 'I don't know what to write' until something new comes into your mind.

• Journal Writing

Writing a journal can be done at any time of day. Sometimes the most productive time can be just after you wake up. Write down your waking thoughts, your dreams, hopes for the day or week ahead, your fears and stresses, how you are feeling at that moment both physically and emotionally. Notice bodily sensations, what you can hear, touch or taste and write these down too. The journal page gives you a space just to be with your thoughts and might help you to explore connections between your thoughts and anxieties and your physical responses.

• 'Writing through the Crisis'

If you find yourself feeling the symptoms of not being able to cope, take a moment to stop, find your notebook and write down the following:

- the situation you are in
- the sensations you are feeling in your body
- the thoughts you are thinking now
- the thoughts you were thinking before experiencing the first symptoms
- your present feelings and what you were feeling before the symptoms began.

As you do this, remind yourself that what you are experiencing does not define you - it is simply something that is happening. You are not the symptom.

7. Be Present

Going through fertility treatment or the monthly cycle of hope and disappointment can propel you into a situation where you are thinking back into the past or forward into the future and never spending any time thinking about the present. Always thinking about what has been or anticipating what is to come can be exhausting and may lead to a sense of things getting away from you. This type of thinking can also interfere with simple pleasures such as being with friends or family, making love or making time to be creative.

Mindfulness classes, yoga and meditation all foster a sense of being 'in the moment' and can aid relaxation. Sometimes something as simple as going for a walk, taking photographs, painting or drawing, singing, dancing or playing an instrument can re-engage your mind with the more playful self that stress and anxiety can smother.

8. Connect

Use HealthUnlocked or join our online support group to share how you're feeling and access support from other members, but remember there is more to Fertility Network UK than just the website. You may want to come along to one of our support group meetings or get-togethers to meet up with others and share experiences. If you would just like to talk to someone, you can also get support from our Support Line on: 0121 323 5025.

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