

FACTSHEET

STRESS AND INFERTILITY

In our busy lives we are all vulnerable to stress-related disorders. You have only to look around any meeting, supermarket, office or staff room to see people in various stages of stress and tension. Most people do not even realise it, but signs like foot tapping, clenched hands or teeth, furrowed brows and so on are common.

The plight of those with fertility problems who are under stress does not often hit the headlines, but through no fault of their own, people with fertility problems find themselves caught in a vicious circle. Do they have fertility issues because they are stressed, or are they stressed because they have fertility issues?

We all need a certain amount of stress in our lives or life would be dull, but it is how much stress and how we cope with it that is important. It is necessary to know ourselves and our limitations and not constantly overstretch ourselves. We all have a stress threshold.

So what is stress?

It is anything which gives rise to worry, pain or fatigue, when our personalities are at odds with the environment and inter-personal challenges which confront us. We all have breaking points which relate to different strengths, weaknesses, experiences and the loads we carry, but when circumstances become intolerable something “gives” and we become ill or have a breakdown. The difficulty is that the chain of cause and effect is often unrecognised and the illness is regarded as bad luck or personal weakness. Its symptoms are treated, but the real cause remains.

The idea of the perfect family with children has existed down the centuries and has been promoted by many groups, including the church, political parties and the media. Many people with fertility problems can start to feel out of place among people with children - this is only natural but may heighten the hurt they feel about their own situation.

It can be very beneficial to learn to relax. This combined with a proper diet, exercise and positive thinking will help alleviate tension. There are various relaxation techniques available, but you will need to try them for yourself to see which method works best for you.

The aim of good coping is to think of the four Cs - be COMMITTED, CONFIDENT, CALM and in CONTROL. You may have to review your lifestyle and reduce the amounts of stress in your life in order to achieve this. The secret is to strike a balance to prevent stress becoming a problem. In other words, learn how to live as full a life as possible with minimum wear and tear.

Emotional stress and its relationship to infertility

It is very common for people to tell you when you are experiencing problems getting pregnant that it would happen if you were able to be more relaxed. There are numerous stories about people who have got pregnant as soon as they are put on a list for treatment, or after a holiday or when they've decided to give up on treatment. It is often suggested that the only common factor in all these events is a relief of tension, and that this must be the secret to achieving a pregnancy. In fact, many pregnancies occur as a result of chance and there is rarely any real evidence that the two events are linked.

The one place it is clear that stress can have an impact on fertility is when the stress of fertility problems and treatment leads to a deterioration in love making for a couple, or where there is painful or difficult intercourse, or where people are dissatisfied with their sexual life.

However, it is important that we remember that for many people, even if they are stressed, there is a physical reason for their failure to conceive and that much more stress and hurt can be caused by well meaning people telling them that it will happen if they just relax.

Although reducing stress can't always help you to conceive if there is a physical problem, it can help you cope with fertility problems a little better and anything which reduces your general stress levels will help with your overall sense of well-being.

What can you do?

When suffering from stress, being confronted with a list of things to do, albeit positive ones, can seem like a pressure in itself. One of the most disconcerting symptoms of stress is feeling out of control when the smallest task can assume monumental proportions. It is a good idea to choose just one or two things from the list below. Set yourself small, realistic goals and when you reach them move on to another. The symptoms of stress may take several weeks or months to appear and unfortunately they are unlikely to disappear overnight. However, taking the initial step of acknowledging that you are feeling stressed and then starting to address it often brings positive results in itself.

Be careful to select things you really want to do. If the thought of spending a couple of hours at a yoga class fills you with dread or bores you rigid, then you will derive little benefit from it. Don't do it because you feel you ought to.

If finding time is an issue, then make an appointment with yourself in your diary. Try to keep it, but if you have to cancel then reschedule it immediately, but make sure you don't blame yourself by thinking it is something else you haven't achieved. Instead, just tell yourself that next time you will definitely do it. Keep giving yourself positive messages to replace the negative ones that are so common when we are stressed.

Anything selected from the following suggestions will help reduce stress levels:

- Control your breathing - breath from the diaphragm, not up in the chest. The deep out-breath is the relaxing one. Breathe in and out through the nose and as you breathe out, imagine all the tension and worries melting away.
- Physical exercise counteracts stress. Swimming, walking and yoga are excellent, but make sure you choose something you really want to and are able to do and try enlisting a friend to join you for moral support and company.
- Manage your time off more efficiently so that you have time for YOU. Make 3 lists a) must do list, b) should do list, c) ought to do list, then concentrate on the a) list, putting time for yourself at the head of that list.
- Learn to say NO. Being assertive is all about stating your needs, saying something like "I have too much on at the moment, but to try asking me again another time", will get the message across without hurting feelings.
- A massage can be very relaxing. Reflexology or head massage are a good introduction if you are uncertain about a full body massage, but there are lots of different types of massage becoming available and all will help you relax.
- Try to laugh more, sing more, read light novels or magazines to help yourself relax. Dancing and painting are also great stress relievers. Whatever you choose to do, do it for fun and relaxation.
- Sleep is a good healer. If you can't sleep get up, don't lie in bed worrying about it. Try reading a book, watching light TV, have a milky drink, do some chores even. Limit your caffeine intake if you are having difficulty sleeping and don't have any after 4pm. Try writing down your thoughts, worries and things you need to do earlier in the day so you are not churning them over in your mind when you get to bed at night.
- Learn to meditate or join a relaxation class where you will learn to switch off, control your mind and think positively. Your local library may have details of courses in stress management and relaxation classes.
- Use relaxation tapes. Use especially before going to sleep at night, but at any time during the day to help calm and relax you.
- There are many good books available on how to deal with stress.
- Enlist support from family and friends. If you find this difficult then always remember that the staff at Fertility Network UK are just a call away.

Remember that your partner may also have higher than normal stress levels whilst going through the rollercoaster ride of investigations and treatments. Learn to talk to each other and to share your feelings. Relax together whenever possible. Reduce the lighting, put on soft music and have a nice romantic evening just relaxing together. It is so important that you make time for each other. It is all too easy to forget about your relationship whilst undergoing investigations and treatment and being wrapped up in all they involve. The last thing you need at such a time is relationship problems occurring, so make the effort to keep the romance in your life whenever possible.

Limit your working hours and work to schedule, make goals, but know your limits. If your stress levels are high and nothing is working for you, you should consult your doctor who may refer you to a counsellor. If you are having fertility treatment at a licensed centre then you should have access to counselling services there. Do use them, they are there to help you.

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