

Infertility Survival Guide

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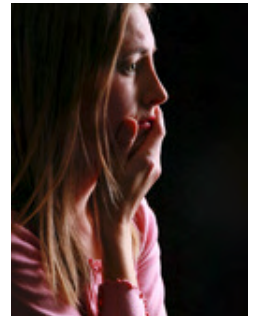


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Introduction

Difficult to Grasp

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Difficult to Grasp

I thought I'd glide effortlessly into motherhood; instead, I stumbled through confusion, despair, and doubt.

The day my friend and colleague came into my little office, pulled closed the door, and squealed her pregnancy announcement, I couldn't haven't been happier for her. Not only was I thrilled my friend was expecting, but I thought her words were prophetic: a special message from the very heart of God especially for me. Just a few nights earlier, my husband and I had decided to start trying to get pregnant. As she told me how she and her husband had decided to start trying and—boom!—next thing they knew she was pregnant, I assumed this was God's special way of telling me everything would go smoothly, and I'd be a mommy in nine short months.

Apparently my gifts of discerning prophecy aren't so keen. God did have a plan for me to become pregnant, but it was less “boom” and more years of testing, procedures, drugs, and boxes and boxes of ovulation predictor kits. When I finally did see two lines on my pregnancy test, it was nearly impossible to believe—a far cry from the way I believed what I thought was news from God!

But infertility does strange things to a person—and a couple. Even though our experience through infertility was mild compared to many people I know, it took us through the complicated journey of stress, despair, confusion, and questioning and doubting God.

I wish everyone could experience pregnancy the way my work friend did—but as you know, it's not the case. About one in ten of us will struggle with infertility. Because it is so common, the “good news” about infertility is that we don't need to walk through it alone. Enough people experience it to find comfort in each other. I hope that's what you find in the pages that follow: not only wisdom and guidance on some issues that surround the attempts to conceive, but also a sense of community and understanding. No one can experience your exact pain and stress—but others do understand your journey.

Blessings,

Caryn Rivadeneira
Managing Editor, Women's and Family Resources
Christianity Today International

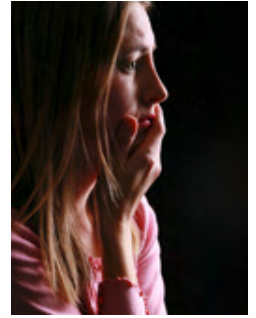


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Leader's Guide

Use for Group Study

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How to use “Infertility Survival Guide” for a group study.

“Infertility Survival Guide” can be used for individual or group study, but if you intend to lead a group study on this, some simple suggestions follow:

1. Make enough copies for everyone in the group to have her own guide.
2. Depending on the time you have dedicated to the study, you might consider distributing the guides before your group meets so everyone has a chance to read the material. Some articles are quite long and could take a while to get through.
3. Alternatively, you might consider reading the articles together as a group—out loud—and plan on meeting multiple times.
4. Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting women to open up.
5. When working through the “Thought Provokers” be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It’s important for women to know that others share their experience. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.
6. End the session in prayer.

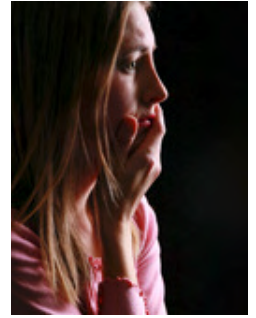


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The Empty Crib

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The Empty Crib

The keys to surviving infertility.

by Kathryn S. Olson

Every month, millions of women in the U.S. face infertility. While they've done all the right things to conceive, when their period arrives, once again they find themselves on that emotional roller-coaster ride of high hopes and dashed expectations. Another month of empty dreams, another month with an empty crib.

Infertility is defined by the medical community as the inability to conceive within one year of unprotected intercourse (six months for women over 35), or the inability to carry a child to live birth. The most frequent causes of infertility include blocked fallopian tubes; poor or absent ovulation, especially in women over 35; endometriosis; and for men, problems such as low sperm count and impeded sperm motility.

According to Jennifer Saake, founder and director of Hannah's Prayer, a nonprofit Internet- and newsletter-based infertility support group:

Women need to remember that infertility is a medical problem. Too often we're told, "If you'd only relax, or go on vacation, you'd get pregnant"! Or we even secretly fear that infertility is God's way of punishing us for some unknown sin. In my own struggle with infertility, I ended up praying and reading my Bible, hoping I'd earn a child. I became angry with God when I did everything according to the 'rules' and didn't conceive. It wasn't until I realized that I was making having a child my idol that I was able to find peace with my situation.

God understands how desperately I need the healthy release of tears when my period starts unexpectedly, or I receive negative test results. The key is not to allow bitterness to blind me to God's compassion in the midst of these trials.

Through the course of these burdens, glimpses of God's compassion and healing can come shining through. Among these glimpses is Kathryn Olson's story. Kathryn, 39, has struggled with infertility for three years. Her story is a poignant reminder not only of the pain, grief, and stress infertile women experience, but also of the faith, hope, and encouragement they can find in God.

—The Editors

It happened in the cereal aisle of my local supermarket. I ran into my third mother-



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and-baby pair of the morning, and grief blindsided me. Feeling as if I'd been punched in the gut, I dissolved into tears, hoping no one would notice.

I'd headed out early that Monday morning to pick up a few groceries, hoping to get a jump on the midday crowds. Several young moms apparently had the same idea, and we smiled at each other as we passed in the aisles. Except I wasn't a young mom. I was a thirtysomething mom-wannabe. And after seeing my third beautiful child—this one a toddler, contentedly munching on a fresh bagel, safely snuggled in his mom's grocery cart—I could no longer hold back the tears.

I'd lost my only child in an early miscarriage more than a year and a half before. Time and God's grace had gone a long way toward healing my heart. But that morning reminded me again that the loss of a child, even a pre-born child, is something a mom never really gets over. But I've learned some important lessons on how to survive infertility:

Be gentle with yourself. It's easy to feel that taking care of yourself is selfish, but sometimes we need a break from people and situations that hurt.

You may need to avoid baby showers for a while, or plan a special time for yourself and your husband on Mother's Day. I'm not suggesting you withdraw from life. But on certain occasions—holidays or celebrations that are especially hard for you—cut yourself some slack.

Sometimes it's not a special occasion but an ordinary one that renews your pain. Maybe it's the anniversary of a loss—any loss—or simply the passing of another monthly cycle that reminds you your dream of motherhood is still just a dream. Whatever the cause, when you're feeling especially low, do something just for you. One of my favorite escapes is to snuggle up on the couch with an afghan, a bowl of popcorn, and a favorite book or video.

Allow yourself to grieve. Since the loss of my baby, funerals are especially hard for me. At the funeral for my husband's uncle a few months ago, my heart broke as I saw the tears of the grieving wife and grown daughters. It was a stark reminder that God sometimes asks hard things of us—such as entrusting our loved ones back into his arms, when we'd much rather keep them here in ours. I even grieve that I was denied this comforting ritual of death—and celebration of a life—for my child.

I now draw great comfort from a Bible verse that never before had much impact on me. "Jesus wept" (John 11:35), the shortest verse in the Bible, describes Jesus' reaction upon visiting his friend Lazarus's tomb. Although Jesus knew he could raise Lazarus from the dead, he was moved to tears by the destruction and grief death leaves in its wake. I'm comforted by that. It means that when my loss—or that of others—leads me to tears, I'm being Christlike. It's okay to grieve.



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Expect emotional ups and downs. Grief comes in waves or cycles. Mine didn't even set in until two months after my miscarriage. Until then, I think I was still in shock. Then, when the magnitude of my loss sank in, everyone else had moved on with their lives, and I felt funny talking about it. Now my grief hits me at unpredictable intervals and unexpected places—such as in the cereal aisle of the supermarket!

I've never been much of a crier, but since my miscarriage, the oddest things set me off. I've learned that's normal. I may be fine with something one day, then the next day feel angry, depressed, hopeless, or weepy at the very same thing.

The hardest emotion I've dealt with is that odd combination of feelings with which I greet the news of each new baby born to a friend. How is it possible to feel such joy and such despair at the same time?

Embrace the life God has for you. I still hope God will bring children into my husband's and my life—either through natural birth, adoption, or a combination of the two. But I choose not to focus on having a baby. I want the life God's chosen for me, whether or not it fits my preconceived notions of what a “happy” or “successful” life looks like. I'm learning that true joy is found in submitting myself to God's plans and letting him mold me into the woman he wants me to be—even when it hurts.

I'll admit it's often impossible to feel good about the “holding pattern” I'm in right now. So I have to make a conscious effort—especially on my “weepy” days—to affirm my trust in a God who loves me and who wants the best for me. A favorite quote from author C. S. Lewis expresses it well: “We are not necessarily doubting that God will do the best for us; we are wondering how painful the best will turn out to be.”

Look for God's comfort. Even in the midst of my pain, I've seen evidence of God's loving care. I'm so thankful for one of my close friends who's experienced two miscarriages. I can talk to her about it any time, and she understands.

Another friend encourages me long distance through e-mail and prayer. One morning last summer, I was taking my mom home from the hospital, where she'd stayed overnight for some tests. As we were leaving, a couple was departing with their newborn. Something about the new father's delicacy and nervousness as he maneuvered the car seat containing their precious bundle hit me like a physical blow. It didn't help that I'd just had a negative pregnancy test after we thought we'd done everything “right” and it looked as though I might have been pregnant. That night I cried myself to sleep. The next morning, my friend Beth sent an e-mail: “Just to let you know I've been praying for you—God woke me around 4:00 this morning, in fact, with you and Timothy and babies on my mind! I felt led to pray for your faith to increase.”



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Wow. Tangible evidence that God had not forgotten me. Beth's prayer for my faith to increase was right on target: I need more faith that God's way is best—no matter how it does or doesn't line up with my desires. Regardless of whether I ever become a mom or not, I've come to realize that, as a character in one of my favorite books says, "I just want to look more like Jesus when I get to the other side of this thing." Hopefully, it will be with a baby in tow, but if not, I know God still really does desire the best for me.

Kathryn S. Olson is a book editor living in the Chicago area. This article first appeared in the May/June 2000 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

Thought Provokers

—In what instances does the pang of infertility strike you the most?

—How have you been able to "embrace the life God's given you" as the author suggests?

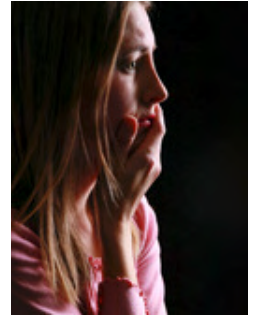


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Married Without Children

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Married Without Children

As our pregnancy tests kept coming up negative, the joy of sex faded, turning it into a mere quest for procreation. Would we ever find that passion again?

by Marshall Allen

The sex life of an infertile couple sometimes seems as if it's a matter of public interest. At least that was our experience.

Sonja and I had been married for five years and had no children, an immediate red flag to nosy people we met at church.

"Don't you know that children are a gift from God?" one man asked.

For those years Sonja and I had asked God every day to bless us with a child. We were aware of their value.

"You'd better get started!" some would say. This would launch us into a conversation about how we'd been "trying" and how we hadn't yet conceived. "At least you're having fun trying, right?" was a comment that usually came with a coy wink.

Wrong. We were *not* having fun "trying." When you're infertile, making love takes on the not-so-romantic air of an assembly line production, where the baby factory yields nothing month after month, year after year. Trying to get pregnant isn't fun when you're stringing together 72 months of forced sex and failed tries at conception.

Sadly, millions of couples suffer from infertility. According to a 1995 study by the Center for Disease Control, there were 2.1 million infertile married couples in the United States, and another 6.1 million women with "impaired ability to have children." Infertility is usually defined as the inability to conceive after one year of unprotected sexual intercourse.

Often, infertility deals a deathblow to a marriage, as a couple deals with years of disappointment and turns against each another. But it doesn't have to be that way. Through a recognition of God's sovereignty, an emphasis on prayer, and making the marriage—not conception—the number one priority, infertility can draw a couple closer instead of destroying them.



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“Unexplained” Infertility

Every infertile couple’s experience is unique, but ours was unique even among people struggling with infertility—we had nothing wrong with us. For years, fertility specialists poked, prodded, and probed Sonja countless times. I’d been required to give a “sample” into a small cup.

Through it all, they found no reasons to explain our inability to conceive. We were young, Sonja ovulated normally and had no conditions that would preclude conception, and my sperm was grade A. Yet we were unable to do what all those people with “unwanted” pregnancies could do: conceive. With straight faces, medical experts diagnosed our condition: “Unexplained Infertility.” Brilliant. Now I know why my faith isn’t in science.

Ovulation graphs based on daily temperature readings littered our bedside table and served as evidence of our condition. For months, Sonja counted days, predicted cycles, and beckoned me to the bedroom when neither of us wanted to be there. Our sex life had morphed from spontaneous passion to hitting “windows in the ovulation cycle,” or feeling the hopelessness of missing a chance to conceive.

Sonja and I could speak authoritatively about the biological nuances of making a baby, but could do nothing about it. Sometimes it seemed we were experts in failure.

It took only a few months before the conflict over forced lovemaking started to take its toll on our marriage. Our pattern of “trying” was similar to that of other couples trying to get pregnant. Sonja would chart her ovulation cycle, then command me to hop in the sack as often as possible during the 48 hours when her egg was supposedly making its way down her fallopian tubes. Repeated sex would have been my ultimate fantasy at 16, but I’d been enjoying the secure and even-keel sex of a married man, and now she was telling me to do it again, and again, and again?! It’s a turn-on the first time, but not the fiftieth.

If a window of opportunity passed without me performing my manly duties, Sonja was stressed, I was frustrated, and we were fighting. It didn’t exactly set the mood for hitting our conception window. Of course I wanted to do my part to conceive, but somehow it felt wrong to sacrifice our healthy love life in a gamble for a child who may never come. In time, we found we both were the root of our problem—Sonja carried the burden of knowing when she was ovulating, and I carried the burden of performing sexually.

Idolizing Pregnancy?

Sonja and I recognized the danger to our relationship, in large part because of our friendship with another infertile couple, Brian and Stacey (not their real names). After two conceptions and one successful birth, Brian and Stacey had gone through five years of secondary infertility (a period of infertility following the birth of a



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child). As the years passed without another pregnancy, Stacey became frantic that she would never have another child.

The years of rote sex brought them to the verge of divorce, Brian told me. It caused damage to their intimacy that was still in the process of being healed nearly five years later.

Through Brian and Stacey, we learned we couldn't put our marriage at risk by continuing to "try" as we had been. We had to make our marriage a greater priority than our baby, which was easier said than done. In our experience, infertility can easily turn a baby—or even a pregnancy—into a form of idolatry.

Scientific fertility advancements certainly contribute to a couple's idea that they can make a pregnancy happen, and therefore to the temptation toward idolatry. But our Christian subculture does that, too. Some Christians put such an emphasis on children being a gift from God that we can easily forget that they are just that—a gift. Children aren't a right, and they're not something people can create through "trying" to get pregnant. I know couples who seem to conceive every time they look at each other with passion, but even these conceptions are God-ordained.

As Sonja and I struggled with infertility, we had to remind ourselves that God's foremost command to us was that we commit our relationship—and our expectations for our family—to his sovereign will.

“Don't Ask, Don't Tell”

Meanwhile, we changed our approach to hitting the fertility window to preserve and protect our sex life.

Sonja instituted a “don't ask, don't tell” policy. Perhaps it was a psychological trick, but Sonja, who knew when she was ovulating, wouldn't tell me about it; she'd just get amorous. Guys are clueless anyway, so this wasn't difficult. When Sonja would lead me to the bedroom, I wouldn't ask any questions, but instead would just enjoy her initiative. We still didn't get pregnant, but our sex life didn't suffer either.

While God protected Sonja and me from an extended period of sexual conflict related to infertility, many other couples have more intense struggles.

What all too few of those couples learn is the need to focus more on love itself—away from the bedroom—and less on lovemaking.

Infertility doesn't have to destroy a marriage. And while it certainly affected ours, it didn't destroy it.

Once Sonja and I decided to submit our design for our family totally to God, he blessed us. No, not with pregnancy, but by making it clear we should adopt. A year



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later, in April 2002, we went to Korea to pick up our son Isaac, who is the light of our lives. Then, the big surprise came a few months later in August, when we found out we were pregnant. Our son Ashton was born this May 1.

People, even Christians, often explain our pregnancy as a result of our adoption. “You’ve finally relaxed!” they say. Or, “See, the problem was psychological all along!” We keep explaining it’s clear to us that God closed our womb for a reason. He had a special design for Isaac, and for us.

Six years of infertility was difficult, but by God’s grace our marriage thrived and we grew in our intimacy with him.

Marshall Allen, a journalist, lives with his family in California. This article first appeared in the Fall 2003 issue of MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP.

Thought Provokers

—*How has the quest to get pregnant affected your sex life?*

—*How has that same quest affected other areas of your marriage?*

—*What can you do to make sure your marriage is a higher priority than a pregnancy?*

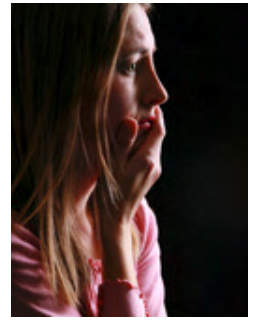


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Living Life Despite the Pain

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Living Life Despite the Pain

How to find contentment in infertility.

by Candy Arrington

My greatest regret is not living life fully during the waiting years. Often, I was totally absorbed with medical procedures, my emotional pain, and, frankly, anger with God. I had a near terminal case of self-pity. Now, looking back, I wish I'd learned to have more contentment in my circumstances.

Some things to consider as you make the most of the waiting years:

1. Remember your first love.

You married because you wanted to spend the rest of your lives together, not to produce a child. Your spouse is the most special person in your life. Keep your romance alive. Make love instead of trying to make a baby.

2. Reject lies.

Satan is a master of deceit, and infertility is fertile ground for his lies. He whispers, "You're defective," "If God really loved you, he wouldn't allow this," and "It's not fair." Reject those lies and claim the truth of Scripture: "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (James 4:7). And this: "I am fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14).

3. Resist negative emotions.

Envy, self-pity, and anger go hand-in-hand with infertility, robbing you of joy. Find someone who's been through the battle of infertility and can encourage you, not join your pity party. Or talk to a professional counselor. (To find an online and/or local support group, try www.bannah.org, a Christian organization dedicated to those who struggle with infertility.)

4. Rejoice despite circumstances.

It's difficult to find anything to be happy about when you're hurting, but it's important to find ways to celebrate. Find something that brings you joy—such as cooking, gardening, tennis, or hiking. Take weekend getaways. Spend time with nieces and nephews. Focus on something besides your situation.

5. Write it down.

Journaling is a great way to "talk" about your fears, frustrations, and heartaches



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without taking others on the journey with you. Constantly talking about infertility with others can have a negative effect on your relationships, so pour out your heart in the pages of a journal. Talk to others about their lives instead of just yours.

6. Consider adoption.

The world is full of children who need loving parents, and there are many ways to adopt. Research the options—private, state agencies, international—and pray about the possibility. A few good online places to start include:

www.christianadoption.com, www.adoption.com, www.cwa.org.

7. Minister while you wait.

Nothing gets your mind off yourself faster than seeing the needs of others. Volunteer to help in a soup kitchen, start a Bible study in a nursing home, help with a hospice program, counsel at a crisis pregnancy center. Also be open to providing words of encouragement for other infertile couples. Focus beyond the “me zone.”

8. Accept God’s control.

Ultimately, despite all the physicians and procedures, God is in control. Romans 8:28 reminds us: “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him.”

Candy Arrington is a freelance writer. This article first appeared in the Fall 2003 issue of MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP.

Thought Provokers

—How difficult is it for you to find contentment while you long so desperately for a child?

—Which of these steps might you find—or do you find—easiest to take? Why?

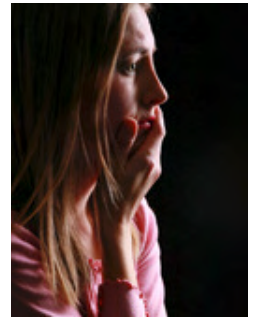


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‘What Does God Think About Fertility Treatments?’

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‘What Does God Think about Infertility Treatments?’

How Christians can navigate the waters between scientific possibility and biblical truth.

by *Melissa and Louis McBurney, M.D.*

Q: Does the Bible say anything about infertility? How can a Christian couple know what medical options are acceptable for achieving conception?

Louis: God is all for pregnancy and having children; the Bible generally reflects the idea of pregnancy as a sign of blessing. But there are, naturally, no biblical guidelines anticipating the vast array of scientific possibilities that are now available to help couples conceive.

I looked up what Dr. Joe McIlhaney, a Christian gynecologist who specializes in infertility, has to say in *1250 Health Care Questions Women Ask* (Focus on the Family). He writes: “It is my personal commitment to do all I can, within my ethical and moral limits, to aid infertile couples in achieving pregnancy. In the process I remind myself and the couple that there are higher goals in life—the protection of the dignity of an individual, the preservation of the family as ordained by God, and the maintenance of healthy relationships within those families. Despite the intensity of their desire to have a child, I believe infertile couples must not and should not be coerced into using any technique they cannot wholeheartedly accept.”

I’d add, from a psychiatric point of view, that mutuality and full agreement between husband and wife is essential whatever is done. If either partner has spiritual or emotional doubts, it would be unwise to proceed.

McIlhaney reminds his readers that “new” procedures are not necessarily wrong, recalling that there were people who refused penicillin when it was new, because “it interfered with the ‘natural’ process of life and death.” He sees laser surgery, in vitro fertilization, and greater knowledge about the hormones controlling reproduction as “exciting advances” that “herald real hope” for couples dealing with infertility.

But he warns couples to evaluate these procedures carefully before moving ahead. He makes a good point: “The fact that these techniques are possible does not eliminate the validity of the feelings and emotions that are a part of life itself.



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Human beings are not meant to go through life as pawns of science, and the ultimate goal of life is not achievement of pregnancy."

Melissa: Being unable to get pregnant is very difficult emotionally. Lots of prayer is advisable, and lots of understanding for each other is necessary. Listening to one another and searching into each other's soul can reap great benefits from this hard time.

Avoid blaming and put-downs at all costs. It is so much better to come through to the other side with your relationship enhanced rather than damaged. Perhaps a support group for each of you would be a good place to express the feelings that might damage your relationship. Being with other men and women who have gone through the same experience might be helpful and reassuring.

Real Sex columnists Melissa and Louis McBurney, M.D., are marriage therapists and co-founders of Marble Retreat in Marble, Colorado, where they counseled clergy couples. This article first appeared in the Fall 1997 issue of MARRIAGE PARTNERSHIP.

Thought Provokers

—*Have you and your spouse discussed how far you both are willing to go with infertility treatments? What have been the results of those conversations?*

—*How have you handled any disagreements here? In what ways have you been unified in your decisions?*

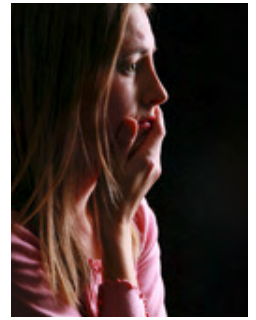


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Secondary Infertility

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Secondary Infertility

When you can't conceive again.

by Penny Schlaf Musco

“So when are you going to have another one?”

For a long time, that was a painful question for me to answer. More often now, since I'm over 40 and my daughter, Miriam, is a teenager, I'm asked: “Do you have any other children?” My reply always catches in my throat: “No, she's my only one.”

I've spent the last 15 years brushing off the subject of pregnancy with a shrug, a light-hearted comment, or a curt remark, often while fighting back tears. Before I had Miriam, I endured a variety of fertility treatments, and my husband, Joe, and I were thrilled to finally hold Miriam in our arms. We figured our infertility problems were over.

Joe and I figured wrong. We staggered through treatments—this time bearing the extra medical expenses on one less income, since I quit my job to stay home with our daughter—before we decided to stop. Because we still longed for another child, we opted to pursue adoption. But our adoption plans either went awry or were prohibitively expensive.

I've discovered I'm not alone. I'm one of more than half a million women in the United States who know the joy of parenthood while experiencing the heartbreak of reproductive failure. I have secondary infertility.

Caught In Between

Like most people, I assumed that despite my initial fertility struggles, because I bore one child, I could have more. But secondary infertility's even more of a shock to those who've had no previous problems. “If someone would have told me I'd be infertile four years ago, I would have laughed my head off,” says Lesley, an Illinois woman. “How could someone who got pregnant twice without trying be infertile?”

Perhaps the bitterest irony of secondary infertility is having to live in a nether world between larger families and childless couples. Helane S. Rosenberg and Yakov M. Epstein, authors of *Getting Pregnant When You Thought You Couldn't*, put it this way: “You have lost your membership in the primary infertility group by attaining the



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Secondary Infertility

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dream (they) still long for. ... Yet you feel you do not really belong to the world of the fertile." They call secondary infertility the "loneliest kind," a depressingly apt description.

In addition to this sense of isolation, I'm aware of a constant inner turmoil, a tug of war between joy in the child I have and heartache over the ones I don't. For years I tortured myself, thinking I must be dissatisfied with my daughter and greedy for wanting more. Rosenberg and Epstein explain that "few couples experiencing primary infertility feel their desire to have a child is inappropriate ... on the other hand, couples with secondary infertility often feel that one should be enough. ... The inability to have more children can be just as psychologically and socially devastating as being childless against your will."

This isn't unique to single-child homes, I've discovered. Harriet Fishman Simons, in her excellent book *Wanting Another Child*, relates the conflict as a mother of two: "I didn't feel I had the right to want more when so many people had no children."

Well-meaning friends and relatives unwittingly contributed to my anguish with not-so-subtle comments that implied I was obliged to provide siblings for my daughter. My mother, an only child, hated not having brothers or sisters, and felt no qualms in telling me I shouldn't let that happen to her granddaughter. To her credit, when Mom finally understood that wasn't possible, she backed off. Still, I've sometimes felt as though I should apologize to everyone for producing only one child.

In It Together

According to research, men and women deal with secondary infertility in starkly different ways. Harriet Fishman Simons's investigation shows a wife is significantly more depressed by her infertility than her husband, mostly because by nature, a man doesn't have to live with a monthly physical reminder of failed conception.

This has certainly been true for my husband, Joe, and me. Joe's had an easier time accepting the fact that there will only be the three of us. For five years after we gave up on medical intervention, I was consumed with my infertility, alternately talking, crying, and raging about it to Joe, who finally confessed he hardly ever thought about it. He thinks it's "unfortunate" we have no more children. I don't resent Joe's calm, stoic attitude; I wish I shared it!

But my greatest struggle throughout this ordeal has been the fear that if my daughter ever died, I'd be childless forever. I've had to prayerfully, deliberately reject my anxiety and not pass it on to my daughter, allowing her the freedom she needs to develop apart from me.

Where Is God?

My biggest comfort is knowing that God completely understands. He's shown me over and over that he's a loving Father who cares more about me, my family, and



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our situation than I ever could. I've chosen to place our lives into his capable hands, acknowledging that he's in control, not me. I've learned, as the apostle Peter commands, to "cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7).

But I've also wrestled with Psalm 127:3–5, which says, "Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are sons born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them." Rather than looking at these verses as the comfort God means them to be, I often took them as a harsh judgment that I didn't "deserve" another child. I have to keep reminding myself that my standing before God doesn't hinge on how many children I have. I've also mourned that I'm not what Psalm 128:3 describes: "a fruitful vine within (my) house; (my) sons will be like olive shoots around (my) table." It's likely there'll be no more "olive plants" around our dinner table. But I'm grateful God's not taken aback by my emotions, that he forgives and heals, that he grieves with me. While God hasn't taken away what the apostle Paul describes as my "thorn in the flesh," he assures me his grace is sufficient even for this situation (2 Corinthians 12:7–10).

Resolution and Acceptance

After 11 years of secondary infertility, I wish I could say I was totally "over it," but I know there'll forever be an ache inside me for the children who might have been. Barbara Eck Menning expresses it best in her book *Infertility: A Guide for the Childless Couple*, in which she states, "My infertility resides in my heart as an old friend. I do not hear from it for weeks at a time, and then, a moment, a thought, a baby announcement or some such thing, and I will feel the tug—maybe even be sad or shed a few tears. And I think, *There's my old friend*. It will always be a part of me."

Just recently, I experienced a sharp pang of envy when the only other family I knew dealing with secondary infertility completed an international adoption of two girls. I worked my way through that, confessing my jealousy and receiving God's comfort, but at the baby shower, I had to slip out as my eyes began to fill. I was happy for them, but incredibly sad that it would never happen to us.

But God gently prods me to keep moving forward. When I lament that others have what I want, I falter in running the course God's set before me (Hebrews 12:1–2). So I stumble on, firmly holding with one hand onto the One who gave his life for me, and with the other hand lightly grasping another gift he graciously bestowed upon me, my precious daughter.

Penny Schlaf Musco, a freelance writer, lives with her family in New Jersey. This article first appeared in the March/April 2001 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.

Thought Provokers

—If you're experiencing secondary infertility, what have you found most difficult about it?



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—How can you seek support for your unique situation?

—Penny quotes a woman who calls infertility her “old friend.” How can you relate to that description in your own journey through infertility?

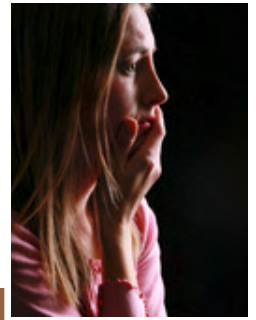


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'Will God Ever Fulfill My Dream of Having Children?'

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'Will God Ever Fulfill My Dream of Having Children?'

A devotional on infertility.

from ChristianBibleStudies.com

When Rachel saw that she was not bearing Jacob any children, she became jealous of her sister. So she said to Jacob, "Give me children, or I'll die!"

Jacob became angry with her and said, "Am I in the place of God, who has kept you from having children?"

Then she said, "Here is Bilhah, my maidservant. Sleep with her so that she can bear children for me and that through her I too can build a family."

So she gave him her servant Bilhah as a wife. Jacob slept with her, and she became pregnant and bore him a son. Then Rachel said, "God has vindicated me; he has listened to my plea and given me a son." Because of this she named him Dan.

Rachel's servant Bilhah conceived again and bore Jacob a second son. Then Rachel said, "I have had a great struggle with my sister, and I have won." So she named him Naphtali.

Genesis 30:1–8

Even if you don't have jealous temperament, jealousy can creep up on you without your realizing it—especially as you struggle with all the questions infertility raises. Let's say a friend who married only three years ago calls to tell you that she's pregnant. How would you feel? On the surface, you'd probably smile and say something nice. But underneath, although you love that friend dearly, you'd have to be the angel Gabriel not to be the least bit jealous. *Why does it come so easily for others, and not for me?* you wonder.

That's when it's good to read the story of Rachel, who was so jealous of Leah, her sister, that she took steps around God's plan for her. Rachel didn't want to wait, so she assigned her maidservant to have sex with her husband to produce a child that Rachel could call hers. Although that action did produce a child, it also spawned an atmosphere of "one-upmanship" between the two sisters. In the end, Rachel's



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impulsive actions and jealousy short-circuited God's perfect plan for her.

Are you short-circuiting God's perfect plan for you in your impatience? (See also Genesis 18:1–15; 21:1–7; 25:20–26; 30:1–8; 1 Samuel 1:5–20.)

This article first appeared in 2001 at ChristianBibleStudies.com. <<there must be another primary source on this, since we didn't come up with this content; JoHannah or Cory might know>>

Thought Provokers

—As you wait, do you struggle with jealousy toward others who are already parents?

—If so, how can you put that jealousy into a better perspective?

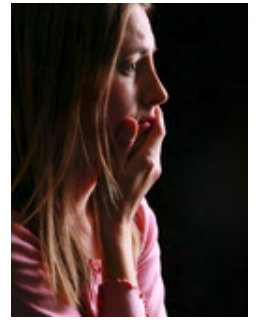


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'My Husband's Fed Up with Treatments'

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'My Husband's Fed Up with Treatments'

What to do when you disagree on how far to go.

by Diane Mandt Langberg

Q: My husband and I were older when we married and haven't been able to become pregnant, so we've been going to infertility specialists. My husband's fed up with all the medical testing, the expense, and the lack of privacy regarding our sexual relationship. But I desperately want to do everything we can to conceive. What should we do?

A: Often couples struggling with infertility end up with a marriage that focuses on having a baby—to the detriment of everything else. Sex, communication, schedules, vacations, finances, and all the other details of life revolve around the hope of pregnancy. It becomes easy to lose sight of marriage as a separate entity. But a marriage means far more than raising children. It begins before children, exists separate from them, and continues long after they've left the house.

Some husbands and wives find taking a break from all the medical "poking and prodding" helps them restore balance to their relationship. When age is a concern, this can be an issue, because a delay can affect the process. However, if it's at all possible, a break can nurture your marriage for another go-round or help clear your heads so you'll be able to decide whether or not to continue treatment.

Many couples fear stopping fertility procedures because then they'll have to confront their grief about not having children. As long as there's one more thing to try, they can forestall the grieving process. Make sure that's not what you're doing—for if you keep insisting on more procedures to avoid grieving, it may result in the death of your marriage.

You and your husband need to stop and carefully assess what's happening. Set aside some time, even if it's just a day, to pray and fast about this issue, giving God control. He alone knows his plan for you and how this is affecting you as individuals and as a couple. Pray that God will make you of one mind, first with him and then with each other.

Diane Mandt Langberg, Ph.D., is a licensed clinical psychologist in private practice and author of Feeling Good, Feeling Bad: What Every Woman Needs to Know about Emotional Well-being (Servant Books) and Counsel for Pastors' Wives (Zondervan).

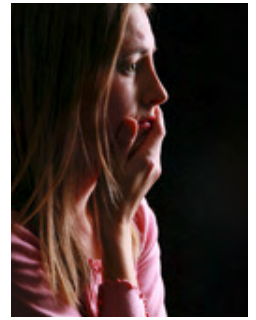


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The Mother in Me

How I learned how to be a “mom” to others, even though I didn’t have children of my own.

by Dandi Daley Mackall

It was the most dreaded day of the year.

Maybe I should just skip church and stay home under my covers. Pretend it’s an ordinary day, I thought. Instead, my husband and I headed for church. Once seated in the back, rather than in my regular pew, I looked around at the other women who seemed to glow this morning. They wore corsages. I buttoned my raincoat, grateful for the morning drizzle that gave me an excuse to hide my uncorsaged dress. As long as nobody says anything, I thought, I’ll be okay.

The music started with Bach. I studied my bulletin and almost believed I’d make it through the service until the pastor got to the microphone . . . “Happy Mother’s Day!” he said to the congregation of proud moms. *Happy Mother’s Day.*

For seven years I’d wanted children, prayed for children—but my womb wouldn’t hold a child. Mother’s Day marked the childless years for me, underscoring what felt like my failure to become a mom. My husband tried to help by giving me a corsage or volunteering to stay home with me. But we’d run out of ideas on how to survive the day.

In church, when all the mothers were asked to stand so we could pray for them, my pain came to a head. I knew women were standing who’d never wanted to become mothers. I’d heard other women complain regularly about the burdens of motherhood. Yet there they stood, and there I sat. Mother’s Day hurt.

It was a week after a particularly grueling Mother’s Day when I began finding a path through some of the pain of my childlessness. I’d been attending an inner-city church on the south side of Chicago, where I taught a small Sunday school class of junior high students. One girl, Tanya, belonged to a gang and brought me to wit’s end dozens of times during the year. That Sunday, I’d spent half our class time trying to get Tanya to stop punching the other girls.



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Tanya didn't stay for church. But as she slipped out the back door, she called to me over her shoulder, "See you around, Mom!" She laughed and made her exit. But before she turned away, I caught her eye. She meant what she said. In some way, I was like a mother to that strong-willed girl who liked to act so tough.

That Sunday, God gave me a glimpse of an extraordinary calling: He could give me *spiritual* children. I could serve as a mother to a world full of people who need the love I have to give!

I started actively praying for children who needed someone to act like a mother to them. As soon as I opened my heart, my mind began filling with possibilities. There was one seventh-grade boy in my class who needed someone to talk to. He thought he should be able to date but his parents wouldn't allow it. All his friends had girlfriends. I didn't tell him anything his parents hadn't already said—but it helped him to hear it from someone else.

Another classmate, Rosa, only came to Sunday school class twice. But God urged me to pray for Rosa "like a mother" long after she left. Many mornings when I awoke, Rosa was the first thing on my mind. I prayed God would reveal himself to her, and that she would listen. I asked God to give her a Christian friend, a classmate to help her say no to temptations. I prayed for her schoolwork, her teachers, her parents.

As I began to experience spiritual motherhood with the children in my Sunday school class, I prayed God would give me unconditional love for them. I soon realized that *telling* my Sunday school kids I loved them didn't go far enough. I had to show it. So I took them to the zoo. Sunday afternoons we played softball in the park. One girl started showing up before Wednesday night prayer meetings so I could help her with her math homework. Several times Tanya stopped coming to my class. Each time, I went looking for her at her home or in the schoolyard. And every time Tanya was amazed that I wanted her back.

I wasn't the only one caring as a mother in the small missions church in inner-city Chicago. I got to know Karen, who studied nights at a city college. Despite a busy schedule, she still found time to look out for Juanita, a 13-year-old living with a grandmother and 11 siblings. Karen made sure Juanita stayed in school and did her homework.

About the same time, Karen's mother took a 10-year-old girl under her wing. She bought the child school supplies and talked regularly to her about the Scriptures. Another woman in the church bought eyeglasses for a boy whose mother couldn't find the time or money to take him for an eye exam.

Mothers are doers—caring unselfishly in practical ways such as giving rides to church or school activities, helping with homework, or babysitting. Or it may show



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up in the form of hospitality—giving someone a place to stay.

Erin and her husband have no children of their own, but their home is the place high-schoolers bring their friends when they want them to see a good, Christian couple, when they want them to hear the gospel, or when the teens themselves want someone to listen.

At my own church, the youth pastor and his wife have no children of their own, but they are like parents to dozens of kids. They have a God-given capacity to love and relate to teens, some of whom barely speak to their own parents. One teenager says, “When they ask me how I’m doing, they really want to know. Most people just want you to say *fine*. I always feel they actually care how I’m doing. So I tell them.”

In some cases, we might see the effect we have on another’s life. But in others, we may never realize this side of heaven the powerful impact we can have on someone by being like a mother to him or her.

That’s the case with Margaret, a widow, who showed unconditional love for her neighbor, eight-year-old Steven, one of the least lovable kids in the neighborhood. He and his mother had lived in a commune for more than a year. Steven never knew his father. Already he’d learned the art of lying. Some days Steven responded to Margaret’s love, coming over unannounced to rake her leaves or bring her the morning paper. Other days, he made fun of “the old lady” behind her back. But *every* day, Margaret showed Steven she was glad to see him. She cut out newspaper articles about his class at school, field trips they had taken, subjects she knew interested him. She asked for a picture of him. Margaret invited Steven and his mother for dinner. And she prayed for both of them.

When Steven and his mother moved away, Margaret grieved. But she knew she’d played an important role in Steven’s life. She tried to keep in touch through cards and letters, but eventually lost contact with them. Yet to this day, she hasn’t stopped praying for Steven and his mother.

Like Steven, Peg is a woman who, as a young rebellious child, benefited from a spiritual surrogate mom. Now 60-something, Peg lights up when she talks about Mrs. Kowaski. “For as long as I could remember, Mrs. K. lived next door alone,” she says. “Her home was a second home to all of us kids in the neighborhood. We didn’t go there for the Bible stories she’d tell us. We went for cookies. But we knew her and trusted her as a mother. To this day, I believe God used her prayers to bring me to Christ. I went the long way around—through alcohol and back. I wish Mrs. Kowaski hadn’t died before I made it ‘back.’ But someday, I’ll tell her about it in heaven.”

Spiritual mothering doesn’t have to be limited to young children. For example, a college friend of mine was known as “Mom” by four sophomores. Only two years



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their senior, she had been instrumental in leading them to Christ. She nurtured them and became their spiritual mother. Age doesn't have to be a limiting factor in spiritual motherhood.

Another friend, Janice, talks about a time when she needed a mother. Her husband left her with three small children and no money. She couldn't make the rent and didn't know where to turn. That's when her aunt stepped in, acting like a mother to her.

"Aunt Ruth, who lived a few miles from me, took me in with all three kids," Janice says. "She listened to me, but never asked about things I didn't want to talk about."

I can't name a person who stands out as being a surrogate mother to me, but several women have offered unselfish care when I needed it most. During one of my toughest seasons of life, my friend Laurie checked on me every day and simply did whatever she saw needed doing—laundry, work on my car, grocery shopping. She'd drop by with salad and fruit to make sure I was eating well. Other women have been around at just the right time, with just the right word of advice or encouragement.

When we long for children but don't have them, a vacuum can develop deep inside us. I believe it's God who gives us the desire for children, the desire for motherhood. Where else would we get a yearning to serve, to love unconditionally, to give unselfish care?

Since God gave us the longing, only God can fill it. God may eventually give you biological children. That's up to him. But right now, this minute, we can allow him to fill that vacuum with spiritual children. We can answer God's call for spiritual motherhood, a powerful and fulfilling role in its own right.

This Mother's Day I'll rejoice, as I have for a number of years now, in my two adopted daughters and my stepson. I'm now legally one of the standing moms in church on Mother's Day. But I pray that I never forget the pain of those past Mother's Days or the high calling God challenged me to.

The call to be like a mother to others hasn't ended because I now have children. There are enough people out there who can use a spiritual mother. As great as the joy of motherhood is, there is another joy not to be missed. John wrote, "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children [spiritual children] are walking in the truth" (3 John 4). Don't miss the joys of spiritual motherhood!

Dandi Daley Mackall is author of Kids Are Still Saying the Darndest Things (Prima), more than 20 books for adults, and more than 100 books for children. This article first appeared in the May/June 1997 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.



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Thought Provokers

—In what ways have you been a “spiritual mom” to others?

—How might God be using this time of infertility to open you to other types of mothering opportunities?

—How difficult or easy is it for you to answer those calls?

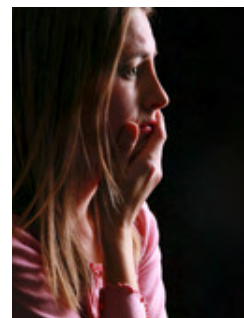


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The Waiting Years

After recording a song about her struggles with infertility, worship leader Shannon Wexelberg realized God wants to use her story.

by Rhonda Sholar

Shannon Wexelberg is familiar with platforms, having led worship at churches and performed as a soloist at concert halls across the country. But it's the platform that she has taken up on behalf of millions of couples that has taken her by surprise.

The 33-year-old vocalist and pianist is known for writing music out of her own need. Her 2002 CD, *Story of My Life*, chronicles her journey from child to woman and recounts the testimony of God's goodness in both joy and uncertainty. The single "In the Waiting" is her dialogue with God concerning her own period of uncertainty.

For nine of their eleven years of marriage, Shannon and her husband Mark have been trying to conceive, only to be labeled infertile. Following a battery of tests, physicians discovered minor complications that will make pregnancy a challenge for the couple, though not an impossibility.

In the song, Shannon asks God the tough question that nearly 6.1 million women confront each year in the U.S.: "I've tried to be strong/ Is there something I've done wrong?/ Cause I've been waiting here so long."

While equal percentages of infertility issues are experienced by men and women (40 percent for each, according to the National Infertility Association), women tend to "bear the greatest emotional burden when dealing with it," says John Van Regenmorter, director of Stepping Stones, the infertility ministry of Bethany Christian Services.

"Infertility for a woman is such a huge issue," agrees Wexelberg. "It overshadows your life in so many ways. You try not to let it, but it's really the heart cry for the majority of women to be a mom."

With 1 in 10 couples affected by infertility (defined as the inability to conceive after one year, or six months for women over 35), Wexelberg has touched a nerve among fans attending concerts or listening to her CD.



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By sharing her story in concert, Wexelberg opens herself up to “a slew of opinions, comments, and advice.” But when she finds the courage to speak from her heart, couples often approach her or post a message on her website (www.shannonwexelberg.com) with similar stories of unfulfilled journeys.

Books and other resources on the topic have been in short supply over the last decade, leaving diagnosed couples to suffer in silence. But the information tide is turning, with nearly a dozen Christian books being published on the subject in the last year.

“People are becoming much more open about the topic,” says Van Regenmorter, who along with his wife, Sylvia, are co-authors of Focus on the Family’s *When the Cradle Is Empty: Answering Tough Questions About Infertility*. “The whole area of sexuality and reproductive technology is becoming en vogue. The media has played a large part because of their coverage on the advances in multiple births, in vitro fertilization, and embryo donations.”

While many perceive the waiting season as God pushing the pause button in their lives, Wexelberg says God’s delays are not necessarily his denials; it’s just his time to work in us.

“You go through moments of feeling very assured of the Lord’s presence and his perfect plan, and other moments you question that he cares at all,” she adds.

The Wexelbergs, who live outside of Denver, where Shannon is associate worship leader at Faith Bible Chapel in Arvada, Colorado, are still weighing their options—keep waiting, consider high-tech procedures, or pursue adoption.

“We’re at this place of praying that God will give us a biological child,”

says Wexelberg. “But we’re still very open to adoption if that’s what he

has for us.”

Rhonda Sholar is a freelance writer and editor living in Orange City, Florida. This article first appeared in the November/December <year> issue of TODAY’S CHRISTIAN.

Thought Provokers

—John Van Regenmorter said women tend to “bear the greatest emotional burden when dealing with [infertility].” What’s been your experience with this?

—Shannon Wexelberg says, “God’s delays are not necessarily his denials.” What does that statement mean to you in relation to your own journey through infertility?

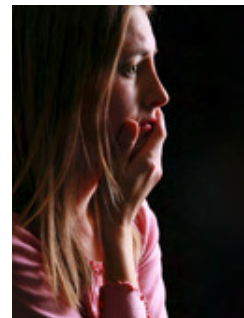


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'They Want Grandkids!'

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'They Want Grandkids!'

When your family bugs you about being childless.

by Dr. Diane Mandt Langberg

Q: I'm dreading the holidays because my parents drop hints about wanting to have a grandchild, and my married sister (who has children) talks about when "my turn" will arrive. The trouble is, we've been trying to get pregnant for months, and each comment is like salt in a wound. My husband and I are stressed enough over this whole fertility issue! How should we handle this?

It's public knowledge many couples today struggle with infertility. Yet why is it some people remain thoughtless and even intrusive in their comments? It doesn't seem to occur to them their seemingly innocent remarks could inflict great pain.

Perhaps now's the time to say something to your parents and sister to stop the questions. Simply tell them privately and individually that you and your husband don't want to talk about the situation at this time, and you wish they'd refrain from comments and questions about pregnancy. Should they press the matter, simply repeat what you've said. You don't have to say anything more than that.

It would be ideal, of course, if you and your husband felt safe enough to let your family in on the truth of the matter. But if they'd respond in a way that would hurt you, or if you'd end up having to support them instead of gaining their support, then don't do so. You and your husband are the best judges of that.

Let's face it: The fears and longings that surround infertility, and the pressures involved in attempting to get pregnant, can stress a marriage. It's never good to go through such things alone, so make sure you have a few good friends who'll support you and pray for you during this time.

Diane Mandt Langberg, Ph.D., is a licensed psychologist in private practice and the author of Counseling Survivors of Sexual Abuse and On the Threshold of Hope: Opening the Door to Healing for Survivors of Sexual Abuse (both Tyndale). This article first appeared in the November/December 1999 issue of TODAY'S CHRISTIAN WOMAN.



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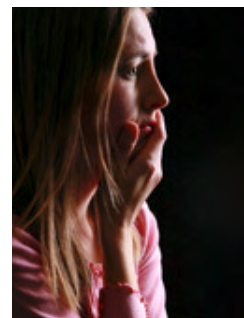
Thought Provokers

—*How have you handled people prying into your childlessness?*

—*How supportive have you found family and friends you've told about your infertility?*

—*What can you say to family members who are insensitive about your situation?*





Infertility Ministries

How to help your church help you—and others like you.

by Beth Spring

Alex and Susan skipped the morning session of the couples' retreat and huddled close in another room, sharing a secret grief. They were childless, but not by choice—one of approximately 10 million couples in the United States who struggle with infertility. Away from the distractions of daily life, their sorrow had engulfed them. The standard opening question of practically every conversation at the couples' retreat had been, "How many children do you have?"

When that question arises, particularly in Christian circles, the infertile have several choices, as my husband and I have learned over the last seven years. They may honestly admit their difficulty and risk receiving unsolicited advice. "Just relax" and "Adopt, and then you'll get pregnant" are two bromides frequently offered. The infertile, on the other hand, may cold-shoulder the questioner out of pure self-defense, leaving a mistaken impression that they are unfeeling, selfish, or uninterested in children. It is not easy to explain, in a few sentences, all the complicated waves of emotion affecting couples who either cannot conceive or cannot carry a pregnancy to term.

Almost without exception, couples experience infertility as a deep spiritual, emotional, and marital crisis. Stepping Stones, a newsletter for infertile couples, articulates the spiritual questions plaguing these couples: "Self-concept, self-image, the very basis of our masculinity and femininity, all seem jeopardized by infertility. Since we have been taught that children are a gift from God, and we haven't received that gift, we examine ourselves by asking: *Am I being punished? Would I be a bad parent? If God isn't going to give me a child, why doesn't he take away my longing? Don't I have enough faith? Can I make a deal with God?*"

Emotionally, infertility confronts a couple with the simultaneous strain of a crisis (every 28 days when pregnancy does not occur) and a chronic condition (as months and years go by). The wear and tear of this chronic crisis most often hits the wife harder, since she is the one who anticipates bearing a child and perhaps defines her most important roles in life and marriage through child rearing. A roller-coaster



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ride of hope and despair leaves both partners feeling emotionally destabilized.

When they realize their infertility is final—and pregnancy will not occur in the ordinary course of events—they grieve. All the familiar stages of grieving may be present, even though no one has died. The couple may experience any combination of surprise, denial, isolation, anger, guilt, and depression.

Stress on the marriage is inevitable. Initial medical interventions to enhance fertility disrupt the couple's most intimate moments by requiring intercourse to be planned for the days when the woman is most likely to be fertile. Often, this is accomplished by having her take her temperature daily, recording the results on graph paper. When the infertility can be traced clearly to one partner, the strain is intensified. About 30 percent of the cases are due to physical problems of the woman, 30 percent are traced to the man, and the remainder result from a combination of factors or are undiagnosed.

Carol and Dan struggled with different responses to infertility after he was diagnosed with a congenital condition that kept him from producing any sperm. Dan alternated between disbelief and the sense that his masculinity was under assault. He wanted to put the brakes on considering any alternatives until he came to terms with the news. Carol, on the other hand, flew into action. She contacted several adoption agencies, collecting forms and getting on lists. She explored artificial insemination by donor, feeling unable to accept the idea of “missing out” on pregnancy and childbirth.

But Dan opposed artificial insemination. “I felt as if I'd be the only loser,” he said. “And what would we tell the child? As long as there are other people around who know the child was conceived by a donor, it is deceitful to raise that child without telling him of his true parentage.” Because of his opposition, they abandoned the idea of donor insemination. But problems between them lingered.

“When one mate has a definite problem, the other one tries to go easy on him, to spare him,” Carol recalls. “Sometimes I felt I really could not share my sadness or frustration. That has been the hardest part for me. I have had to learn how to allow him to help me through this.”

Seeking Resolution

Clearly, infertility presents a dilemma. The church, though, has an enormous reservoir of resources to help.

The first step involves recognizing infertility as a legitimate condition with a variety of possible solutions. Telling an infertile couple, as one Christian leader did, that “God can work miracles” rings terribly hollow. A better response is to approach involuntary childlessness just like any other disease or chronic condition a parishioner may develop.



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In the case of Alex and Susan, what they considered a miraculous answer to prayer came in the form of a simple announcement from the minister leading the couples' retreat they attended. As they cried and prayed together in the morning, away from the other couples, they overheard John Yates, rector of The Falls Church (Episcopal) in northern Virginia, invite childless couples to meet following the retreat's evening session to discuss common concerns. At 9:30, they and eight other couples tentatively entered a meeting room, not knowing quite what to say to one another.

John's wife, Susan, eased the tension with a simple reading from the Gospel of Luke. Elizabeth and Zechariah, she read, "were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. But they had no children." Susan, mother of five, spoke confidently of how valuable everyone is to God, whether childless or not. Infertility should never be misconstrued as punishment, she said, nor does it mean God has abandoned a couple.

Without pretending to know "all the answers," Susan offered simply to grieve with the couples there and listen to their stories. One couple acknowledged that they disagreed about adoption; he favored it, and she opposed it. A middle-aged couple who came to the meeting recalled their struggle with infertility and passed around photographs of their adopted children, now in their teens. Agonized accounts of surgery, multiple miscarriages, and seemingly endless waiting periods for adoptions were interspersed with humorous tales of trips to the urologist.

Alex and Susan quietly shared the news they had just received from their doctors. They had very little hope of conceiving a child naturally, so the only available alternative for a biological conception was in-vitro fertilization. They harbored serious questions about this expensive, high-tech procedure and sought help from the group in sorting the facts.

Beyond addressing the specific concerns of couples, the meeting served as a starting point for a support group that met every other month for two years. Simply getting to know other couples experiencing infertility set many husbands and wives on the road toward resolution. The existence of a support group, announced regularly in church bulletins, alerted the congregation at large to be more sensitive to the problem. And meeting regularly for discussion and prayer support assured these couples they were valuable, essential members of the body of Christ. The group helped get them off the sidelines and back into action.

Seeking Support

The Falls Church group met with no formal agenda, other than encouraging couples to become acquainted with one another. On several occasions speakers were invited, and these sessions were the best attended. One such meeting featured a childless couple in their 60s who explained how they had coped. They had been unable to adopt because the husband was a military officer and they moved too



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frequently to complete the process in any one state. They filled the void in their lives by sponsoring a number of children through the Christian Children's Fund, building close relationships with nieces and nephews, and caring for six godchildren.

At another meeting, a couple explained the step-by-step process they went through to adopt an infant from Korea. A panel of two adults who were adopted as children and the adoptive mother of a grown woman gave the group a candid look at the issues adopted children and their parents face.

With some reluctance John Yates came to speak to the group. "This is a group I didn't particularly want to speak to, because I don't feel adequate," he admitted. "I like to be able to answer everybody's questions. I can't do that with this group."

The group's organizers had provided John with a copy of an excellent book on infertility, *Childless Is Not Less*, by Vicky Love. He developed a theme she addresses, based on Psalm 127:1: "Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain." After he spoke, he prayed with the group and invited couples to join him in the church sanctuary for private prayer. Several couples did and experienced a sense of emotional healing as a result. Their pastor cared, and he demonstrated it.

A different approach to a support group format is modeled by Menlo Park (California) Presbyterian Church. Theirs grew out of a six-week series of classes on infertility prepared by two members of the church. Cynthia Lovewell, a registered nurse, and LeRoy Heinrichs, an infertility specialist, developed a curriculum. Weekly discussions on different aspects of the problem were led by church members or staff with expertise in the field. Some of the topics included problems in reproduction, the emotional aspects of infertility, spiritual dimensions, and an overview of adoption alternatives.

Couples were urged to write answers to two take-home questions: "What are you doing to help yourself during this stressful time?" and "List all the resources available to you that could possibly assist you in your present situation."

One year after the classes ended, the group was still meeting regularly. Three of the original eight couples were expecting babies, and one was pursuing adoption. The other four continued toward resolving their infertility within the supportive network of a caring Christian community.

Intensive support groups such as the original one at Menlo Park and the more informal network at The Falls Church require little ongoing attention from a church's pastoral staff. They are, instead, an ideal opportunity for lay ministry. Infertile couples in both places found that the mere exercise of getting together on a regular basis to share information, test ideas, and simply vent emotions helped tremendously.



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While pastors do not need to become deeply involved in these activities, they may want to take the infertile into consideration on occasions that are particularly painful, such as Mother's Day, infant dedications or baptisms, and Christmas. These child- and family-centered occasions are likely to send the infertile fleeing from the church while praise is lavished on the fertile. The Falls Church inaugurated an Abraham and Sarah Fund on Thanksgiving, and couples who were grateful for the gift of children were invited to donate money to assist couples with adoption or foster-care expenses.

Support from other infertile couples and a pastor's special sensitivity were the keys to resolution for Carol and Dan, the couple struggling with male sterility. For months, Carol could not articulate her feelings in a group setting because she was so distraught. Eventually, as they came to accept their circumstances, they agreed to pursue adoption through a Christian agency. To their great surprise, a five-week-old boy was theirs a full six months before they anticipated placement. And their support group responded with a festive baby shower.

Alex and Susan attempted in-vitro fertilization twice, with no success. Feeling that the door to physical childbearing had closed tightly behind them, they went on to adopt an infant girl from Thailand. For both of these couples, the church came through with encouragement, prayer, and understanding during a genuine time of crisis.

Understanding infertility, acknowledging its emotional impact, and guiding couples toward positive solutions are steps any church leader can take. For those experiencing infertility, knowing that a church leader cares may be all it takes to help them walk a difficult path with the Lord rather than withdraw into bitterness and isolation.

Beth Spring is a freelance writer in McLean, Virginia. This article first appeared in the Summer 1988 issue of Leadership.

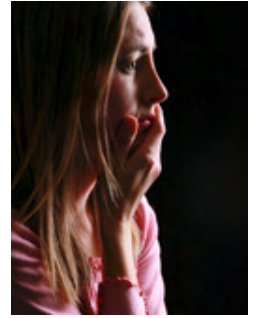


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Books to Help You Further

Hannah's Hope: Seeking God's Heart in the Midst of Infertility by Jennifer Saake (NavPress, 2005; 224 pages). Using the biblical example of Hannah from 1 Samuel 1 and 2, the author directs you to the Source of your strength, the God of all comfort.

Longing for a Child: Devotions of Hope for Your Journey Through Infertility by Kathie Wunnenberg (Zondervan, 2005; 256 pages). This book offers 60 heartfelt devotions designed to connect readers securely to God during this time of waiting, heartbreak, and questioning. It also provides a variety of perspectives from both men and women, and a balance of biblical and contemporary examples.

The Infertility Companion: Hope and Help for Couples Facing Infertility by Sandra L. Glahn (Zondervan, 2004; 288 pages). This book focuses on important questions including: how can we make moral, biblical decisions about medical treatment; can people of faith ethically use high-tech infertility treatments; and how can the stress of infertility on marriage be minimized. Included are discussion questions and a workbook suitable for individuals, couples, or small groups.

Moments for Couples Who Long for Children by Ginger Garrett (NavPress, 2003; 176 pages). By looking at what the Bible says about the issue, offering sample prayers, and pointing out positive steps couples can take as they search for answers, the author gently leads people to a new sense of hope in God's compassion.

Inconceivable by Shannon Woodward (Cook Communications, 2006; 224 pages). This book is the remarkable true-life story of Shannon Woodward. She speaks of healing, but not the kind that other women in her condition have prayed for. The healing she has experienced is the healing of walking another path—the path of peace that she is uniquely equipped to share.

Empty Womb, Aching Heart: Hope and Help for Those Struggling with Infertility by Marlo Schalesky (Bethany House, 2001; 187 pages). This book provides comfort and camaraderie in the face of infertility and pregnancy loss.

Water from the Rock: Finding God's Comfort in the Midst of Infertility by Donna Gibbs, Phyllis Rabon, and Becky Garret (Moody Publishers, 2002; 143 pages). Rather than addressing the medical aspects of infertility, this book helps readers focus on reaching out to God and allowing him to comfort them throughout this trial.



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Websites

The International Council on Infertility Information Dissemination
www.inciid.org

Hannah Prayer Ministries — *www.hannah.org*

Stepping Stones — *www.Bethany.org/step*

The National Infertility Association — *www.resolve.org*

The American Society for Reproductive Medicine — *www.asrm.org*

