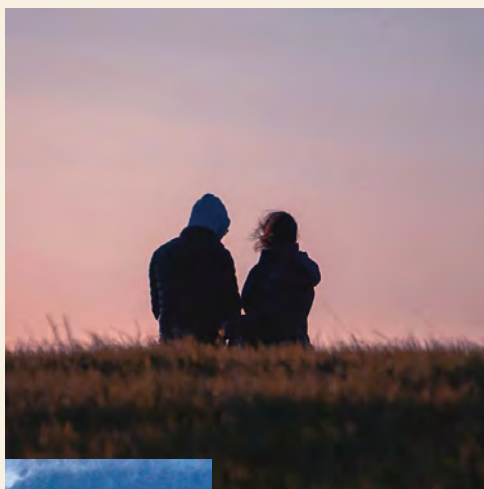


A Mental Health Guide

to Coping with Infertility



A Mental Health Guide to Coping with Infertility

by Wildflower Center for Emotional Health

Infertility affects many people, yet those navigating it often feel deeply alone in their struggle.

You are not alone. At Wildflower, we understand the profound emotional and psychological impact infertility can have, and offer specialized mental health support tailored to your needs.

Understanding Infertility

Infertility is one of the most common reasons women between the ages of 20 and 45 seek medical care in the United States. According to the CDC, approximately 19% of women experience physiological (medical) infertility. In addition, many individuals and couples experience social infertility — challenges to building a family related to social circumstances or relationship status rather than medical causes.

Given how many people are affected by infertility, it is essential for psychotherapists working with adults in this age group to have a strong understanding of infertility, available treatments, and the significant mental health effects it can have on individuals and couples alike.

Wildflower therapists are trained to provide expert care that supports clients through the emotional complexities of infertility, family-building decisions, and the often challenging treatment process.

Infertility, broadly defined, refers to challenges related to conception and becoming pregnant. According to the American Society for Reproductive Medicine (ASRM), infertility is the inability to achieve a successful pregnancy based on a combination of factors, including medical and reproductive history, age, diagnostic testing, and other considerations.

For some individuals and couples, building a family may involve medical interventions such as fertility treatments, the use of donor eggs, sperm, or embryos, or other assisted reproductive options.

There are various physiological causes for infertility. Age is a common factor, as the chance of conceiving each month drops from 25-30% for a woman in her 20s to 10% for a 40-year-old woman. Problems related to ovulation, stemming from PCOS, thyroid disease, and other hormonal imbalances, can also cause infertility. Blocked or damaged fallopian tubes can prevent successful pregnancy, as can a variety of sperm-related issues, such as problems with sperm count, motility, morphology, or ejaculation.

Infertility and Mental Health

The mental health toll of infertility cannot be understated. Women going through infertility have been shown to have similar rates of depression to those undergoing treatment for cancer. Studies have demonstrated that as many as 52% of women experiencing infertility suffer from depression, and in a large study in Northern California, 76% of women undergoing infertility treatment reported symptoms of clinical anxiety. In addition to the grief and anguish associated with infertility, the testing, medications, and treatments can exacerbate mood-related symptoms.

Infertility also significantly impacts couples. Couples experiencing infertility report lower relationship satisfaction than those who have not faced infertility. Multiple studies demonstrate lower sexual satisfaction among couples dealing with infertility.

Infertility Myths

There are many beliefs and narratives about infertility that are not only unhelpful to those going through it, but also untrue. Here, we aim to dispel some of the most common ones, and provide accurate, evidence-based information.

Myth #1: Infertility only affects women over the age of 40

The truth: This is not accurate. Women can experience infertility at any age, and generally speaking, fertility begins to drop in the late 20's and early 30's, with a more rapid decline after 35.

Myth #2: Infertility is rare

The truth: According to the World Health Organization (WHO), Infertility affects 1 in 6 people globally, much more frequently than commonly thought.

Myth #3: If you've already had one child, you can't be infertile.

The truth: Many people struggle to conceive after previously conceiving without issue. This is called "secondary infertility" and impacts 11% of couples in the United States.

Myth #4: Infertility is caused by stress

The truth: Although stress can certainly impact overall health, infertility is a medical issue that requires medical treatment. Blaming stress for infertility is both factually untrue and attributes fault to the person experiencing it.

Myth #5: Infertility is a women's issue

The truth: Male factor infertility contributes to 30-60% of all infertility cases in the United States, making this very much an issue for all genders.



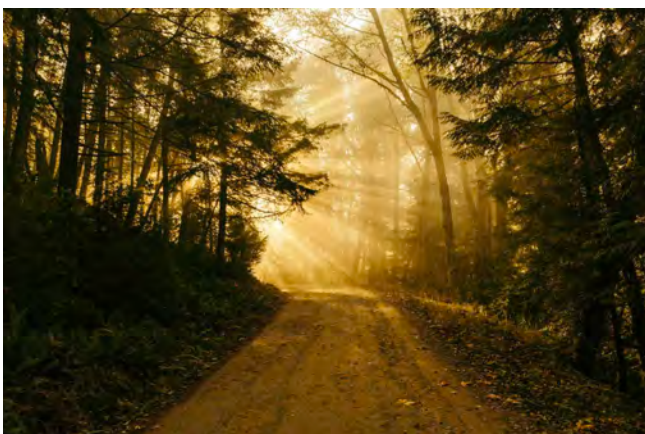
Male Infertility: Not to Be Forgotten

Often the reality of men experiencing infertility is left out of the greater conversation. As shared above, male-factor infertility accounts for a significant portion of all infertility cases, but is less talked about, often leading to feelings of shame, secrecy, and isolation. Seeing a therapist who specializes in men experiencing infertility has helped many men navigate these challenges.

Social Infertility

Social infertility is a newer term used to describe situations where people want to become parents but are not biologically able due to social or relational circumstances. This includes factors like sexual orientation, relationship status, and life circumstances, which might necessitate fertility treatments. In support of this movement, in the fall of 2023, the American Society for Reproductive Medicine (ASRM) updated their definition of infertility to include anyone who needs medical intervention to achieve pregnancy.

Additionally, in 2022, Illinois updated its legal language around infertility to be more inclusive of the LGBTQIA community and single people, recognizing one of the definitions of infertility as a person who is unable to reproduce (either single or with a partner) without medical intervention. This change mandates many (though not all) insurance plans within Illinois to cover fertility treatments for people experiencing social infertility.



How Therapy Can Help

Studies have shown that women experiencing infertility have similar rates of depression and anxiety as women battling cancer and other chronic health conditions. The mental health impact of infertility is enormous, and in addition to depression and anxiety also often comes with isolation and self esteem struggles.

Given the significant mental health toll, it's critical to find a therapist with expertise in the intricacies of infertility to provide support, coping tools, and work through the complex emotions associated with infertility. At Wildflower, all of our therapists receive advanced training on infertility, preparing them to provide specialized support.



Questions to Consider Asking a Prospective Therapist

- ❖ Do you have experience working with individuals or couples experiencing infertility?
- ❖ Are you familiar with the emotional impact of fertility treatments such as IVF, IUI, or pregnancy loss?
- ❖ How do you support clients coping with grief, anxiety, or relationship stress related to infertility?
- ❖ Are you knowledgeable about the unique challenges of social infertility, including LGBTQ+ family building or single parenthood by choice?
- ❖ Do you incorporate partners or support systems into therapy, if desired?
- ❖ How do you approach therapy during ongoing fertility treatments or decision-making processes?

Helpful Resources

Organizations

RESOLVE: The National Infertility Association. Resolve was established in 1974 and is dedicated to ensuring that all people challenged in their family building journey reach resolution through being empowered by knowledge, supported by community, united by advocacy, and inspired to act.

Donor Conception Network. A supportive network of families with children conceived with donated sperm, eggs, or embryos; those considering or undergoing donor conception procedures; and donor- conceived people.

The American Society for Reproductive Medicine. ASRM is a multidisciplinary organization dedicated to the advancement of the science and practice of reproductive medicine. The Society accomplishes its mission through the pursuit of excellence in education and research and through advocacy on behalf of patients, physicians, and affiliated health care providers. You might find their educational videos particularly helpful.

Books

Conquering Infertility: Dr. Alice Domar's Mind/Body Guide to Enhancing Fertility and Coping with Infertility by Dr. Alice D. Domar

Empty Womb, Aching Heart: Hope and Help for Those Struggling With Infertility by Marlo Schalesky

LGBTQ Family Building: A Guide for Prospective Parents by Abbie E. Goldberg

Unsung Lullabies: Understanding and Coping with Infertility by David Diamond, Janet Jaffe, and Martha Ourieff Diamond

Your Future Families: The Essential Guide to Assisted Reproduction (What you Need to Know about Surrogacy, Egg Donation and Sperm Donation) by Kim Bergman

Ever Upward: Overcoming the Life Long Losses of Infertility to Define Your Own Happy Ending by Justine Brooks Froelker

Random Families: Genetic Strangers, Sperm Donor Siblings, and the Creation of New Kin by Rosanna Hertz and Margaret K. Nelson

Books, Continued

The Infertility Journey: Real voices. Real issues. Real insights. by Tarun Jain, MD

Babymaking for Everybody: Family Building and Fertility for LGBTQ+ and Solo Parents by Ray Richlin, Marea Goodman.

Books for Kids

Family Stew: Two Moms Use a Sperm Donor to Build Their Family by Linda Stamm

It Takes Love (and Some Other Stuff) to Make a Baby by L.L. Bird

Mom, Mama, and Me – and How I Came to Be by Tina Rella

The Dancing Fish and the Clever Crab by Ms. Reen

The Extra Button by Jules Blundell

The Pea that Was Me: A Sperm Donation Story by Kimberly Kluger-Bell

Wish by Matthew Cordell

Podcasts

Big Fat Negative. A podcast about all of the trials and tribulations associated with IVF.

Infertile AF. An unfiltered perspective on IVF by a journalist who experienced secondary infertility.

Fertility Docs Uncensored. A podcast by three board-certified Reproductive Endocrinologists, who myth-bust, and provide education around fertility and IVF. <https://www.fertilitydocsuncensored.com/>



Warmlines and Hotlines

RESOLVE HelpLine: 866-668-2566

MOMS Line: 866-364-6667

National Maternal Mental Health Hotline: 833-852-6262

PSI HelpLine: 800-944-4773

Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 988

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If you are looking to start psychotherapy at Wildflower, please reach out to our intake team by calling 312.809.0298 or completing the inquiry form on our website.