

# Stress and fertility treatment

“Just relax and you will get pregnant “

“My cousin was going through adoption when she got pregnant naturally “

“You should be grateful for what you’ve got already “

“Cheer up love it might never happen ...”

I once compiled a list of the most unhelpful comments said to people going through Infertility. Needless to say it was a long list. A long and deeply annoying list.

And yet the sad truth is that people facing fertility issues almost certainly *WILL* be stressed purely by definition of the circumstances they find themselves in.

Indeed a leading Psychologist from the States , Dr Alice Domar has even reworked the stress point reading scale to incorporate Infertility for the first time.

Not surprisingly for those of us who have been through it the scale placed Infertility somewhere between Cancer and Bereavement in terms of a person’s experience of Infertility.

Fertility issues really are stressful and no amount of trying to put on a brave face is ultimately going to help all that much.

Instead then I believe the starting point for dealing with stress should be seen as stress *management* rather than *Stress removal*.

It is the acknowledgement that this season in our life is an incredibly tough one and thus one which needs care and attention.

This self care I believe starts with two key concepts:

- Firstly that such care can become learned behaviour
- And secondly that stress management will always be specific to each person.

## Learned behaviour

There has been much research recently showing that there is a science to the art of compassion, whether to yourself or others. And that just as with other learned behaviour we can proactively teach ourselves to be kinder.

Indeed the brain can literally imprint new neurological pathways as we do this and we can learn to live more compassionately in general See the wonderful book : “The science of compassion” by Paul Gilbert.

One of the essential components to this is that we realise we have the ability to change our behaviour; that small acts towards developing a more compassionate nature, over time can make a huge difference. And that ultimately proactively working towards a more compassionate state of mind will have long term effects both for ourselves and others.

This is essential as a tool in stress management. To be able to look at how kind we are actually being and how we can best look after ourselves during fertility issues as a *proactive* not reactive coping technique.

### Personalising your stress management

We are all unique individuals and both our reaction to stress and the tools to help ourselves cope will be specific to us .

There is no one size fits all!

I encourage people to keep a stress log writing down observations when they experience stress.

What specifically happened?

What were the potential triggers?

What happened physically and psychologically?

What, if anything, helped?

By looking at the record we can begin to see areas which trigger stress more than others, and how specifically we experience stress.

From there we can begin to look at how best to help ourselves. What is needed to best support YOU at this time.

Support then often falls into three categories

- Physiological
- Practical
- Psychological

I encourage people to write down the things that best work for them and from there to be proactive in making these a priority whilst facing Infertility.

### Physiological

Examples here could include the following:

- Controlled breathing. Learning to stop and take a breath in at a slower pace than usual - counting to five for example . Then releasing the breath at a slow pace as you exhale .

- PMR or progressive muscle relaxation. Taking a moment to become aware of areas of the body that may have become tense. Constricting these areas then gradually letting go...a classic example being holding stress in our shoulders...
- Physical exercise, especially low impact types can be a fantastic way to get endorphins going and regain perspective. Yoga can be an especially useful resource.
- Distraction techniques , Finding those things that you can lose yourself in, anything from singing to reading , to watching box sets of Poirot . Anything that you find focuses the mind and gives you some respite from Fertility Issues .
- Mindfulness. A wonderful tool in which you literally focus intently on just one experience at a time and do this at various moments throughout the day noticing what you experience with the senses.  
For example, rather than rushing from one place to another, take a few moments and notice what you can see, taste, touch, smell and hear on the journey . Or take time to eat Mindfully rather than simply seeing food as fuel !

### Practical

- How can you best help yourself and who could you ask to support you? From nutritional support, to the D.C Network, to acupuncture or getting help with the cleaning. Be proactive in building a support network around yourself . Again brainstorm a list of who to ask. Take the top five and make sure you do something today towards building that team .
- Who or what is NOT helping at the moment is also worth thinking about too .Infertility will put an enormous strain on your resources and test even the most patient of people .There may be friends that are usually quite draining that may need to take a back seat , or projects to put on hold .The key thing to remember is this is no time to try and be superhuman !

### Psychological

There is so much in this section that you could use to help yourself but here are a few that I find incredibly helpful :

- Journaling (also known as keeping a diary)  
Again there has been much research on the therapeutic aspects of Journaling and that people have found their ability to deal with stress significantly improved .There is no right or wrong way to do it, just get the feelings out on a pad of paper that is specifically set aside for this purpose .  
You can then choose to read it back to yourself or throw it away , or read it another time . Whatever works for you .
- WDINRN ?  
This is a simple mnemonic to help keep you calm throughout the day and stands for

“What do I need right now?”

The answer can be a simple thing (I need to take a five minute break) or more complex (I need to ask a friend for support at this time.) The key is to keep checking in on how you are *actually* doing. To address the needs rather than ignoring them. Then from there to take small proactive steps to help yourself .

- Gratitude diary.

When things are tough going it can be incredibly easy, and indeed understandable to only focus on the negative. I am not suggesting you pretend that everything is ok. It's not. But it can be incredibly helpful to find some good even in the midst of difficulty.

Anything from a kind text from a friend to a nice programme on TV that made you laugh. Notice the good things by recording them in a diary.

It is also really helpful to notice the things that you are proud of personally on a daily basis. Again it doesn't have to be huge but at a time when your confidence is so easily knocked you need to be able to notice what you doing well each day. Again write it down and give yourself a well done !

- Own best friend technique .

This exercise perhaps best encapsulates everything I have so far said.

Imagine for a moment a best friend, someone you really love and care for and only want the best for. Now imagine they are going through the same thing as you are right now.

What do you feel towards this person?

What do you want for them?

And perhaps most importantly what are your expectations?

So often our standards are so high for ourselves when going through difficulties, far higher than they would be for someone else.

*From now on only apply the same expectations on yourself as you would do for a dearly loved friend.*

Infertility may well be one of the toughest issues you ever face, affecting every part of yourself. Stress is inevitable as a part of the journey but I hope with a few of these techniques you can make the journey a little more bearable.

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