

Talking About Infertility

Telling Family and Friends

By Gwen Morrison

Talk to any couple going through fertility treatments and they will tell you it is one of the most stressful things they have ever experienced. Some studies have indicated that infertility can be more life altering than a death in the family. The emotional factors, in addition to the physical strains, can be overwhelming for couples. During these challenging times, relationships with friends and family – even spousal relationships – are put to the test. At a time when you need the support of those closest to you, you might find yourself keeping a safe distance.

The very fact that infertility is such a personal issue is why many couples are hesitant to share their experiences openly with friends and family. They often retreat from sharing the details of their experience, because they are afraid of the reactions. Having listened to the haunting questions about when they are going to have children for so long, many couples feel that the myriad of ensuing questions about conception difficulties will be too much to bear.

Education is the Key

When trying to decide how much information to share with friends and family, keep in mind that before you entered into this new world of infertility there was much you didn't know about it. Your family and friends can be a great source of support during this time, if they are educated about the physical and emotional struggles of infertility.

"If a couple wishes to share their situation with family, it is my strong recommendation that the family have as much education about infertility as possible," says [Dr. Lawrence B. Werlin](#), a fertility specialist and medical director at Coastal Fertility Medical Center in Irvine, Calif. "The best way to achieve this goal would be to utilize various educational venues such as [The American Society for Reproductive Medicine \(ASRM\)](#) – also, the various patient advocate groups, such as [Resolve](#), [The American Infertility Association \(AIA\)](#) and [The International Council on Infertility Information Dissemination \(INCIID\)](#)."

Realizing that there are ways to educate family members about the issues that are important to you can help alleviate some of the stress revolving around your infertility. Having an ally who is sensitive to the nature of infertility can be instrumental during times when you need support.

"Our family was a big support during our miscarriage," says *Brenda Collins of Allenwood, N.J. "Of course there were some ignorant comments made about my active lifestyle (I exercise on a regular basis and am a pesco vegetarian). We found that the people who just listened were the ones that were most helpful. No one has the right answers."





Since her miscarriage, Collins has had three unsuccessful intrauterine insemination (IUI) procedures. "I have found it extremely helpful to share on the [Hopeful MomsTalk](#) discussion board and be proactive in educating myself on all aspects of infertility," she says. "These girls are able to relate to the ups and downs of conceiving. Nothing is sacred between us, and there is a sense of intimacy we all share, yet the anonymity is something we also desire."

Collins feels that being knowledgeable about infertility helps her to provide the right information to those people closest to her – those who she chooses to share her struggles with.

"At first we had decided not to tell our family that we were trying to conceive, but when we miscarried we were forced to tell them," says Collins. "The aftermath of questions and suggestions were a little overwhelming at first. We heard things like, 'Just relax. It will happen,' and 'You shouldn't do so much.'"

Collins says she was a little relieved when the "cat was out of the bag." Even though there was an onslaught of questions and advice about conceiving, the fact that everyone knew they were trying to have a child stopped all the prodding questions about when they were going to start a family.

"Family may love you dearly, but they are not trained mental health professionals, and in wanting to help, they may trigger interaction problems without intending to," says Dr. Mabelle M. Seibel, professor of clinical OB/GYN at the University of Massachusetts School of Medicine in Worcester, Mass., and author of [Journal Babies](#). "Also, parents may have different views on many treatments having to do with assisted reproduction, donor eggs and sperm and so on. Their bias may make your decision more difficult."

Dr. Seibel points out that fertility treatments are usually evolutions, not revolutions – they take time to accept. The added pressure of family input may make it more difficult to decide the right course of treatment for you as a couple. "Bottom line, keep family informed at one step behind rather than one step ahead," he says.

Finding Support

Though there are times when you may feel anxious around friends and family for fear of being bombarded with questions, try to keep in mind that they are truly concerned about you. If you find yourself trying to avoid family gatherings, it may be better to be up front with them from the beginning. Tell your family that you appreciate their love and concern but that you will let them know if something happens. Explain to them that you would rather not discuss it otherwise. Chances are with open communication, the dreaded questions will become less and less frequent.

"The only people that know of our 'trying to conceive' journey are my sister and my friends on the [Hopeful MomsTalk](#) discussion board," says Wendy Simmons from Oklahoma City, Okla. "I wouldn't even have told my sister, but I needed some background information as to why it took her almost 13 years to conceive her first child."



Simmons chose not to tell her family, having witnessed the pressures that were placed on her sister when she had trouble conceiving a child. "I remember her frustration and know that I just couldn't handle that," she says. "Sometimes it's very sad and I feel so isolated, but I know I am doing the right thing. My sister has been very supportive and that has helped a lot. She even sent me flowers after my surgery. She doesn't second-guess my decisions, and she listens to me. I guess you never quite forget the pain of infertility."

"There is a tremendous sense of loss experienced by infertile couples, and there is a great need to reach out," says Dr. Seibel. "At the same time, it is important to remember not to reveal information to anyone, including family, unless you want everyone else to know. Try to give family only the amount of information you are comfortable sharing."

**Names have been changed to protect privacy.*