

Coping as a Couple

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Infertility is not just an individual trauma; it can affect your relationship in profound and confusing ways. The stress on your relationship can leave you feeling alone, as if you were facing this crisis on your own, not as a team. There are so many decisions to be made along the way – from trying fertility enhancing drugs, or making an investment in IVF, considering using donor technology, or thinking about adoption – and you and your partner may not always see eye to eye. How each of you copes may be vastly different from each other, causing you to wonder about the very nature of your relationship.

The good news is that there is probably nothing inherently wrong with your relationship itself; it is the struggle to create a family that is making things so tough. If you think about it, the things that couples argue about the most are money, sex, and family – and infertility hits all these targets dead on.

As you maneuver your way through the maze of reproductive choices, it can be helpful to focus on the differences in how you and your partner cope. If you can recognize these dissimilarities, you will not take your partner's behavior personally. For example, some people cope by shutting down and not talking. All they want is to burrow into a cave, become a couch potato, or hide under the covers. Others take solace in the support of close friends and/or family. These folks cope by talking – they need to process all they are feeling – and get relief when they unburden their emotions, even when no concrete solutions are at hand. Some throw themselves into work – to remind themselves that they are more than their reproductive organs; others cannot concentrate and have trouble focusing on anything but building a family. And while some cope by gathering information – for example, spending hours doing research on the Internet – others find the myriad of data imposing and overwhelming.

In many heterosexual relationships, it is not atypical for a woman to want to talk about her feelings, while her partner would rather not. It's not because he doesn't care, but rather it may be because he doesn't have a solution for the problem. He may feel helpless when he can't 'fix it,' as if somehow he has failed. Many men feel incredibly frustrated: they would like things to 'go back to normal,' feel that talking about things only makes it worse, and may not recognize her need to talk as a positive coping strategy. On the other hand, she may misinterpret his silence as not being concerned, leading her to feel more isolated and alone in her grief. She may not understand that watching a football game, for instance, may be his way of coping, providing an escape from the ongoing agony of dealing with baby-making. She may not understand that he doesn't

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want to bring things up for fear that it will upset her more. And try as hard as she can, she cannot 'go back to normal.' She feels every hormonal shift, every twinge, every cramp; she cycles up and down, from being full of expectation to plunging to despair when her period comes. Once again, she may want to talk; once again, he can't fix it, and the pattern continues.

What can you do to stop feeling as if your mate is your enemy and have them be your best friend again? Two key tools are *communication* and *negotiation*. Communication is not just talking; it's taking time to understand what you feel, rather than just *feel*, and letting the other person know in a language they can understand. It can help to let your partner know what you need at that moment – maybe it's simply a hug or the reassurance that you will get through this – together. Negotiation is not about convincing the other person to do things *your* way; rather it's about each of you understanding each other's needs, without leaving the other person feeling flattened or lost. Negotiation also means being open to compromise. If she is gung-ho on doing research, perhaps he does not have to read everything, but agree to read some of the articles. Or if he needs to escape by watching a game, perhaps he can agree to set up 'talk time' after the game is over. Being sensitive to what your partner needs, and how each of you uniquely copes, can help you to get through the multiple stresses of infertility.