Non-Death Losses Across the Life Span: Helping to heal disenfranchised grief and invisible losses

The Grief of Infertility: Silent Suffering

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What is Infertility?

- Infertility is a disease or condition of the reproductive system, often diagnosed after a couple has had one year (six months if the women is 35 years of age or older) of un-protected, well-timed intercourse, or if the women has suffered multiple miscarriages.

- Approximately one in ten couples experience primary or secondary infertility. The organic causes of infertility are in general 40% male factor, 40% female factor, and 20% unexplained or combined male/female factor.

- Assisted reproductive technologies, and/or third-party reproduction gives couples more options with which to build their family than were available 30 years ago.

- More options for treatment for infertility are overall a positive influence, however multiple options and prolonged treatment times can increase psychological distress at times, and prolong or intensify the grieving process.
Grief/loss Issues Related to Infertility

- Infertility is considered a major life crisis, and as such, has a significant impact on the lives of the individuals, couples, and families that experience infertility.

- One factor that significantly influences the potentially devastating experience of infertility is that it involves losses in many areas of the lives of those experiencing it. Because of the personal nature of infertility, many aspects related to it are not discussed in public, leaving those suffering often times to suffer alone.

- Although family and/or friends may (many times they do not) know an individual and/or couple is experiencing infertility, they can not comprehend the magnitude of it. Individuals and couples experiencing infertility suffer from negative emotions related to their experiences, but often do not realize how many areas of their lives involve loss, or that grief is contributing to their pain.
Grief/loss Issues Related to Infertility

- The many losses of infertility include:

  - Loss of a normal sexual relationship with one’s partner and the loss of conceiving the “normal” way.
  - Loss of positive sexual identity.
  - Loss of control over their bodies, treatment decisions and/or options, and when they can or should have intercourse.
  - Loss of pregnancy and birth experience.
  - Anticipatory grief at the possibility of remaining childless.
  - Loss of a genetic legacy.
  - Loss of work productivity which can contribute to loss of career advancement and/or income.
Grief/loss Issues Related to Infertility

The many losses of infertility cont.

- Loss of a sense of spirituality and/or religious beliefs and a sense of hope for the future.
- Loss of an important life role and life goal.
- Loss of support system.
- Pregnancy loss or loss of baby at birth

When a woman and/or couple are in the process of building their family whether it be through seeking medical treatment or adoption, the losses are far reaching, and can cause significant emotional and psychological pain.

The process of grieving the losses related to infertility is different than the grief process associated with other types of losses because of the ongoing, chronic nature of infertility.
Many times infertility-specific grief may never be completely mourned, transcended, or fully integrated.

The stages of grief that individuals go through when grieving any loss apply to those who are experiencing infertility, however the “rollercoaster of infertility” does not allow individuals to fully resolve and accept their losses while the overall process still continues. Each loss re-opens the wound one is trying to heal.

In addition, many individuals feel that if they fully grieve the losses associated with their infertility, they are “giving up”, and so their feelings are often suppressed.

**Anticipatory Grief** is common for those experiencing infertility, as many of the losses associated with infertility may not be permanent losses. The grief is related to the anticipation that the individual/couple will remain childless forever.
Grief/loss Issue Related to Infertility

- A unique feature of the disenfranchised grief related to infertility is that infertility may be so socially unacceptable that the shame of the diagnosis, the treatment for it, and/or family building alternatives may lead infertile individuals and couples to keep losses hidden to minimize social stigma.

- This may be especially true if infertility is related to or caused by male factors.

- Gender differences in grief and mourning related to infertility:

  1. Women often assume the role of primary mourner, bearing an unequal share of the emotional burden of a couple’s grief. This may be magnified by the fact that infertility treatment is disproportionately geared toward women.
Grief/loss Issues Related to Infertility

2. Most research has indicated that general male response to infertility is less negative than their female counterparts, with the exception of when there is male factor diagnosis.

3. The differences in the typical emotional coping styles of men and women contribute greatly to the way each responds to the losses and grief work associated with infertility.
Grief/loss Issues Related to Infertility

- For most individuals and/or couples that make the decision to adopt, or utilize a third party for reproduction purposes, it is necessary to grieve their previous losses and obtain some resolution of their grief. This can be especially difficult since most of the time couples do not follow the same timeline or path in their grieving process.

- This resolution phase typically involves some form of these overlapping tasks:
  
  2. Mourning the loss of a genetically related child.
  3. Refocusing of moving past the infertility whether through adoption, use of a third party, or child-free living.

Managing Grief Related Issues of Infertility

- How one helps others manage the grief related issues of infertility depends greatly on the relationship between the parties involved, and the need(s) of the individual or couple.

- If it is a counseling relationship, many of the tools and strategies that are helpful in dealing with grief related issues related to other losses apply when working with individuals and couples struggling with infertility.

- When evaluating how to best help infertile individuals manage their grief/loss related issues, it is important to assess where they are in their infertility journey.
Managing Grief Related Issues of Infertility

- Affirming for individuals/couples that infertility is considered a major life crisis, and offering them a safe place to express and explore their emotional pain can be very therapeutic.

- Decision making about infertility treatment and family building options contributes greatly to the emotional and psychological difficulties associated with infertility. Helping individuals/couples recognize they may need to process and grieve the losses they have suffered, and then helping them through that process can be very helpful to infertile individuals/couples in moving forward.

- Helping couples recognize their differences in how they experience, process, and respond to infertility can be helpful in repairing marital breakdown, and/or preventing further deterioration.
Managing Grief Related Issues of Infertility

- Teaching stress management skills and relaxation techniques can be especially helpful to women experiencing infertility. Helping women manage the symptoms related to their depression and anxiety, gives them a better reservoir with which to do the work of grieving so that can renew themselves to move forward in their infertility journey.

- Most individuals/couples that have the financial resources can realize their dream of becoming parents whether it is through medical treatment or adoption. Most people end treatment, or pursuit of building their family through adoption, because they can not handle the pain of continuing to pursue their dream and continually getting disappointed (chronic sorrow and grieving), not because they can not afford it.
Resources for Infertility Related Information

- These resources are helpful and useful to infertile individuals as well as for those who wish to be more supportive and helpful to their infertile friends, family members, patients or clients.

- **Resolve** - [www.resolve.org](http://www.resolve.org)

- **The American Fertility Association (AFA)** - [www.theafa.org](http://www.theafa.org)

- **The American Society for Reproductive Medicine (ASRM)** - [www.asrm.org](http://www.asrm.org)

- **The International Council on Infertility Information and Dissemination, INC.** - (INCIID-pronounced inside) - [www.inciid.org](http://www.inciid.org)