

Two's company, three's a problem

Fertility treatment is a roller-coaster ride. It's also a blanket term that covers everything from a tablet to help a woman ovulate through to more invasive treatments such as in-vitro fertilisation (IVF).

There is, however, a whole range of treatments in between.

We still know very little about why couples find it difficult to conceive. But struggling with the three dominant feelings – hope that pregnancy might happen, disappointment if it doesn't, and absolute joy if it does – can be corrosive to a relationship.

We all carry a sense of entitlement about fertility; we tend to think that achieving pregnancy is our birthright. So fertility treatments can feel like an assault on that birthright. Naturally there is grief if it doesn't succeed.

People respond differently to the strain of treatment and it's important to allow space for the different emotions to be expressed.

Some people are totally focused on the treatment process and they're going full steam ahead. Others may be a bit wary. Tensions may develop if a couple reacts differently. The hopeful partner might feel that the other doesn't care, while the wary partner might feel that the hopeful one is over-the-top about the process.

In the case of disappointment, some people cope by trying to get on with life, while others become depressed and withdraw.

In the case of more complex fertility treatment, many clinics try to involve the couple rather than just the individual. But there are aspects of fertility treatment that are down to the individual woman.

If a pill has to be taken, only one person can take it. If an injection has to be given during the day, for purely practical reasons the woman will probably have to inject herself.

What can be tough to deal with is the fact that a normally private, two-person affair becomes a three-party event - him, her and the clinic.

Because the couple might feel that their affairs are now public property, with the inclusion of the third party, it's important to have some time together as a couple before and after the treatment.

The weekends are a time when the couple can invest a bit more in their relationship to counteract the pressure being applied by the treatment process.

Having your sexuality and fertility in the public domain is very confronting, so you need to make sure you can go through the process as a united couple, not just as two individuals.

Because treatment is such an intense process, isolation is a real danger. It is important that the couple stay connected with other people.

They need support systems that allow them to speak to others as a couple, as well as the chance to talk individually to people. It's too much to handle over an extended period and keep it to yourselves.

These days, most people know someone who has had fertility problems, and these people can be a huge help for letting off steam.

If a couple is finding fertility treatment corrosive to their relationship, they should seek support from a professional relationships counsellor or a counsellor at a fertility clinic.

Fertility treatment can be one of the toughest experiences for a couple to go through, so it's worth getting a bit of help in order that you both survive.

Survival tips

- **Stay connected and communicate as a couple through the fertility treatment process**
- **Understand that you may react differently from your partner**
- **Find others with whom you can share the emotional stress**
- **Get some professional help if the treatment process is affecting your relationship as a couple.**