

# Advice To Friends And Family

Unless you have experienced the trauma of infertility, it is difficult to know automatically how to respond to someone in the midst of it. The following suggestions may provide some insight and give you concrete ways to help relate to your loved ones during the painful time.

1. Understand that handling infertility is a process. There are no quick or easy answers, and an infertile person does not resolve intense feelings overnight. Mood swings are common, and at times the feelings may be enormously painful. To complicate matters, there may be times when these individuals feel like talking and other times when they need some distance. Try to be patient - the infertile person needs your acceptance and understanding.
2. Listen to what the couple has to share - their pain, frustration and anger - and try to imagine what they are experiencing. Avoid giving advice or trying to provide answers unless you are asked or feel that you have some crucial information. Understand that people often give unsolicited advice that reflects a lack of knowledge or sensitivity, so that the couple may already be fed up with outside intrusions. Presenting strong opinions also may set up a situation in which a couple feels a conflict of loyalty: one friend or relative says they should follow one route and another espouses a different view. Whether you realize it or not, listening can be the most helpful gift you can offer, something that is not always easy to do.
3. Share with the couple your concern and support so they know they are not alone. If you are at a loss for words, say so ("I wish I knew what to say or could help in some way. Is there anything I can do?"). Otherwise, silence may be interpreted as rejection or lack of concern. Don't be reluctant to open your mouth for fear of saying the wrong thing. As long as you can convey your feelings of support and caring, most infertile people will understand and occasional tactless remark. Even though you have probably not experienced infertility, it is likely that you have struggled through some other significant loss, like the death of a loved one or a divorce. It can help to recollect your suffering and to remember what kind of help and support was most comforting to you at that time. The feelings may not be dissimilar.
4. Avoid asking the infertile woman if she is pregnant. Believe me, she will let you know if and when it happens.
5. Respect the couple's need for privacy, but let them know you are there when they might need you or want contact again. An occasional brief call or note can help you stay in touch and let them know you care.
6. Be honest in telling of your own pregnancy or that of others. As painful as the news may be to the couple, it is usually better that keeping it secret. Acknowledging their pain is the most helpful action you can take. Understand that the tears they may shed do not reflect malice, only sadness and anger at their own emptiness.
7. Be aware that reactions differ from person to person and from day to day. Understand that for some people there may be a need to isolate themselves occasionally, especially from events involving children. Please realize that when the infertile couple visits you, it may be a wrenching experience to watch you with your children. If they seem to find pleasure in contact with your children, then by all means offer it. Otherwise, do not ask them to hold or feed your baby.
8. Try not to offer false hopes ("I'm sure you'll be pregnant by the summer"). Infertile people play enough games with themselves without the additional burden of your denial. Also be careful about sharing the success stories of others.
9. Humor has its place in dealing with the struggle of infertility, but do not be the one to joke about it - leave that to the one experiencing it. A remark like "Sorry you're not pregnant, but it sure must be fun trying!" is not only hurtful but probably untrue. Nor should you diminish the impact of infertility by comments like "It's really not so bad. Think how much worse things could be. Did you hear about so-and-so who...?"
10. Do not say directly or insinuate in any way that the couple's inability to conceive must stem from inner doubts about their desire to have children or must mean that God has not found them suitable for parenthood. Comments like these can be devastating.
11. Support the couple's decisions regarding medical treatment or resolution as best you can, even if you do not agree. They probably feel enough turmoil already without you adding your advice - unless of course they have requested it.
12. Learn more about infertility so that you can be an informed listener.