

Secondary Infertility

by Rachel Blatt rblatt@gmail.com

Are you going to have a second?" For some, this is an innocuous question, but for women suffering secondary infertility, it can be devastating.

According to **Resolve.org**, secondary infertility is "the inability to become pregnant, or to carry a pregnancy to term, following the birth of one or more biological children. The birth of the first child does not involve any assisted reproductive technologies or fertility medications." Whether women are nearing the end of their child-bearing years or have years to go, secondary infertility can be an emotionally isolating experience with no easy answers. From choosing Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ART) such as IUI, IVF or donor eggs to monthly charting or using a digital fertility monitor, women facing secondary infertility must make difficult decisions about what they are willing to do and how much they are willing to spend to get pregnant.

Feeling isolation

For those suffering secondary infertility,

there is no escape. With a child in tow, your world—from birthday parties to preschools to playgrounds and museums—is filled with pregnant women and new babies and everyone talking about siblings. Moms who shared the intimacy of new motherhood have moved on to the demands of a second pregnancy or juggling a larger family, leaving you alone.

Isolation coupled with guilt magnifies a sadness in not being able to conceive again. According to **Beth Jaeger-Skigen**, a therapist specializing in infertility, friends may not view secondary infertility as a big problem. "The outside world tells women to be thankful. They have one," says Jaeger-Skigen. One mother experiencing secondary infertility said, "It is tough to discuss with friends and family because it seems like people either feel uncomfortable if I bring it up or they are pregnant and I feel guilty about discussing it." Adding to a woman's guilt is the thought that she does not appreciate her first child enough and is selfish for wanting a second.

All of this can be exacerbated by the stress

secondary infertility brings to a relationship. Jaeger-Skigen says, "a child is a stressor. Infertility is a stressor that compounds it. Honor that, know that." Your partner is not able to be the emotional rock because he is working through the same issues. Jaeger-Skigen reminds women that men cope in different ways and to be patient with one another.

Staying sane

While treatments for secondary infertility vary widely by diagnosis, age and personal choice, a key element of success is decreasing your stress during the process. Here are a few tips to follow as you embark on the path.

Trust your team. There are many options for fertility treatment in the Bay Area and there is no one best doctor or clinic. The three major fertility clinics in San Francisco — **Pacific Fertility**, **UCSF Center for Reproductive Medicine** and **Laurel Fertility Care** — all offer seminars and/or free consults with their doctors. Take the time to talk with them or get a second opinion to ensure you find the best fit for

With a child in tow, your world—from birthday parties to preschools to museums—is filled with pregnant women and new babies and everyone talking about siblings.

you and then stick with it. For one mother, getting a second opinion gave her greater faith in the team she already had: "The other RE [Reproductive Endocrinologist] offered a different approach that helped me realize that I was already in the right place."

Acupuncture, either in support of Western treatments or by itself, is recommended by many women dealing with infertility. One mother said, "I have no idea if it helped but it made me feel like I was doing something and was a good way to carve out time to relax." **Craig Marble**, who has been practicing acupuncture for 13 years, says that acupuncture can be "like taking a high-powered nutritional supplement to regulate and support the endocrine system." Between breastfeeding, taking care of the baby and working, women often don't take time for themselves, depleting their resources. "Something has to give," says Marble.

Eat a balanced diet but don't let rigid rules control your life. There is much conflicting information on the best way to eat when trying to conceive. Many women, under the guidance of Chinese medicine, swear by a diet free of caffeine, alcohol, refined sugar and flour and go light on exercise. But for others, strict rules only increase their stress

and add to their guilt when treatments are unsuccessful. "I felt like I was in a glass house trying to follow the doctor's and acupuncturist's instructions. And I was chasing around my toddler which was a definite no-no. It was madness!" one mother said. Marble advises his patients to eat a diet that is "reasonable and balanced in way that you are happy but also conscious." Or as **Dr. Marcelle Cedars**, Director of UCSF's Reproductive Endocrinology and Infertility Division, says, "Healthy for you, healthy for pregnancy." What does that mean? Go easy on the alcohol and coffee and skip the cigarettes and drugs. And this is probably not the time to train for a marathon.

Align yourself with key people who understand. Be it close friends, family members, a therapist or an infertility support group, Jaeger-Skigen says that it is critical that you "create a safe place where you can openly share" your emotions. Online communities, such as BabyCenter.com, offer meaningful support networks but some mothers advise you to be cautious of the advice you receive, like flying across country to the "best" clinic.

Do non-child related activities. Get a babysitter and make time for you and your

partner to go on a hike or out for a nice dinner. Or take a class and focus your energy on learning a new skill like cooking or ceramics. Undergoing fertility treatments can quickly become all-encompassing and making the time to break away from it gives you a boost.

Finally, enjoy your child. Cliché but true, they grow up way too fast, and if you spend too much time trying to get pregnant, you miss out on those precious moments with your first. A mother who was not successful after multiple attempts, said, "We will be in serious debt for a long time to come. In the meantime, I am picking up the pieces and trying to make peace with how much time I let slip away with my existing child."

Moving on

The good news, according to Dr. Cedars is that "most people overcome secondary infertility, as pregnancy is a powerful positive predictor of your chances to conceive." So if you have been pregnant and had a child, your odds of becoming pregnant again are greater than those who have never been pregnant. This holds true for those even with the most dire of prognoses. One mother underwent chemo and radiation and was then able, with the help of ART, to conceive a second child. Another woman, at age 41, quit the fertility clinic after multiple losses, content with her family of three, and then went on to conceive naturally the next cycle.

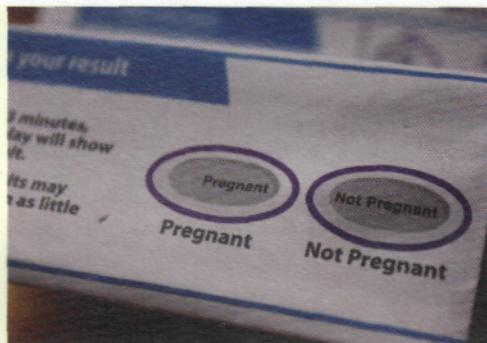
These examples do not hold true for all, and it is important to determine your own limits in the process. Talk with your partner and, if needed, a therapist, to determine what is right for you and how far you are willing to go both in terms of treatment and expense. And give yourself the leeway to change your mind. One mom swore she would never try IVF but, "once we looked the stats, we knew it was the best option for success given my age." Whatever your decisions, your struggle with secondary infertility will eventually come to an end. As Lauryn Salassi Gilliam, MS, MFT, writes in an article on The American Fertility Association website, "You will get through this and you will either have a child, adopt or decide to move on with other things in your life."

A former marketing executive, Rachel Blatt lives in the Richmond district with her husband and is a stay-at-home mom to son, Miles. She also serves on the GGMG Board as its Treasurer.

How to support a friend who is dealing with infertility?

Lauryn Salassi Gilliam writes that "people who have not been through infertility cannot begin to understand what their friends may be going through. They can be empathetic towards them and want to help, but they can't appreciate it." So, unfortunately, most people offer what sounds like helpful advice—"just relax, it will happen when its time," "be grateful for the one that you have," or "you can always adopt"—and end up making their friend feel even further isolated.

The best way to support a friend is just to be there however she needs. Listen. Empathize. Offer to watch her kids when she has appointments. Let her drive the direction of the conversation. Laugh and cry with her at the frustration, insanity and unfairness of it. She will get through it and your friendship will make it that much easier.



ONLINE RESOURCES

Resolve – The National Infertility Association
www.resolve.org

American Fertility Association
www.theafa.org

Society for Assisted Reproductive Technologies www.sart.org

SUPPORT GROUPS

Beth Jaeger-Skigen
therapistsf.org
415.317.4893

Kaiser-Permanente Mind & Body Class
Next class starts April 14
tinyurl.com/kaiserfertility