

Treating Infertility

Studies Show Reducing Stress Is Best Way to Address Fertility Issues in Men and Women

By Diane Johnston
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Despite popular opinion and a declining birth rate, many women still struggle to “have it all.” Waiting until their early 30s or 40s to start a family often accompanies increased fertility problems, which can create feelings of anxiety, frustration, sadness, anger, loss of control, and even hopelessness.

The roller-coaster effect — the emotional highs and lows associated with an inability to become pregnant — can cause many individuals to feel out of step with friends, relatives, and peers. Too often the total focus becomes the fertility issues, and both men and women begin to lose sight of what is actually working in their lives.

The findings of a National Infertility Awareness Campaign, the results of which were published in 1997, demonstrate that women who are pursuing treatment for infertility commonly experience feelings of depression, anxiety, grief, and inadequacy.

A mind/body approach to fertility — using interactions between the mind and body to target health-related issues — can help a woman regain control over her life at a time when she feels she wields little power. The approach uses deep relaxation, meditation, visualization, mindfulness practice, and cognitive-behavioral techniques.

Mindfulness, an ancient Buddhist practice, is about noticing the present. By combining this and other mind/body approaches, a woman is able to shift her focus from infertility to recover the joy of life that she has been missing as a result of total immersion in infertility issues. Positive physical, emotional, and psychological changes can occur through regular practice.

Loving-kindness meditation, a particular form of the practice, helps a woman develop compassion and caring for herself at a critical time — when she needs nurturing. Through this technique, self-blame, which often accompanies fertility issues, is reduced and feelings of self-love and self-worth increase.

“The meditation techniques used in the program were extremely effective in relieving the painful tension I was experiencing caused by worry and anxiety,” confided a patient who would identify herself only by the initials J.A. “I also incorporated this meditation to help me through the procedures associated with in-vitro fertilization ... I am now looking forward to the future with much optimism.”

Through physical changes such as the decrease in the release of stress hormones, the body is able to heal from the constant assault of stress, which is a leading cause

HEALTH BRIEFS

HEALTHY HEART HEALTH FAIR

HIV testing and counseling, body-fat composition testing, blood pressure screenings, and “meet the doc sessions” will be offered as part of the Healthy Heart Health Fair on Saturday, Feb. 21, from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Ryan/Chelsea-Clinton Community Health Center (645 10th Ave.). The free fair will also offer yoga and massage sessions as well as face painting for children. For more information, call 212-265-4500.

FLOWERS BLOOM HOPE

Brighten a loved one’s or coworker’s day with a bunch of fresh-cut daffodils — the spring flower of hope — available for purchase from the American Cancer Society through March 5. Donations from the \$7 vases and \$8 Gifts of Hope will support cancer research, education, prevention, treatment, and patient programs. Deliveries will be made the week of March 22. To order, call the American Cancer Society at 800-227-2345.

MUSICAL COMEDY ABOUT HEALTH CARE

Singing doctors Greg LaGana and Barry Levy will perform “Damaged Care: A Musical Comedy About Health Care in America,” which highlights issues such as reduced insurance coverage, the dehumanization of health care, medical errors, and the threat of “superbugs.” Performances are at 2 p.m. on Sundays through March 7 at Danny’s Skylight Room (346 W. 46th St.). Tickets are \$10 plus a \$10 food/drink minimum. To make reservations, call 212-265-8130. More information is also available on the Web at damagedcare.com.

of infertility in men and women. (According to a study conducted by the Pacific College of Oriental Medicine, men account for 40 percent of infertility.)

In women, stress can trigger irregular ovulation, fallopian tube stricture, and spasms in the fallopian tubes and the uterus, interfering with the movement and implantation of a fertilized egg. In men, it can affect sperm counts and cause impotence.

Meditation and acupuncture — the deep prick of a needle in a pattern of pressure points located throughout the body — can reduce stress and make both sexes more productive in their efforts to reproduce. Emotional and psychological changes yield an increased ability to focus and concentrate, to control emotions, and to improve self-confidence, leading to a greater sense of well-being.

“[The mind/body approach] taught me to refocus my attention on my needs and to treat myself as a person, not a walking science experiment,” said one woman involved in the treatment who wished to remain anonymous. “As a result, I found myself better able to cope with stress in all aspects of my life.” ■

Diane Johnston, N.P., M.S., is a therapist in private practice in New York City and Connecticut. More information on Johnston and the mind/body approach to fertility is available at mind-body-fertility.com.