

How Infertility Affects Men Emotionally

Handling strong feelings when you and your partner are struggling to conceive

by Matt Villano Seleni

Sadness. Frustration. Anger. Shame.

Steven* experienced all these emotions when he and his wife were having trouble conceiving a child. Weeks went by, then months and years. With every negative pregnancy test and every early miscarriage, both Steven and his wife grew more despondent.

Steven found himself falling into what he calls "the spiral of devastation" with self-doubt and self-loathing. He wondered whether he had somehow injured himself in childhood and ruined his ability to have kids. He convinced himself it was all his fault.

"I went through these bouts of being ridiculously hopeless. I convinced myself I didn't deserve to be a father," he says. "And I had no one to talk to about any of it."

That's the rub. Infertility, which affects one out of every eight couples, is hard on everyone. But men rarely have outlets to deal with their feelings on the subject, and often feel like their emotions need to take a backseat to their partner's. Eventually this can lead to a powder keg of emotions, waiting to explode.

The emotions of infertility for men

Traditionally "fertility in men has been tied to virility," says William Petok, MD, a fertility expert based in Severna Park, Maryland, and many men feel less masculine when they struggle to procreate. Feelings of inadequacy can also be paired with guilt says Petok. Often men who experience infertility issues become distraught that they are unable to continue genetic lines.

That's what happened to George, an artist from Northern California, when he and his first wife experienced infertility in the late 1990s. A descendent of a famous architect, George's fertility problem left him paralyzed with guilt after he realized he would not be able to pass on the family genes to a biological child.

"All I remember thinking was, 'If I don't make a baby, I'm the last one,'" he says.

Why men can have a hard time opening up

"Society tells us that men aren't supposed to show emotions or be sad," says Alice Domar, a psychologist, IVF expert, and founder of the Domar Center for Mind/Body Health in Boston. "In most cases where a wife is expressing pain and sadness, the husband to some extent feels he has to hold it together." When a man is already watching his partner struggle with her emotions, adding his own on can feel like an unnecessary burden.

That's the trap Steven fell into.

"No matter what happened, good or bad, I always actively put her emotional state front of mind," he says, looking back. "From my perspective, she didn't have to take care of anybody but herself, and the very last thing I wanted to do was make her feel guilty for worrying about herself instead of doting on me."

The biology of infertility

Men and women are equally likely to contribute to a couple's fertility problem, says Petok. Female factor and male factor infertility each account for 35 to 40 percent of cases, with combined or unknown causes making up the remainder.

Sometimes (as in Steven's case) fertility problems can be resolved with significant medical intervention. In other cases, patients have to decide whether to pursue alternate ways of becoming parents, namely surrogacy or adoption.

Adoption proved to be the best option for George, who had a low sperm count. He and his second wife ultimately decided to adopt a child. "I came to terms with the reality of the situation and focused on making the best of that," says George. "The difference between saying, 'I want to have a baby' and 'I want to raise a baby' makes it less important for the child to be from your body, and more important that you simply get the opportunity to be a parent and raise a child the way you think the child should be raised."

Seeking help

Though it may not feel easy to do, seeking support – from friends, family members, professionals, or any combination of the three – can make a tremendous difference. Domar suggests that men join a resource group to discuss their feelings in a safe environment. [Resolve.org](https://www.resolve.org) is a good place to start.

Finding an outlet for pent-up frustration, like playing sports or video games, joining a book club, or socializing with friends, is also helpful. Anything that relieves stress is a

good choice, says Petok, as long as both parties are choosing healthy ways to cope with emotions.

Finally, working to [stay connected to the present moment](#) (as opposed to spinning ideas in your head about what happened in the past or what may happen in the future) can also be helpful for managing the strong emotions of infertility. This practice doesn't have to be fancy or expensive. It can be as simple as taking a regular walk in the park, focusing on your breathing for five minutes daily, or going to a weekly cooking class. Anything that helps you take a break.

Choosing to stay connected to the present moment and doing activities that you enjoy can also help you maintain a sense of control, which men often need says Patricia Harteneck, a senior psychologist with the Seleni Institute. "Anything that makes you feel like you're in control – even if it's something little – can make a huge difference [in] your state of mind."

Harteneck adds that many of her patients over the years have benefitted from participating in group therapy sessions or online forums for men experiencing infertility issues. Online forums are especially popular among men who feel uncomfortable sharing feelings face to face or in small groups. Try the male factor infertility and support group at [BabyCenter](#).

Thanks to IVF and the support of their doctors, Steven and his wife now have beautiful twin one-year-old boys – children so active that the struggles to conceive them seem like a distant memory.

"Do I wish the path to this point [had been] easier? Absolutely," he says. "But I wouldn't trade this for anything in the world."