



Care for Couples Experiencing Infertility

Rabbi Idit Solomon

Facing infertility or fertility challenges for any person is hard and requires self-care. Going through the experience with a partner requires care for the other person and teamwork. Below are ways for couples to care for each other and their relationship during the experience.

1. **Check the blame and the shame at the door.** Infertility is nothing to be ashamed of and has no place for blame, but people feel it anyway. This is true of both partners in a relationship regardless of medical conditions or any other limits. Neither will get you closer to your intended outcome nor make the experience easier. It's not your fault and nobody deserves it – men and women alike. If others around you can't understand this or are insensitive to it, you might consider gently enlightening them (they may really not know and would want to be helpful) or taking a break from being around them. Seriously.
2. **Stay connected.** You have appointments, decisions, and emotions times two in addition to the rest of life that is happening. Staying open with each other and checking in is important. If it means setting aside a time to talk fertility, then make the time to address what is happening. Only talking with each other can be isolating too. Consider finding others to talk to either individually or as a couple if you want another outlet. You are not alone and sharing helps.
3. **Double check your priorities.** Partners may have different ideas about which treatments to take or how much to spend and it often is a reflection of differing priorities. When making decisions, talk about the priorities informing your decisions and not just the final vote. Considering what is important to you as a couple can help you navigate decisions more smoothly and sometimes even open up other options you may not have considered.
4. **Calibrate your limits.** Similar to priorities, as individuals and as a couple you have boundaries too. They may be emotional, physical, financial, time based, level of intervention or otherwise and they may be different for each of you. They may also change along the way as more information comes to light. Pay attention to when you and your partner are hitting limits together or individually so you are better able to support yourselves and each other and deal with the situation. You are now on a team and need to consider the limits and the costs not just for yourself, but for your partner and the relationship.
5. **Put your marriage first.** If your experience leads you to being parents, you will welcome that child into *your* life and *your* home. Make sure to build that life and home together. It will not magically appear once the infertility issues are addressed. As you determine priorities and limits, make sure your marriage is front and center. It is the foundation for making it through the experience and the family you are building together.
6. **Respect the other.** One of the biggest challenges for relationships is that one person may be coping with denial while the other wants to face it straight. One may be hitting a wave of laughter while the other is in a storm of tears. It is okay to be in different places. Give each other some space and make a point to meet again when the waves and storms subside.



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7. **Allow time to grieve.** Many losses can happen along the way whether a failed treatment, a bad test result, or a miscarriage. The intimate candle light dinner that turned into a doctor appointment is also a loss of how you imagined building your family. Rather than pushing past the feelings, allow yourself and/or your partner the time and the space to work through those feelings.
8. **Remember Shabbat and keep it holy.** Taking time out is not just okay it is necessary. That could mean a fertility vacation to stop treatment for a month or two, skipping the family event or toddler birthday party, or just a week to not talk about it. Every week we are to take a Shabbat from the workweek and appreciate the blessing already created. Take a fertility Shabbat in whatever form you need to refresh yourself and keep your sense of appreciation.
9. **Make meaning.** As a couple, you created a relationship greater than either of you as individuals. Each of your lives have meaning as does your relationship. Keep going and keep making meaning in your life beyond the fertility experience as best as you can. Some things may require rescheduling, but caring about the world around you and participating in meaningful activities do not have to stop. That larger life perspective is helpful as you face fertility challenges just as you would face any challenge.
10. **Have fun together.** Laughing is great medicine. It helps us loosen up, open up and bond us together. Between infertility, and life in general, there will be plenty of opportunities to be serious. Make a point to have fun together. Pursue your hobbies; support each other in doing enjoyable activities. Now may even be a good time (really!) to do that fun activity you have always wanted to do.
11. **Keep the flames burning.** Infertility can strain sexual intimacy. What used to be fun can feel like a chore especially when it becomes timed and medicated or you are in different emotional places. Find different ways to maintain your physical relationship and nurture your physical intimacy. Consider a nice massage or other forms of intimacy and touch as well.
12. **Define success.** Often people think of infertility as a journey and success is having a baby. That may be the case for some, but for others it is an experience that takes them to places they never imagined when they started. More important for you and your relationship is to move through the experience with integrity and to keep your sense of self and your relationship intact. There are other paths to parenting and many ways of having meaning in your life and your marriage. Your heart, soul and relationships are what will make your life whole regardless of your fertility.