

Suggested Reading:

Linda P. Salzer, *Surviving Infertility, a compassionate Guide through the Emotional Crisis of Infertility* Harper Perennial, New York, 1991.

In this book Linda Salzer draws on her own personal struggle with infertility and her extensive experience as a psychotherapist. She offers individuals and couples a comprehensive guide for coping with many of the intense feelings that often emerge from the crisis of infertility.

Kay Oke ed, *Taking Charge of your Infertility*, Melbourne IVF, 2000.

This book, written by infertility counsellors, casts light on how those facing infertility can ride the emotional merry-go-round with a sense of assurance, rather than feeling that they are spinning out of control. Copies can be obtained from Kay Oke, Melbourne IVF, Suite 10, 320 Victoria Pde., East Melbourne Vic. 3002 Australia. Fax +61 3 9473 4454

Jean and Michael Carter, *Sweet Grapes. How to stop being infertile and start living again.* Perspectives Press, Indianapolis, 1989.

In investigating the psychological process of working through this life stress, Jean and Mike emphasize the crucial role of communication in making decisions that allow the infertile couple to regain control over their lives. The Carters use their own experience to share what is means to be childfree and start living again.

Facing the death of a dream of having a family, often after many years of investigations and infertility treatment, can be extremely difficult to deal with. This fact sheet offers some thoughts about strategies which have helped others face the feelings of disempowerment and loss that come when one is faced with the prospect of approaching life without children.

The **International Consumer Support for Infertility (iCSI)** network is committed to empowering patients to become full partners in ART healthcare and public policy, by building effective relationships with providers, governments and media worldwide.

To further this vision and mission objectives, an international meeting of patient leaders is held prior to the annual meeting of the European Society of Human Reproduction and Embryology (ESHRE)

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Approaching
 Life without
 children

A fact sheet - Approaching life without children

Although attitudes towards what constitutes a family are changing, people can still feel considerable societal pressure that without children they are not a "real" family. Of course, if this situation has arisen because of personal choice, there is no problem. Advantages such as more time to spend on interests or hobbies, the time and energy to nurture relationships and the potential to pursue a career without considering parental obligations and responsibilities can be very attractive.

Choice

CHOICE is the central issue here and to be denied this choice because of fertility problems leads to feelings of disempowerment, helplessness and above all, of loss.

Most people who want to have children have grown up with the belief that control of such an important part of their destiny will be within their grasp. Having been confronted with the harsh reality through infertility, that this is not the case, they then have to make decisions about whether or not to pursue assisted reproductive technology treatments. A decision against may follow much soul searching, as ART may be contrary to one's personal values or one's cultural or religious beliefs.

Emotional Facts

The times and circumstances where the prospect of having to face life without children arises will vary tremendously. So, too, will the strategies you use to adapt to this probability and then reality. It is a process that will take some time. In fact, in some senses it never finishes. There will be reminders as life goes on, such as friends' children starting school and sisters and brothers becoming grandparents. It involves grieving for the loss of dreams for what might have been. Several mental health professionals have described the tasks, which are important to the grief process. One of these tasks is adapting to the reality of the loss. This may be particularly difficult in this instance as this loss is of a potential, not actual person, and it is often assumed that the loss should be less because of the lack of a "real" person, when - it isn't. There is no ritual for this loss. Individuals and couples in the process of adapting to a life without children may be confronted with misunderstanding and disbelief.

There may be the expectation by oneself or by others that at some stage, the mourning will be completely over. This may not necessarily be so, as many losses of loved ones - no matter whether they were alive in reality or in fantasy - usually becomes part of the person we become after the loss, just like many other crises which leave their marks in our lives.

It may help to mark the transition from hoping to become a parent to relinquishing this hope with a special time or act. To spend time as a couple on a holiday may provide a break from daily routine and a chance to appreciate each other in a different way. Redecorating the room allocated for the nursery is another thing, which some people have found useful at this time.

Support through this transition can take many forms. This may be either talking with others, including perhaps those who have been through the same experience, it may be professional counselling or it may be changing significant aspects of one's lifestyle. It may be an opportunity for the venture which has been put on hold for some time

At some point, there has to be a process of letting go of this dream. Linda Salzer in *Surviving Infertility - A Compassionate Guide Through the Emotional Crisis of Infertility* writes, "Grieving is letting go - letting go of unfulfilled dreams and replacing them with a comfortable reality". Resolution is usually seen to be the goal in any grieving process. Linda Hunt Anton in *Never To Be A Mother* states "Resolution does not mean you will be glad to be childless. What will change is that it becomes a past issue, not a current one. Resolving your feelings about being childless means living the many days of your life as well as you can, as fully as you can; it means minimizing the losses of childlessness and maximizing the assets of your life".

What can you do to minimize the pain?

Here are some thoughts about strategies which have helped others:

Don't let the child you long to have dictate your life.
Remind yourself to be in charge!

Don't neglect yourself, your partner or friends - they need you and you need them! Don't expect never to be affected

by the loss once you seem to have overcome it. Remaining childfree is a life-long issue, just like having children is. However, do expect the pain to become more manageable.

Do decide whether you would like to integrate children in your life. If you cannot have your own children, it may be helpful to contribute to the welfare of others.

Do decide what you want to leave behind. There are other ways to achieve this than having children. It does not matter how big or small this is but it does matter that it is significant for you!

Do live healthily. Good nutrition is also vital for those who cannot reproduce. Regular sports can help to counteract depressive reactions.

Do expect the experience of infertility to change parts of who you were before. For many, the naive optimism of being able to achieve everything in life has vanished. Many describe afterwards that they have grown as a result of this crisis.

AND

Do seek help from a counsellor or a support group to help you on your journey

Someone who wrote poetry during some of the difficult times in her fertility treatment eloquently describes how she approached the reality that her life would be without children of her own:

*"And the child so dearly wanted I must learn
to live without -
It brings me now to question what my
life is all about.
And though I have no answers now, I know
in time I will.
I'll find a purpose to my life, the empty
space I'll fill."*

Anne Graham