

SURVIVING THE WAIT – AGAIN!

We are acutely aware of and understand the extra stresses now facing those undertaking or about to start their assisted reproductive journey. You wanted to either start your family or add to your family. The waiting may feel intolerable. It may feel especially difficult because it is unknown when the fertility clinics will re-open and resume IVF/ICSI treatment.

The human brain hates ambiguity, uncertainty and being in limbo. Unfortunately, that is exactly what you are facing with the COVID-19 outbreak and with the social isolation restrictions. It is unsettling. You may feel a lot of fear and distress. Your mind probably goes to some very dark places, for example “What if I’m never able to have children”? “What if the shutdown continues for 6 months, 12 months or 18 months”? “What if the shutdown means that my chances of having a baby are significantly reduced or become non-existent”?

The decision made by the Government to include assisted reproductive technologies in the elective procedure category may have felt dismissive and confusing. It is hard to comprehend why having fertility treatment is considered an elective choice. Most would not choose to have to go through all that is involved in this process if they did in fact have a choice. The Fertility specialist's hands are tied and whilst rationally it was probably understood, to keep people safe, emotionally it is now an even longer wait to fulfil your deepest desire to have a family, another stage of being in limbo. It is totally normal right now to feel whatever you are feeling, whether that be frustration, loss, further grief, sadness, isolation and maybe anger.

Whilst many of you have existing survival tips and have no doubt used many of them before now, maybe these are some helpful reminders:

TIPS TO COPE FROM OUR PSYCHOLOGISTS:

1 **Try to practice self-compassion**, you are going through a very stressful time. Try to remain curious and open about whatever feelings arise. You

may feel anger at the unfairness of the situation and the impact that it is having on your life. You may feel sad at the loss of being able to start your family or add to your family. You may feel fear, anxiety, worry or distress because the shutdown may reduce your chances of having a baby. Try to give yourself empathy for whatever emotion you are feeling, for example “It’s horrible to feel so overwhelmed and helpless” or “It’s understandable that I’m so upset because this is really important to me”.

- 2 **Try to reduce self-blame** and judgement. Hindsight bias is when we look back on the past and berate ourselves for not doing things differently. We assume that the younger version of us in 2019 or 2018 had all the information and perspective that we have today. However, the younger us did not know that there would be a worldwide pandemic in 2020. You could not have predicted that fertility clinics would close, and that Australia would go into shutdown. Therefore, try to reduce the self-criticism, and self-blame. The first step would be to notice when you are having highly critical thoughts or self blame for example “ah, that’s interesting I’m blaming myself again”. Observing your thoughts is an important step. In the past you may have had a negative thought and absorbed it as the truth. Now you can observe the unhelpful thoughts and then choose to have a compassionate thought about yourself or the situation. A useful benchmark is how would I speak to a good friend? If you would be more compassionate and understanding towards a friend, try to apply the same language to yourself.
- 3 **Reach out** to other people. It may be hard for friends and family who have a child to truly understand what it is like to long for a baby. Therefore, you may find it helpful to chat on an online forum with other parents who are in a similar situation. Reading other people's →



stories may help you feel less alone. However, it would be helpful to set some limitations such as not reading forums in the evening before bed.

- 4 **Understand that different people** have different ways of managing stress and coping with uncertainty. Some people like to vent as their way of processing ambiguity. Other people may compartmentalise and focus on things that they can control. If you are in a relationship and your partner has a different coping strategy, don't take it personally. It just reflects how he/she manages stress and it is probably something that they have done for years or decades.
- 5 **Understand that relationships** are under a lot of stress. Everyone may be a bit more reactive or hypersensitive. We may not have the same level of resilience and patience. This can impact how we communicate and manage conflict. The Gottman Institute in Seattle has done the most longitudinal research on what makes relationships succeed and fail. The **Gottman Relationship Blog** has brief articles that explain some of the research such as The Four Horsemen (four negative ways of managing conflict that need to be avoided) www.Gottman.com/blog/
- 6 **Seek help.** If you feel like your mood has deteriorated, your anxiety levels are too high, or you are not coping speak to your GP. You can get a referral to see one of the Clinical Psychologists or Psychologists at **Gidget Foundation Australia**. The sessions are done via Telehealth and are bulk billed. If your relationship is struggling, consider seeing someone who specialises in couples therapy. In addition, consider apps that may be helpful such as **The Resilience Project** or **Head Gear**.

A Gidget Foundation Australia client, who is a fertility specialist nurse, kindly shared these tips with us:

- See this as a time to focus on things you may have had to put off due to your focus being on IVF and trying to have a baby.
- Know that you are part of a community of people who are all in this waiting period with you - you are not alone! Connect with others as well as allowing some space for yourself.
- Talk to people about how you are feeling, no matter what is happening in the world, how you are feeling is important.
- Focus on what you can control. Only access reliable information, from your fertility specialists or trusted health professionals.
- Use this time to work on your most 'healthy self' - ready for pregnancy. Practice more self-care.
- Continue taking pre-natal vitamins.

Remember that self-care is more important than ever. Making time for adequate rest, eating and trying to sleep well as well as daily exercising of some sort. Also, not feeding the fears and limiting listening to unhelpful social media and news. Find ways to boost your mood, rather than feed into ways that dampen it even more. Be patient and kind with yourself. 🌸