

Chicago Parent

Full heart, empty arms

A journey through infertility can be emotionally,

by Diana Xin
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Fertility matters

The babies are everywhere.



They scream on the train, cry on the plane. They sleep peacefully in your arms with the certain sweetness only babies have. But then time's up and for some women, the hardest part about a baby is returning him to a friend, a sister, a neighbor at the park and then walking away, arms heavy with emptiness.

Infertility affects 2.1 million married women in the U.S., according to the American Society of Reproductive Medicine. It happens to both men and women. Sperm weakens and eggs decline. Even after a successful pregnancy, secondary infertility may prevent couples from having another child.

Still, no one expects infertility to happen to them.

"People get pregnant all the time. It's such a natural thing," says Elizabeth, 38, a resident of Chicago's Lincoln Park. "(Infertility's) a very foreign thing. It was to me before I started going through it."

Infertility, despite how common it is, often feels taboo and hopeless, something no one else has to struggle with. For women who do receive the diagnosis, their journeys are marked with longing and new decisions, but the paths also yield new discoveries and relationships.

Elizabeth, who wanted to keep her last name private, planned her life like many other women. She graduated from college, focused on her career and expected kids to come later. She was the oldest of four and always imagined having a big family.

After becoming successful in business development, she married at 36. Most doctors say it becomes progressively harder to get pregnant every year after 35. But the first time around, it wasn't.

The couple was thrilled to find out in June 2006 they were going to have a baby. Elizabeth's younger sister was also pregnant at the time, so word spread fast and the family was excited to welcome two babies. But at 11 weeks, Elizabeth miscarried. "It's not only really painful, but emotionally, it's very challenging," says the curly-haired blonde.

Medical experts usually recommend couples try to conceive for a year before going to a fertility clinic. After the miscarriage, Elizabeth and her husband tried for six months before they were referred to the Fertility Clinics of Illinois. The clinic also referred them to Pulling Down the Moon, which partners with clinics to offer a holistic complement with services such as acupuncture, nutrition counseling, yoga, massage and Reiki.

Elizabeth underwent three intrauterine inseminations (IUI) and one cycle of in vitro fertilization (IVF). IUI, an outpatient procedure, is less expensive and takes less time. IVFs take much more preparation and are more expensive and invasive, but the success rate is also higher. For Elizabeth, however, the pregnancy test never showed positive.

"I think it's hitting (my husband) more now, the failed IVF," Elizabeth says. "You're spending all this money, it's a pretty invasive procedure, and when it doesn't work it's like, 'Whoa.' "

Telling family and friends was difficult.

"It's easy to feel like you failed," she says. "When you can't have a child, it's a failure. How do you deal with that type of emotion?"

High stakes

Even though the IVF wasn't successful, Elizabeth says she feels lucky she was able to do it. "When we hear about others doing five or six, that's like \$150,000," she says. "We joke that just one was a college education."

As people deal with infertility, cost is one of the greatest considerations. It's no secret that kids are expensive, but their absence can dry out the bank account as well. According to Elizabeth's doctor, Dr. Angeline Beltsos, of FCI, a cycle of IVF usually costs about \$10,000 in Illinois. The additional medication required can range from \$3,000 to \$5,000. IUIs cost about \$1,000.

Some women whose eggs are not viable have to take extra steps. If they use a donor egg from an agency, they pay an additional \$10,000 to \$12,000 fee. Surrogacy through an agency can cost between \$50,000 and \$100,000.

Beltsos says that Illinoisans are lucky because state law requires companies with 20 or more employees to cover IVFs and fertility treatments in their insurance.

"I think media portrays that it's easy to get pregnant," Elizabeth says. "It's always 'someone in their 40s gets pregnant.' They don't talk about how much (money) you spent, how many cycles you went through. They don't talk about the challenging stories."

For these women, there are challenges at every step. But with the support of others, they learn that it's OK to struggle, it's OK to long for a child.

"It's a community of people and we're all trying to figure it out," Elizabeth says. "You don't feel like you're a freak. You don't feel like you're alone."

Resources

Fertility Centers of Illinois

900 N. Kingsbury, Suite RW6, Chicago

(312) 222-8230

www.fcionline.com

Pulling Down the Moon

900 N. Kingsbury; Riverwalk 6-A, Chicago

(866) 727-4ICF (4423)

www.pullingdownthemoon.com