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HEALTH & FAMILY::

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## No kidding

### Dealing with the emotional drain of infertility problems

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Ten years ago, dejected and anxious, Beth Kohl of Winnetka left her third infertility specialist. It had been eight months since she first sought medical treatment for help in having a baby and she was still not pregnant. She didn't know where to turn.



"I felt so completely out of control," Kohl recalled. "Not only was I not going to be able to control my reproductive life ... but I was completely disempowered. I mean I was at the mercy of medicine and my first try I had been to somebody who so completely got it wrong ... ."

Today Kohl, 39, is the mother of an 8-year-old and twin, 6-year-old daughters, all conceived through in vitro fertilization (IVF). Her path to motherhood was not an easy one.



Kohl was 29 when she went off birth control pills and was surprised when her menstrual periods did not return. Her first doctor had her all but convinced that she had a hypothalamic tumor, but she eventually learned that she had polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), a condition that can affect a woman's menstrual cycle and her ability to have children.

Kohl next went to a local center for infertility, but doctors there put her on fertility drugs that exacerbated her condition. She moved on to a more holistic fertility specialist who delayed referring her for IVF, a procedure she would need in order to get pregnant.

### What worked

She finally got her happy ending at the Highland Park office of Fertility Centers of Illinois where she met Dr. Brian Kaplan. Kaplan understood PCOS and immediately treated her with IVF, a procedure in which doctors unite a woman's egg and a man's sperm in a laboratory and then transfer the embryo into a woman's uterus. Some women with PCOS require IVF in order to get pregnant. After four rounds, Kohl conceived. She still remembers the sadness and pain she experienced along the way.

"I was incredibly stressed," Kohl said. "I think a lot of people do feel the stress of not being able to procreate naturally the same way as their mothers and grandmothers and great-grandmothers did. It just feels like a tremendous compromise."

Kohl went on to document her experience in the book, *Embryo Culture: Making Babies in the 21st Century*.

About 7.3 million women and their partners in the U.S. -- or 12 percent of the reproductive-age population -- are affected by infertility, according to the American Society of Reproductive Medicine. Many of them feel significant levels of stress as they try to balance their work and personal lives with the time- and energy-draining process involved with assisted reproductive technologies like IVF.

Research by Alice Domar, the executive director of the Domar Center for Mind/Body Health in Waltham, Mass., which serves clients struggling with infertility and other illnesses, has shown that the levels of depression and anxiety that infertility patients experience are similar to what are experienced by women who have cancer or are HIV-positive.

Stress can also have physical effects on fertility. Anything physically or emotionally stressful can affect a woman's ovulatory pattern or a man's sperm count, said Dr. Edward Marut, the medical director of FCI's IVF Center in Highland Park. He added that physiologic functions disrupted by stress of IVF treatment, for example, are easily treated with medication.

## **Overfocused**

Marie Davidson, a psychologist with Fertility Centers of Illinois, thinks the relationship between stress and fertility is less clear. Some factors don't come across in research -- the fact that some people manage stress better than others, for one. "I'm not saying that stress doesn't play a role, I'm just saying it can be blown out of proportion so they (infertility patients) become so focused on it that it becomes another problem for them," she said.

Whether or not stress affects treatment outcomes for women using assisted reproductive technology, it's important to manage it. "The ease of treatment is increased when as much stress as possible can be relieved," Marut said.

One major source of stress for these women is that they can't have what's considered normal, said Elissa Geier, a clinical psychologist who sees women coping with infertility in her Northbrook practice. A woman dreams of having her own child, it's an emotional loss when she can't, she said.

Also adding to stress are peoples' comments, like "'You have to have a positive attitude or it won't work' or 'You know you're too stressed. You have to relax,'" Davidson said.

"It's judgmental and it winds up making the person feel that they are mishandling their own fertility and fertility treatments by worrying about it too much," she said.

## **Keep it quiet**

Davidson encourages infertility patients to stop talking about their problems with friends and family, or be selective about the people with whom they do talk, especially those who are having babies. Seeing other pregnant women can leave the woman struggling with infertility feeling left out and out of sync, Davidson said.

Davidson also suggests couples read Domar's book, *Conquering infertility: Dr. Alice Domar's Mind/Body Guide to Enhancing Fertility and Coping with Infertility*, which presents an array of stress-management

techniques. Whether it's yoga, acupuncture, meditation and breathing exercises or walking, just pick anything that has a foot in creativity, Davidson said.

Wilmette's Tami Quinn, 42, recalls her struggle to get pregnant at 30. She'd always assumed she'd go off birth control pills and get pregnant right away. Instead, it took over a year and a combination of fertility drugs to conceive her twins.

The process was financially and spiritually draining, and you just start to get down in the dumps, Quinn said. Her entire life she had envisioned herself a mother, and had begun to wonder if she didn't become a mother, what would she become? Would the whole infertility process drain her marriage? Would her husband like her better if she were fertile?

## **Group support**

To help other women going through what she did, Quinn co-founded Pulling Down the Moon in 2002 with her business partner Beth Heller. The center offers services that complement medical treatment for women struggling with infertility like support groups, nutritional counseling and special fertility yoga. It has locations in Arlington Heights, Chicago and Naperville. It and has an informal partnership with Fertility Centers of Illinois.

Domar suggests that women struggling with infertility join a support group. RESOLVE: The National Infertility Association (RESOLVE.org) offers support groups and educational programs in Illinois and most other states as well as a virtual support community online.

"You're suddenly in the majority," Domar said. "You can walk in and say your sister got pregnant and everyone else will say 'Oh my God, we hate her too.' And you're with people who understand how you're feeling. That's very powerful."

*\*\*\* Article featured in the Mundelein Review*