

## *Relax and Get Pregnant*

### Fertility news: Managing stress really does boost IVF success

By: *Jessica Snyder Sachs*



When Nikki Zilinsky, 37, learned how to ease her stress, she got pregnant. Is there a connection? Definitely, a new fertility study finds.

Nikki and her husband Rich had been trying to get pregnant for two years when they decided to try in vitro fertilization (IVF), a process that combines an egg and sperm in the laboratory and then transfers the fertilized egg into the uterus. After three IVF cycles and one devastating miscarriage, Nikki, then age 31, was physically and emotionally spent. “I was at rock bottom,” she recalls. “I didn’t feel like me anymore.” Though her husband was eager to try again, Nikki needed to stop. “At least until I felt right again,” she explains.

A few months later, Nikki picked up a flyer for Pulling Down the Moon, a center in nearby Chicago that takes a holistic approach to fertility. “It talked about more than getting pregnant,” she recalls. “It talked about healing yourself.” Nikki signed up for the center’s yoga classes, joined its fertility support group, and got regular massage and acupuncture treatments. The following year, she and Rich tried IVF again. Nikki got pregnant during the first cycle, and on Christmas Eve 2007, she gave birth to their son Jackson. “Not only was it successful,” Nikki recalls, “I also felt different through the whole process. I was in the best physical and emotional shape ever.”

Nikki’s experience wasn’t a fluke. A Harvard study presented in October at the annual meeting of the American Society for Reproductive Medicine confirms what fertility experts have long believed: Stress management can boost success rates for women undergoing IVF.

For years, studies had suggested that stress and depression lowered the success rates of fertility treatment, explains study leader Alice Domar, Ph.D., a Harvard Medical School psychologist and director of the Domar Center for Mind/Body Health in Waltham, MA. “This is the first study to show that even women who are healthy psychologically can use stress management to increase their chances of getting pregnant.”

Domar’s study enrolled 97 IVF patients. Half of the participants started a program that included 10 sessions of relaxation training, stress management and group support. The other half received a spa certificate and served as a comparison group.

Near the beginning of the study, both groups underwent their first IVF cycle with about 43 percent of each group getting pregnant. The rest of the women went on for a second IVF cycle—this time after those in the stress-management group had completed their program. The difference in success rates was significant. Eleven out of the 21 women in the stress-management group got pregnant (52 percent), while only 4 out of 20 women in the comparison group (20 percent) did.

“Though the number of women in the study was small, these are huge differences,” Domar says. “It confirms what we’ve long been telling our patients—that reducing their stress is just as important as giving them the correct doses of medication.”

Meanwhile, the Harvard study’s results are being hailed by infertility support groups and holistic health centers across the nation. “We’ve always believed that reducing stress is an important part of the potion,” says Tamara Quinn, cofounder of Pulling Down the Moon and coauthor of *Fully Fertile: A Holistic 12-Week Plan for Optimal Fertility*. “Now we have the science to back that up.”

If you’re trying to get pregnant—whether or not you are undergoing fertility treatments—learning ways to reduce your stress always make sense. Quinn offers the following tips:

**Reach Out.** Resist the tendency to suffer alone, Quinn advises. Ask for emotional support from friends and family and/or ask your doctor to connect you with an infertility support group.

**Relax.** Yoga, meditation and acupuncture are some of the relaxation techniques used at integrative care fertility centers such as the Domar Center and Pulling Down the Moon. Even if you don’t have such a center near you, chances are good that there are similar classes and therapists in your community. As an alternative, get together with girlfriends or your partner to trade massages and share a guided relaxation CD or yoga DVD.

In *Fully Fertile*, Quinn offers a great anytime relaxation technique: Find a comfortable sitting position. Close your eyes and inhale deeply through your nose. At the top of the inhalation, hold your breath for three seconds. Then release your breath through the mouth saying “ahhhh” until your lungs are empty. Repeat two or more times. Use as needed throughout the day.

**Identify and Eliminate Stressors.** Learn to identify the root causes of your stress and practice releasing the anxiety that surrounds them. Quinn suggests using visualization.

Perform the relaxation breath described above, and then return to breathing normally with your eyes still closed. Picture the day’s stresses as phrases on a white-erase board. Include everything that pops into your mind from “boss is an idiot” to “call Kelly back.” Take an imaginary eraser and remove the phrases from the board one by one. Where there was once clutter, see that the board is now white, clean and blank. Spend at least five minutes focusing on your clear, white board.

**Chose the Right Exercise.** Fertility-friendly exercise stimulates circulation and relaxes the mind without stressing the body, Quinn explains. Daily walking is ideal, she says. By contrast, hard training and distance running can disrupt the body’s production of fertility hormones.

Nikki laughs as she recalls how the benefits of her stress-reduction program extended right through labor and delivery. “The OB was teasing me while I was in labor,” she says. “He kept saying, ‘Yep, it must be that yoga. You’re doing fantastic.’”