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The Taboo of Infertility

“Are you ever going to have kids of your own?” Hearing my new coworker ask me this question instantly makes my stomach turn. It’s such a non-offensive question asked so nonchalantly, why would it bring so many painful thoughts to the surface? Unfortunately for both of us, she didn’t know that I have been suffering from infertility for the last two and a half years, putting my body and mind through torment in hopes of maybe being able to “have kids of my own” someday. Now we are in this awkward situation where I have to figure out how much feels like oversharing and how to avoid making my coworker uncomfortable because of my situation. Many people are uncomfortable with the topic of infertility. They don’t know what to say, or what they do say ends up being offensive to the person with infertility. Many people believe it should be a private matter between partners, while other people think infertility just isn’t as hard as people make it out to be and there are simple solutions. The truth is, infertility is an incredibly hard thing to experience, often there is not a simple solution to the problem, and the things people say in these conversations about infertility are often dismissive of other people’s experience and hurtful.

Experiencing hardships throughout life is a normal part of being human. Most people can sympathize with others’ struggles, even if they are different from their own. Infertility, however, is a very difficult experience to relate to unless you have gone through it yourself. Looking in from the outside, there's not a lot of common knowledge about infertility and what it entails, so

people often assume it's not as hard as it's made out to be. They might think, "Surely there are worse things to experience." However, I can tell you from the perspective of someone currently experiencing it, there are a lot more layers to the problem and things people just don't know about. Physically, infertility diagnosis and treatment are incredibly hard on a person's body. When I was working towards a diagnosis, I had a year of tests that were incredible invasive and painful. My doctor did bloodwork on different days of my cycle, imaging such as an HSG and transvaginal ultrasound, and eventually an explorative diagnostic laparoscopic surgery (where they used cameras through abdominal incisions to take images of my reproductive organs and the area around it). Outside of the tests my doctor did, I was constantly tracking my ovulation through Lh test strips twice a day and taking my temperature every morning at the same time to track my basal body temperature. Juggling all of these tests and tracking was taxing on both my body and my mind. Hormonal treatments for infertility usually have intense side effects, and IVF treatments are outrageously expensive and almost never covered under insurance. Many people who experience not being able to conceive easily also commonly have multiple miscarriages. Miscarriages are immensely hard on a woman's body. They are also devastating mentally and emotionally. The loss of a pregnancy, regardless of how far along it was, has a profound effect of grief and hurt that is very difficult to recover from, and many of these people are experiencing it back-to-back while still trying to have the will to continue treatment. These hardships add up over time, and many people just don't realize how much infertility can really entail. Some people see couples experience infertility and get lucky by having a less invasive solution and think there is always an easier way.

Unfortunately for me, my infertility experience has been full of weird, unsolicited advice from people. I once had a woman tell me, "Have a couple drinks! I was drunk when I got pregnant with all of my kids, it works every time!" I've also strangely received advice to stop

using plastic Tupperware because the toxins in the plastic prevent pregnancy. Or the classic, “You are just too stressed out about it! So many people get pregnant when they stop trying. Maybe try meditation!” My mother-in-law is *still* convinced that if I just tried the keto diet, I would be able to conceive. The problem with these comments isn’t the intent, and all of these people likely believe they are helpful and encouraging. However, people who are experiencing infertility tend to do a ton of research about the topic. Anything that they can try, with scientific evidence of maybe working, they likely have done or are currently trying. Offering simple solutions to this huge problem implies they aren’t knowledgeable on the subject or that the problem (that has consumed their life at this point) has a simple solution. Unfortunately, the problem of infertility is often hard and involves real medically proven treatments (that are not cheap or easy to do). And if the problem does have an easy solution, like cutting back on stress and making an effort to be more mindful, they likely have already tried it.

The other thing to consider is that the person has been going through infertility longer than you maybe know, because it is not an easy subject to share with people. Infertility is an uncomfortable topic of conversation, so a lot of people avoid talking about it and feel it should be a private matter between couples. Talking about receiving yet another negative pregnancy test or having a miscarriage is a difficult subject; however, not talking about it is incredibly isolating. As humans, we find comfort and connection through sharing life’s hardships, so not feeling able to share this huge part of your life makes the experience that much harder to live through. Having friends and family open to hearing about the sad, mad, and disappointing parts of the journey can really lift a portion of the burden off the person experiencing it and make it easier to cope with the pain.

When I was about a year and a half into my own infertility, I had only shared my infertility with 2 people apart from my husband. Our families, friends and coworkers had no idea

I was crying in the bathroom every month looking at a pregnancy test with only one line. However, I had a shift in perspective and decided to become transparent about my experience with anyone who asked. While I did receive a lot of unsolicited advice that dismissed how hard my infertility is (and some people felt I shouldn't be sharing this information), the shift from hiding my infertility to being open about it lifted an enormous weight off my shoulders that I didn't even know was there. Suddenly I didn't feel alone, and people were able to be more sensitive about things like pregnancy announcements, or questions about my family planning. I no longer had people commenting, "You look good holding that baby! When will you finally have a baby of your own" when I held a baby at a family function. It was a small win, but I think that change and added support made me more able to be positive about having multiple surgeries and treatments. It also opened the conversation with other people facing the same struggle as me. What really became apparent to me was just how many other people were also going through infertility like my husband and me. My husband and I felt less alone when we found community, and it made us a little better about not being able to conceive. Infertility made me feel incredibly inferior to other women who were able to conceive easily (and often unintentionally), so finding other women that shared that hardship made me feel better about myself. I wasn't truly alone in infertility, there are a lot of people I know that are going through the same thing. Being asked when I will have kids of my own is still a difficult part of infertility, but with the support of people around me and confidence that I can share my infertility with other people, I know I can handle those questions.