

Infertility

The pain of childlessness is often misunderstood - and yet the pain can go on for life.

You're sure to know a couple who are just that: 'a couple'. Where are the children? It's very likely that the couple have been suffering for years because they've longed for a baby, but have been unable to have one.

Very often, no thought is given as to why a couple is childless. Even if there is some thought given, it is assumed that they didn't want a family, or that the woman put her

career first. As a result, many misunderstood couples might stand with a group of people talking about their own children, and nobody notices that they remain quiet. And it's a grief that goes on beyond the ages of 30 or 40. Before long these same couples remain quiet while their contemporaries talk about their grandchildren.

Lost hopes and dreams

"There is a problem here. There's a strong chance you will have difficulty having children."

My heart sank to the pit of my stomach at the doctor's words. Fear gripped me and tears welled up. It seemed so ironic that in my teens I had pontificated with my friends, "I don't know if I do want to have children." How stupid it sounded now. I really, really did want children - and now it might not happen.

I didn't tell many people. I didn't want to be another piece of 'news' on the grapevine. I decided I wouldn't tell anyone unless they wanted the information in order to pray for me and help me as I grieved.

Not that many people give me credit for experiencing grief. How can you grieve for something you've never had? But I *am* grieving for something I've never had, for lost hopes and dreams.

I find that my grief is cyclical on a monthly basis - not surprisingly! Calendars and counting become a way of life, making sure you make love during the critical time limit - very romantic!

I've been to a few shower parties in my time, but only one since I heard about the infertility. It was for a close friend who knows my situation, and she was filled with incredulity at what I had to experience there. I don't blame those who don't know about me waxing lyrically about all things pre- and post-partum, but the silence of those who do know is hard to bear.

No-one invites me to them any more. The word is out! Easier for them not to, than to have to hear me say, "No, I won't be coming." Interestingly, my feeling of isolation and reticence around them in other situations has increased.

I really welcome people who are brave enough to ask me how it's going. I have a handful of friends who will. They're brave, because they don't know if they'll have me in floods of

tears or not. But it's much braver for me (I think!) to bear this pain month in month out than it is for them to - just once - risk reaching out to me.

Pregnancy announcements are hard. I have experienced at least two women who denied pregnancy when they were being sick, and then, at three months, they announce it. Their prerogative of course, but for me it felt like betrayal. But one good friend who was pregnant told me first and then wrote me a lovely letter expressing her sadness at my situation and her hopes and prayers for me. That was really appreciated.

It's difficult for me to feel excited about any future plans at work or church - it just doesn't seem as important as having a child.

I empathise much more now with other people's pain and to those who don't fit the mould - those in their 30s who are not married, those in their 40s who have not had a longed-for child, older people who can't talk about their grandchildren. I stop and think now before I speak.



Repeating the pain

My husband Michael and I were unable to have children, and when our contemporaries began to announce the birth of grandchildren, the pain of childlessness was repeated all over again.

Part of me cuts off from it because I have to, but it hurts to see their joy. Some people are thoughtless. When they 'boast' about children or grandchildren, they ought to be sensitive to others' experiences. If you boast that a child has a good degree, it can also hurt those whose child is disabled and can't study, and those whose child was capable of getting a degree but has wasted his or her talents. There's always someone who's going to feel hurt.

Some grandparents are worse about talking about their grandchildren than they were about their children. But when they tell me the problems they have with their grandchildren, I can identify with them as a fellow human being.

Michael's not interested in 'continuing the family name', but I did ask him if he missed having grandchildren, and he said "I miss the interest..." I don't normally think about it too much because I get on with living. But it gets to you at various points. I thought I'd coped with it, and then I went to a service on motherhood and realised the feelings were still there.

I knew as I looked around that I wasn't the only one finding it difficult – for all sorts of reasons.

It's a biological need that hasn't been met. Sometimes I hear grandparents talk about how desperate they are to *see* their grandchildren – it's not enough just to talk on the phone – and I realise it's a bond I've never experienced. It makes me wonder whether I am

stunted emotionally. But none of us are 'whole' people. You have to learn to live with what you have as well as what you don't have.

We're all minus something - perhaps our parents were terrible, our marriage wasn't good, or we have children but miss the loving relationship we might have had with them. It's all part of the same loss.

When people retire, most of them say they're going to spend more time with the grandchildren. There's a gap. But I realise

I also don't have a lot of the problems. It isn't all loss if you're realistic about it.

As you're getting older and you start to contemplate the end, it's a 'dead end'. You can't think 'they are carrying on where I leave off'. People say you don't miss what you haven't had – but you *do*. It's just a different sort of missing.

Catherine

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Childless for life

Last weekend we received in the post an invitation to a wedding. It was from one of our godchildren whose parents are our contemporaries. I was reminded, in that most intimate and personal of ways, that once you are childless it is for life. It never goes away.

Lots of people think childlessness is about babies. They think it's an issue when all your contemporaries in their 20s and early 30s are giving birth, and once you've got through that stage, the problem will somehow disappear. Well, it doesn't – it's a lifelong issue.

This is particularly true at times of rites of passage. When other people are having their children baptised or you realise you will never be the mother or father of the bride or that you won't be a grandparent.

Douglas and I married in our late 20s and hadn't been inclined to have children straight away. I then began to have some gynaecological problems that took me to the GP who out of the blue one day said, "Why aren't there any babies? You're 33. Don't you think you ought to be getting on with it?" My view was 'Yes' - but we didn't use contraception and nothing had happened.

He took the decision out of my hands and said "maybe

we need to investigate". He didn't warn me about how horrendous those investigations can be. Every month you wonder whether, as a result of whatever treatment you decide to have, 'it' is going to happen. We weren't prepared to subject ourselves to all the treatments and we finally decided to stop the relentless pursuit to have a child.

We took the decision because we felt a conviction before God that nobody has a right to a child. Children are a privilege and a responsibility. We concluded that in God's wisdom we were not going to have that privilege and responsibility.

I still believe this even more strongly 20 years on when I see people not taking their parenting responsibilities as seriously as they might. I say to God, "I would have been a good parent! Why not me?"

We were misunderstood by some people at church. Once I overheard a group of mothers talking, and one said, 'I feel terribly sorry for him [my husband]. She's so career-minded that she won't let him have children.'

From that point on I decided to be utterly truthful about our situation. I know some people find it very difficult to talk about. I still find it awkward to say that we

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are childless and also tell them a little bit about it. But I do find that easier than living with the conclusions people jump to. Understandably, people assume I am a 'career woman' because I have a fulfilling career - but now I make it clear to them that this wasn't by choice.

This isn't a woman's problem. It has been every bit as acute for my husband as it has for me. At first, he was in shock - more than I was. He cried every day for two years, which I didn't do and it was difficult for me to bear. Interestingly, I have shed more tears lately than I did in those early days.

I had to struggle with the fact that it was a male friend he wanted to talk to about it, rather than me. We did talk to one another about it often, which was a very important thing to do, but I had to accept that he didn't want to tell me all the things he shared with his friend.

I believe that God had a calling for my life and there are things I have done that I wouldn't have if I'd been a mum. It doesn't take away the 'particular' longing to be a mother, but at no point have I been tempted to feel or think that my life is somehow worthless.

I made a decision not to shy away from children. I understand wanting to run away from a pram or children - but I like children. They have come into our lives in great numbers.

We took the decision not to adopt: because of our age, because children would come with problems, and because we felt God had other plans for us. One of these plans was to be given 13 godchildren! Two of them have got kids of their own so we are god-grandparents! Our latest godchild is six months old. We said we were too old, but were thrilled that this young couple said they didn't want anybody else: "We want the two of you."

Finally let me tell you about Katie. I have just taken her out for a swanky dinner for her 18th birthday. I first met Katie when she was 10. She was at the

school where I was chair of governors.

When Katie did a reading at the carol service, the headteacher complimented her for smiling at everyone during the reading. Katie replied, "I didn't smile at everyone, I smiled at Ann Holt."

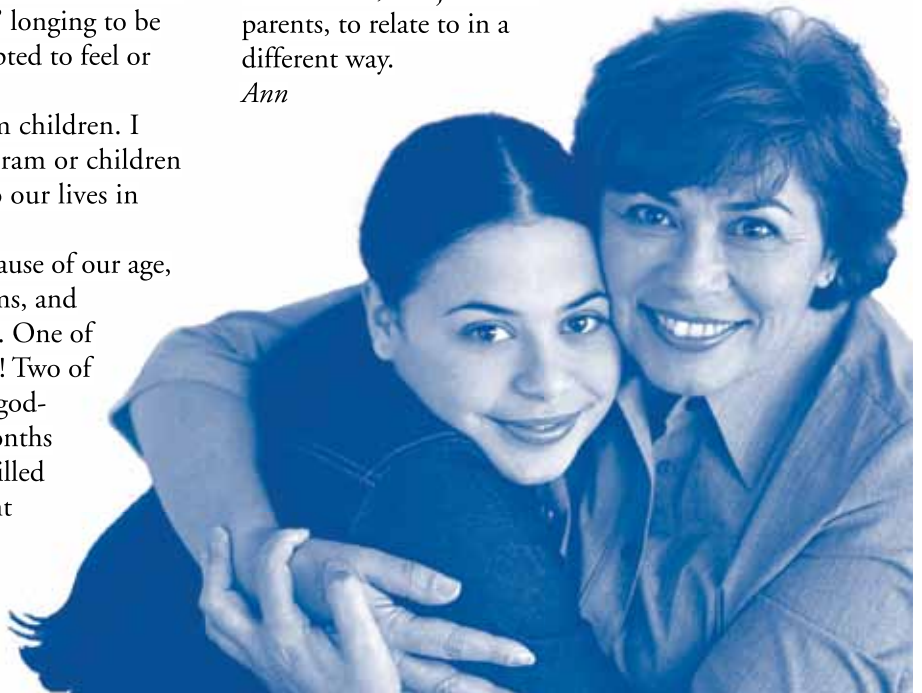
I told Katie's mum about it, and she said, "Oh, Katie talks about you all the time." I couldn't understand this at all. Katie is confident on the outside, her mum told me, but very insecure inside. I said that I was just like that when I was 10. When she told her daughter, 10-year-old Katie replied, "Don't you think I know that, Mother! That's why I have chosen her to be my role model!"

It has been eight years of awesome responsibility! But I believe we all have the potential to forge a relationship with a child or young person and we don't

have to be parents to do that. Every child needs other adults, not just their parents, to relate to in a different way.

Ann

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Not something men do

I felt gutted for all sorts of reasons, but mainly I felt guilty because the problem lay with me. It's not easy to own up to a condition which is the butt of jokes in the locker room. Although I would like to have children, I don't suffer in the same way as my wife does. To be honest, I don't always know when the time of the month approaches. My body isn't experiencing the same feelings of loss and emptiness. I think it's different for

men, well, for me, anyway.

Infertility feels 'unmanly', like I think women feel 'unwomanly'. At work I don't feel all that unusual, but in church, getting married and having children are high on the agenda. We have a high regard for the family in Christian circles. It's hard not to be part of it. I would say generally no-one talks to me about this. It's just not something men do.

How to help

- Be aware than infertility can cause depression, anger, resentment and guilt. It can cause isolation and such severe stress that some couples decide to part. Don't treat it lightly.
- Be brave - ask your friend how they are with regards to their infertility. They probably won't tell you if you just ask, "How are you?"
- Don't say, "Have you thought of adoption/IVF/world travel/prayer/hormone treatment/taking your temperature/cold showers/post-coital leg raising?" Yes, they have!
- If you have faith, pray for them.
- If you are the good friend of an infertile person and you get pregnant, consider telling your friend first, privately. Even tell them if you are trying for a child. It helps them get their emotions sorted out so that they can express their joy for you when it goes public.
- Put yourself in the shoes of the childless occasionally (and that includes single people who might want to be married with children) at family occasions or church gatherings.
- Don't pull the pot plant out of the hands of the 'non-mother' you accidentally gave it to at the church Mothering Sunday service, and say, "Oh, sorry, you're not a mother, are you?" (True story!)
- Don't ask for all the details (unless your friend wants to talk to you about it). It is *very* embarrassing to talk about such things. It's private. Do you really need to know anyway?
- Don't assume they don't want to be around children. Different people have grief triggered by different experiences. It's often pregnant women who are the hardest sights to bear.
- Don't pass on any information you have about an infertile person to others unless you intend to pray. It is tantamount to gossip.
- An infertile person is allowed to say, "It's not the end of the world. I won't let it ruin my life." But don't you say it to them!

Facts to face

One in six couples visit their doctor because they are worried about not having conceived. They are often offered treatments which, for some, are not ethically viable options. For example:

- Donor sperm and donor eggs
- ICSI - the injection of sperm directly into the egg (the IVF procedure is different in that the eggs and sperm are in a test tube in close proximity to each other rather than injected)
- Multiple embryo production
- Frozen embryos

The options often exclude any other kind of intervention. Therefore, many who want to uphold their ethical stance have few options to consider when it comes to infertility treatment. It often boils down to adoption or praying for a miracle. If couples do go ahead, the waiting list for a first appointment for treatment on the NHS can be two years. Private treatment can cost £4,000 - £6,000.

Extra help

Support groups

Fertile Thoughts

Web: www.fertilethoughts.com

This US based website deals with infertility and adoption, with forums on subjects such as endometriosis, living without children, and IVF treatment.

Infertility Network UK

Charter House
43 St Leonard's Road
Bexhill on Sea

East Sussex TN40 1JA

Tel: 0800 008 7464

Web: www.infertilitynetworkuk.com

Bookshelf

The Ache for a Child: Emotional, Spiritual and Ethical Insights for Women Suffering through Infertility and Pregnancy Loss

Debra Bridwell, Victor Books, ISBN 1564762483