INFERTILITY

The following articles are excerpted with permission from “Stepping Stones: To Offer Hope, Encouragement, and Support for Infertile Couples,” a bimonthly newsletter published by Bethany Christian Services, 901 Eastern Avenue NE, P.O. Box 294, Grand Rapids, MI 49501-0294.

1. THE JOURNEY by Silvia Van Regenmorter

Infertility is an emotional journey and, before it is over, the couple will experience every emotion known to humans. Where are you in this journey?

There’s Nothing Wrong
The journey begins in a hazy fog. You have been married for a year or more and no children have come. In the back of your mind you begin to wonder why you haven’t become pregnant, but there is no worry. Perhaps if you and your husband were able to get away for a few weekends...or if you felt rested enough to make love more often...or if...

There’s Something Wrong — Now What?
You continue in the fog until slowly, gradually, it begins to lift and you realize something is wrong. You should have become pregnant by now. Each month you hope for the best, but each month you are disappointed. You laugh it off when asked when you are going to start a family. “Why get tied down so early?” you respond. “We need to enjoy life first.” For all of the outward lightheartedness, you are becoming increasingly worried. What is wrong?

It Is Something Minor
The fog is lifting now, and you are ready to acknowledge that you have a problem. This is an important milepost on the journey. You carefully select a doctor and you make an appointment to see him — confident that he will help you. As far as you are concerned, there is no need to pack for a long and trying trip — just an overnight bag will do. Why, in no time, you will become pregnant and the journey will be over!

Shock
Suddenly, you fall off a cliff that you hadn’t seen. You hit bottom with a soul-jarring thud. Your physician has discovered that there is something seriously wrong with you or your spouse. You are surprised. “Doctor,” you say, “You’ve got to be kidding.” But he is not smiling. Shock is often the shortest stop on the journey. Soon, you climb back up the cliff and, though you are bruised, you are unbowed.

Denial and Anger
With renewed energy and determination, you plunge ahead. You do not realize that you have begun to blindly stumble down the path of denial. You convince yourself that the doctor must have gotten the wrong test results. You assure yourself by saying, “God would never deny us children.” You do not travel very far before you stumble over a sharp rock in your path — the rock of anger. You may become
angry at your physician: “He is so cold and so costly.” Your anger may leap out at your spouse: “Why don’t you understand what I am feeling?” You may become angry at yourself: “It is stupid of me to get this upset!”

**Guilt and Depression**

Anger does not usually last long. Before you know it, you have fallen down an embankment into the valley of guilt. At the valley floor, you encounter depression, which appears in many forms. You may simply have a dragged-out feeling or feel unattractive and unloved. You may lose all your desire for sex or neglect your appearance. For some it is very important to seek support — perhaps even professional counseling. I was part of an eight-week support group with four other couples. It was so helpful to freely share my thoughts, fears, and pain with others who understood.

**Isolation**

The worst part about being at the bottom is that you feel so alone. Even your spouse does not seem to be walking by your side. The sun is blazing down on you now as you walk the lonely trail. You are becoming weary and tired — oh, so tired! You endure tests and more tests and maybe even try the latest (and most expensive) technique while on your journey to have a baby. But with no success!

**Grief**

The most difficult part of the journey is through the river of grief. You begin to traverse these raging waters when you realize that you may never have a biological baby. You grieve over this thought. You grieve the loss of your hopes and aspirations. You mourn the child you may never have. In this time of sadness, there is no body ... no memorial service ... no group of friends to offer their condolences.

**Recovery**

After you have grieved and mourned, you continue the journey. You are now on the way to recovery. It begins when you take positive action and look forward to the future. The energy that you once put into your grief, you now devote to new projects and new beginnings. The room you had kept for the baby you redecorate as a den. You begin to cultivate what is fertile in your life — a musical talent, a career you had put on hold, a desire to learn more about an interest you have.

2. **LONELY OR LOVED: Maintaining Friendships Through the Infertility Journey** by Joy Englesman

It was Wednesday night and I didn’t feel like being at choir. Too many sideways glances of pity, too many whispers, too many comments from the unintentional intruders, too much awkward silence from well-meaning friends. But once again, I set aside my personal privacy to risk exposure to the community. During the rehearsal, my announcement that I was pregnant brought a cheer and promise of prayer for the next day’s result. But God’s response to the prayers of my friends was a difficult one: We lost our third child to miscarriage. My husband, Bob, and I were devastated and heartbroken. Separated from our family by thousands of miles and from our friends by their silence, we felt as if we were the last two people on the face of the earth.

Infertility can test all areas of life: physical, emotional, financial, and spiritual. It also has the dangerous power to totally devastate a couple’s social life. What role do our friends play in the ups and downs of our cycles of hope and ruin? How can we find the support we need to face months of desire and disappointment? What kinds of friends are we drawn to?
Often, friendships are defined by what we have in common. This is a most dangerous definition for the infertile couple. First, no one wants to belong to such a “club,” so the “membership” is reluctant, reticent, resistant — not exactly the kind of people to support you in need. Second, sooner or later, members of the club will graduate — either through pregnancy or adoption — leaving the remaining members feeling more isolated. A circle of friendship based exclusively on common experiences with infertility may serve well as a temporary support group, but it usually won’t last the test of time.

To Get a Friend, You Must Be a Friend:
My husband and I realized early on that if we wanted to keep our friends we would have to be honest with them about our pain, our hopes, and our hurts. We wished they would have known what to say or do without telling them, but we learned that they needed us to teach them about infertility and grief.

We’ve come to define our friends as those who are willing to walk with us through pain and sorrow, hope, and joy. Some of our friends have been down this road before, but many have not. Most are very different from us; some are old enough to be our parents. They are the ones who admit they have nothing to offer but their shoulders, prayers, and love. Our best friends are the people who trust us by being real with us. They don’t walk on eggshells around us. They dare to laugh with us, cry with us, ask for our prayers for them, and promise the same for us. They invite us to share their lives, hold their babies, play with their children, and they understand when we can’t. May you find the friends you need to carry you, too!

How Infertile Couples Can Encourage and Retain Friends
“Our friends love us, but they don’t know how to show it. We have to show them how.”

1. Recognize and appreciate love, even when it is cloaked in clumsiness.
2. Acknowledge others when they attempt to understand your situation.
3. Realize that “hurting people hurt people” and that loving us in the middle of our pain is a bit like hugging a porcupine. Try not to poke people with your quills!
4. Share your knowledge about infertility, when appropriate. For example, when well-meaning friends tell us those amazing stories about couples who adopted and then were able to get pregnant on their own, I smile and say, “How wonderful for them! Did you know that happens to only five percent of couples?”
5. Don’t assume that your friends are able to understand your feelings, treatment, or grief. Or that they are ignoring you when they don’t ask how you are. Or that they are purposely avoiding you when they don’t invite you to events. (They may be trying to protect you from being around children or in other potentially painful situations.)
6. Be honest with your friends and ask them to be honest with you, even about secrets you want to keep. For example, you could say, “My husband and I are struggling right now. Please don’t ask about the details, but we appreciate your prayers.”
7. Make a list of things that people could do for you when you are down. It makes them feel better to have something to do, so tell them and then let them do it!

Additional material regarding infertility is available through Focus on the Family. To obtain a listing of these resources (RL052), please call us at 1-800-232-6459.