The emotional aspects of Infertility, IVF and Counselling

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The role of counselling in ART

Part 1: How counselling operates in ART Clinic

Part 2: The psychological issues associated with infertility and its treatment

Part 3: The role of the counsellor
Training requirements for counsellors

• Must be a registered psychologist, social worker or equivalent qualification, registered with ANZICA

• Fertility counselling is a specialized area. Different from other grief & loss work

• Requires training and orientation on-site in all areas
Pre-treatment Counselling

• Psycho-educational, information
• Consideration of mental health and stress factors
• Support networks
• Review treatment, legislation (if applicable), outcome possibilities and decisions
On/after treatment Counselling

- Therapeutic and supportive counselling
- Follow-up
- Psycho-social care
- Relationship counselling
- Grief – miscarriage, tx failure, loss
- Coping with stress
- Decision making
Mandatory Counselling

There are a number of circumstances where counselling is mandated by law or other regulation:

1. Donation – any treatment relating to the use of donated gametes: eggs, sperm or embryos, requires implications counselling

2. All surrogacy arrangements require additional counselling and usually assessment

3. In Victoria only, all fertility treatments require initial counselling. Most also require police and child protection checks, but these are under review. They place a huge additional burden on both the patients and the clinics.
THE IDEAL INFERTILE COUPLE

- Optimism
- Mutual Support
- Thick Skin
- Foresight
- Stamina
- A deaf ear to mindless advice
- Knowledge
- Cash
Emotional reactions

Initial Dx, Nature of Dx

- Current stressors eg sick parent, pressures at work
- Gender differences
- Available support from family and friends
- Meaning of infertility
- Cultural factors

Unique to relationship

Unique to individual

Past life experiences

Exit IVF
- Pregnant
- Childless
The emotional impact of Infertility and Treatment

- Pain, grief, loss
- Fear
- Guilt
- Jealousy
- Rage
- Anxiety
- Hope
- Shame
- Helplessness
- Despair
- Depression
- Stress
- Isolation
- Frustration
Loss and Infertility

- Loss of dreams/future
- Loss of control
- Loss of easy way of achieving a pregnancy
- Loss of intimacy, spontaneity and mystery of conception
- Loss of a natural rite of passage
- Loss of fun and joy of sex
- Loss of self esteem
- Financial loss
- Loss of friendships, avoidance compassion fatigue
The impact of these losses

• Profound grieving process, different from a death
• Hypersensitivity to others’ pregnancies
• Obsession with becoming pregnant

• Identity and self esteem issues
• Self blame, self doubt
Challenges

Feelings of isolation, not feeling normal

Life cycle issues – no children, no grandchildren

Existential issues- who am I? What is my purpose in this life? The meaning of life?
How does the counsellor help?

• Bear witness to the pain in safe environment
• Identify ongoing stressors which may be intensifying distress
• Develop strategies to reduce impact of stressors
• Normalize the experience, differences between men and women
• Work on self esteem
• Develop coping and communication skills
• Grief work
• Gaining control where they can
• Address other issues
Gender Differences

Male

• Tend to respond in practical ways and be solution focussed
• Tend to internalise and repress
• Preoccupied with needs of partner
• Tend to look to the positive
• May appear uncaring

Female

• Tend to wants to talk about feelings & be emotion focused
• Tend to be overt & expressive
• Preoccupied with craving for baby
• Tend to look to the negatives, the what ifs
• May appear neurotic
• Carry the burden of IVF treatment
What helps? A toolbox of coping skills

- Self Nurturing
- Relaxation and Breathing
- ACT
- Cognitive Restructuring – new ways of thinking about treatment and self
- Managing thinking, telling the story
- Mindfulness – learning to value the present
- Developing effective supports (communicating needs)
- Developing strategies for coping with individual situations e.g. birth of a friend’s baby
- Developing a ‘Plan B’
Other issues

- Finances
- In-laws
- Career
- Illness
- Sexual difficulties
- Relationship problems
Implications for pregnancy and post natal period

- May be more anxious in pregnancy
- Potentially lower self-esteem and confidence in relation to parenting
- Feel less able to show negative emotions and ambivalence, put pressure on themselves
- May be more willing to accept help as have done so before

If no child

- Coming to terms with childlessness
- Grieving process
- Exploring other options such as treatment with donor gametes, adoption or childlessness
Thank you

Questions?