

Relieving Stress in the Fertility Clinic

By: Beth Heller, Co-Founder, Co-Director of Pulling Down the Moon

The latest buzz among patients undergoing treatment for infertility is not a new medication for ovulation induction or a new mode of embryo transfer. The latest buzz is not related to any medication or procedure at all. It is related to the connection between mind, body and fertility and the science behind this "new wave" of treatments that has been in use for thousands of years. Disciplines like yoga, Ayurveda (the medical science associated with yoga) and Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) have long considered both the mental and spiritual well-being of patients in addition to their physical health when assessing medical infertility. "Yoga and meditation can provide a means by which the patient can relax and calmly approach the infertility process. It is helpful for them to know there are classes which can help them achieve their inner sense of balance and that there are others going through the same stressful process," says Dr. Meike Uhler from the Naperville office of Fertility Centers of Illinois (FCI).

Realizing the benefits of complementing traditional medical treatment with holistic modalities, Reproductive Endocrinologists (R.E.'s) are beginning to partner with holistic practitioners in order to make these non-traditional offerings available to their patients. Such is the case for the Fertility Centers of Illinois who recently partnered their group of eight Chicago area clinics with Pulling Down the Moon, Inc. a holistic fertility group which provides classes in yoga, meditation, breathing and relaxation techniques as well as acupuncture, massage therapy and other complementary treatments. Pulling Down the Moon differs from other holistic clinics because all of the programs and offerings at Pulling Down the Moon are specifically designed for fertility patients.

It is not fair to say that holistic thinking in the fertility clinic is new. Most R.E.'s have long advocated this type of approach in their practice. They might recommend "lifestyle changes," rather than specifically going to yoga or meditation, yet the message is similar: reduce the intake of substances such as drugs and alcohol which have been shown in clinical studies to adversely impact the odds of conception and sperm quality, and calm the physical and mental system as much as possible.

"If patients have not already done so, I encourage them to stop smoking, decrease alcohol to no more than 2 times per week, limit caffeine to less than two cups per day, decrease their Body Mass Index to less than 25, take daily prenatal vitamins and exercise," says Dr. Uhler. When asked about the impact of stress on fertility, most R.E.'s acknowledge that there can be a negative effect.

"Stress of any kind may interfere not only with normal ovulation, but sperm production as well. It's likely that the endorphins produced by stress suppress normal pituitary function; but excess cortisol may have a feedback effect on the

reproductive axis as well," say Dr. Edward Marut, an R.E. at FCI's Highland Park practice.

These physicians are confident in their medical interventions and the efficacy of the drugs used to modulate the reproductive cycle. Yet they are also aware their patients are struggling with the loss of control that comes with fertility treatment which can ultimately increase stress levels and create emotional fatigue.

Holistic Support for Fertility Treatment

Tami Quinn, Co-Founder of Pulling Down the Moon and the mother of six-year old twins, sums up her past experience with infertility as an emotional roller coaster:

"Your moods tend to ebb and flow with your menstrual cycle. I'm happy today because I'm going to see the doctor and work out my protocol, I'm sad today because I only have two viable follicles, I'm happy again because we got good embryo quality... The waiting game is nerve-racking and, at times, you feel like your whole life is moving in slow motion."

Indeed there is an excruciating element of waiting in the treatment of infertility. Women wait to get their periods, wait to see the doctor, wait to start the drugs again, wait to get the ultrasound, and the worst wait of all is the two-weeks couples wait to see if they are pregnant. All of this time gives couples a lot of time to think...too much.

"You can receive the best treatment in the world," continues Quinn, "but if you can't cope with the emotional stresses inherent in the infertility process, the journey toward being a parent can be horrible. It can wreak havoc on your marriage and your career as you find yourself timing intercourse to the hour and sneaking out of the office for yet another doctor's appointment this week." Add to this the pressure of families, who keep asking when a couple is going to start a family, and our very basic cultural belief that getting pregnant should be easy, and infertility becomes one of the most profound life challenge couples can face.

Clinical data on the emotional toll of infertility is slowly beginning to trickle in. A 1993 study by Alice Domar, Ph.D. found that women undergoing infertility treatment have stress and depression levels comparable to women with cancer, AIDS and other life-threatening chronic diseases. Further research by Domar demonstrated that one year after undergoing a 10-week mind/body program that included relaxation techniques, yoga and nutrition counseling, 55% of the mind/body couples experienced a viable pregnancy, compared to just 20% in the control group. It is very difficult to conduct controlled scientific experiments on this topic, since participants are self-selected for the intervention. In other words, patients who opt to enter the study and join the mind/body group may already have healthier attitudes and lifestyles, or even better prognoses than those who

do not. Nonetheless, the data have piqued the interest of clinicians, psychologists and patients alike.

Yet, Dr. Marie Davidson, a clinical psychologist who specializes in support for fertility patients at FCI cautions against overstating the role of stress in conception. "In my work, I try mightily to reduce the power of the belief that stress is inextricably linked to fertility failure for two reasons: First, this belief creates yet more stress. Second, data to support it is not at all clear. My 'data,' as I sometimes tell patients, is this: if stress was preventing women from becoming pregnant, fertility patients would never have babies!"

Davidson is, nevertheless, a strong proponent of the psychological benefits of supporting medical infertility treatment with holistic practices and regularly sends patients to Pulling Down the Moon's Yoga for Fertility programs. "I base my recommendation on dozens of comments from my fertility patients in my counseling practice saying things like, 'I learned to quiet my negative thoughts', 'I found a way to relax that really worked,' 'this brought my body and my mind together and I felt such peace.' Through yoga and meditation patients find a way to be more in control of how they feel and how they manage the products of their minds."

Yoga and TCM practitioners would argue that stress is not the only culprit in limiting fertility and would also say the benefits of such interventions extend beyond a calm mind. Reasons brought to light by a non-conventional approach to infertility may be stress, past or current emotional traumas, structural and postural misalignment, blocked chakra energy flow or weaknesses in the blood. These non-conventional approaches also acknowledge the inter-relatedness of these root causes.

Both acupuncture and yoga asana (posture) practices add the energy anatomy (chakra system) to the fertility equation. Chakras, which can be visualized as whirling energy centers in the body, are believed to play a key role in reproductive health. The idea of a chakra energy system originated from ancient yoga healing practices dating back thousands of years. Hundreds of chakras exist in the body, but healing science focuses on just seven, located along the axis of the spine. These chakras function as "wheels", drawing in the life-energy (also called prana, ki or chi) and distributing it to the glands, organs, blood and nervous system of the physical body. Since each of the seven chakras corresponds to an endocrine gland and physical function, if any of them are either constricted or too open, their ability to distribute energy to the body is disrupted which can lead to physical dysfunction. In addition to making the body feel more physically vibrant and the mind calmer, yoga and meditation and acupuncture can be used to balance this energy system.

For those not yet ready to dive into the world of mysticism perhaps FCI's Dr. Marut sums it up best. "These techniques (yoga and meditation) could aid in

coping with stress and reaching a calmer level of existence, both to improve normal reproductive function, and for an overall better state of mind and health."