

THE BENEFIT OF A MIND/BODY APPROACH WHEN STRUGGLING WITH INFERTILITY

by Amira Posner for *Creating Families* – Fall 2013

The relationship between stress and infertility is a hot topic in the news today. However, living with infertility no longer needs to mean living with stress and its detrimental effects. Through utilizing mind-body techniques women struggling with infertility can now combat that stress and emerge with skills that will support them through any life struggle.

The emotional challenges that come along with trying to conceive a child without success are severe and taxing. When we are confronted with an experience of uncertainty, such as infertility, fear and anxiety can create an emotional surge that sets the body into a physical spin. When that level of stress and anxiety is maintained for such extended periods of time, it creates a stress response within one's body, which can exacerbate the pain and struggle a woman may feel. It is this mind/body relationship that has become a focus of research today. The same connections that cause the high level of stress can be used to reduce the stress. This focus shines on the idea that integrating a mind/body approach when dealing with infertility can optimize chances of achieving a pregnancy.

The benefits of participating in a mind/body group during infertility have been researched in the last decade. In a study by Helen Adrienne, author of *On Fertile Ground, Healing Infertility*, it has been demonstrated that mind/body support groups can create an environment that fosters acceptance and optimism towards the infertility journey. Helen also found that many of the women who attended a mind/body group reported a relief in physical tension due to the increased knowledge of how to reduce stress. Stress reduction techniques such as practicing mindful awareness, meditation, and self-care exercises can support women in creating a mind/body balance. Calming the way our bodies respond to stress and purposefully choosing where we focus our attention can impact the stress effects arising from infertility.

In another study published in the *Journal of Fertility and Sterility* by Alice Domar, Director of the Domar Center for Mind/Body Health, it was revealed that the women who were involved in a mind/body program for stress reduction, while undergoing IVF treatment, had a significantly higher pregnancy rate than those who did not participate. These research initiatives have brought more awareness to the fact that the body's natural stress response may impact the conception rate. In order to optimize the chances of treatment success, it is important to understand the power our minds and bodies can play when we learn to work with them in new ways.

Fight and Flight: The Body's Natural Stress Response System

Our bodies are hardwired to perform certain activities. And our brains are hardwired to conceptualize things in certain ways. The fight and flight response is one such example. The fight and flight response is the body's primitive automatic response that prepares us to "flight" from any perceived threat. The limbic system, which is the part of our brain that determines a fight and flight response, cannot differentiate between real danger and excessive stress. Unfortunately, many women struggling with infertility have an activated stress response system which can play out on an emotional and physical level, potentially impacting conception. When our fight and flight system is aroused, we tend to perceive the things in and around our environment as a threat. Fears, negative thinking and our belief systems can become distorted. On a physical level, nerve cell firing releases chemicals such as adrenaline, noradrenaline and cortisol into our system. These chemicals can alter the homeostasis – the ability to maintain equilibrium – of our physical bodies. Our body actively looks for the enemy; we gear up to flee the enemy. The only problem is there is no enemy in infertility. It is the painful experience of not being successful at conceiving a baby and all the associated anxiety that can set off the fight and flight response. Taking charge of oneself through mind/body interventions can restore a deeper connection with self and the experience of infertility. It also mitigates the worry that the stress may be contributing to the infertility.

Mind/Body Techniques:

“The present moment is all that we have. It’s the best way to live, but most of us, infertility patients especially, spend their time ruminating about the past or the future. From the vantage point of the present moment, the physiology of stress can be eased if not reversed.” (Helen Adrienne, 2006).

Infertility is such that it requires a lot of energy and resiliency. The reality is that infertility could go on for many years. Mind/Body techniques can be seen as a letting go strategy that can neutralize stress and make it easier to deal with the negative results and hardships, while at the same time helping us to keep on going forward with trying to conceive. The key to any mind/body technique is to train the mind to focus on the present with full concentration and focused attention. If we can bring our attention into the present and purposely take it away from focusing on the pain we are experiencing, we can strengthen the mental muscle of positive coping.

Mindful Awareness, The Relaxation Response (Benson & Stuart 1992), and cognitive restructuring, which will be explained in more detail, are just a few of many Mind/Body techniques available. These techniques can be practiced alone in a quiet space or in a supportive group setting.

Mindful Awareness:

“Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.” Victor Frankl

Mindful awareness simply means paying attention to the present moment experience with openness, inquisitiveness and tolerance. It is an invitation to allow yourself to slow down enough so you can pay full attention to what is going on in and around you, while at the same time it is an offer of tolerance to all that is. It allows us to see past the covering of our automatic thoughts and feelings. It sounds easier said than done, and this approach to life can be applied anytime, anywhere. When we use this tool, we soon realize how often and how

much our minds are filled with worry, fear and judgment. The more we can pay attention to our fearful mental patterns, the more control we gain in our effort to quiet and shift them.

There are many ways to bring mindful awareness into one's life. Mindfulness meditation, yoga, breathing, eating and walking mindfully are just a few examples. You can do almost anything in your life with a mindful awareness; it just takes a little effort. With practice, this tool helps balance narrow-minded thinking related to infertility, allowing more space for compassion and acceptance. With any action or task that you are undertaking, become aware of the nuances within the sights, sounds and sensations that you are experiencing. Focus your attention on this experience, and re-focus every time your mind returns back to other things. Training your mind in this way helps one flex the mental muscles necessary to regain control of one's thoughts and life experiences.

The Relaxation Response (Benson & Stuart 1992):

The Relaxation Response was developed by a mind/body medicine pioneer, Dr. Herbert Benson. This method consists in using your breath and attention to help your body reach a state of complete relaxation. Through utilizing this technique as often as possible, you are encouraging your body to return to a state of relaxation from the heightened state of constant arousal brought upon by the stresses of infertility. In this state of relaxation, your system releases chemicals that allow your physical body and inner organs to slow down while increasing blood flow to the brain. Focusing on the breath, visual imagery, prayer, energy healing and hypnosis are a few ways you can elicit the relaxation response.

Following is the Relaxation Response technique taken directly from Dr. Herbert Benson's Book, *The Relaxation Response*. His website is loaded with beneficial information about the research he has done demonstrating the benefits of the Relaxation Response.

Steps to Elicit the Relaxation Response

- *Sit quietly in a comfortable position*
- *Close your eyes*

- *Deeply relax all your muscles, beginning at your feet and progressing up your face. Keep them relaxed.*
- *Breathe through your nose. Become aware of your breathing. As you breathe out, say the word “one” silently to yourself. For example, breathe in and then out, and say “one” in and out, and repeat “one.” Breathe easily and naturally.*
- *Continue for 10 to 20 minutes. You may open your eyes to check the time, but do not use an alarm. When you finish, sit quietly for several minutes, at first with your eyes closed and later with your eyes opened. Do not stand up for a few minutes.*
- *Continue not to worry about whether you are successful in achieving a deep level of relaxation. Maintain a passive attitude and permit relaxation to occur at its own pace.*

Cognitive Restructuring:

To combat the thoughts that continuously arise regarding infertility, one may find cognitive restructuring a beneficial tool. Cognitive Restructuring helps us to gain understanding around the negative thoughts we have in order to challenge and eventually replace them. Our mood and demeanor are driven by the stories that we tell ourselves.

These stories are most often based on our own interpretation of the environment around us. When struggling with infertility, the interpretation of our environment can often be skewed depending on how long we have been trying to conceive. As treatment fails, hopes for a family diminishes and our attitude and energies can change. Often, we take our beliefs about ourselves and our experience for granted and just assume that they are true. Cognitive restructuring helps us evaluate and test these interpretations, allowing room for more positive perspectives. Through the process of cognitive restructuring, we can reframe our thinking.

The last thing any woman dealing with infertility wants to hear is, “Relax and it will happen;” however, there may be some truth to it. Integrating these different Mind/Body techniques helps us ease through the experience of infertility. The holistic model of treating the mind and body as a whole, and nourishing their relationship, can have powerful

physiological effects. When we begin to understand that we can actually reverse stress and how we respond to it, a new world opens up. Gaining an awareness of the Mind/Body connection allows us to use our minds to alter our physiology and connect with something deeper all within ourselves.

About the author

Amira Posner, BSW, MSW, RSW, founder of Healing Infertility Counseling and Support, works with women, men and couples who are struggling with infertility. Amira provides support in dealing with the emotional pain associated with infertility. Her mind/body approach to infertility has helped many women gain perspective and strength on their journey towards having a family. Amira facilitates mind/body infertility support groups providing women with specific tools they can utilize in order to optimize their infertility treatment. These groups are run out of the Centre for Fertility and Reproductive Health at Mt. Sinai Hospital as well as at different locations throughout Toronto.

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