

**INFERTILITY:
CREATING AN “EYE” AND AN “I” IN THE STORM
BY BREATHING IN THE NOW**

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Have you ever been in the eye of a storm? I was, when I was seven or eight. There was a ferocious hurricane one minute, and the next, the sun shone brightly and the wind was a memory. I jumped up and down the way children do, wanting to go swimming. We ran to the community pool, but with the warning that soon the storm would be back. When I was told that I must get out of the pool without any fanfare, and come home to sit tight while the rest of the hurricane blew by, I didn't understand what the adults were talking about. What was the eye of the storm? All I cared about was that I had been allowed to go swimming.

All these years later, the eye of the storm comes up as a perfect metaphor for the calmness that must be created in between the driving rain and gale force winds that is the infertility experience. Unlike the eye of an actual hurricane, which is a natural phenomenon, the eye of the emotional hurricane of infertility must be actively created so you can “swim while the sun is out”.

It is the physical benefit of the “eye” that is so critically important while you are in the throes of the infertility journey. It is the inner peace of the “eye” which returns your physiology to the neutral that we are meant to have in between any of the trials and tribulations of life. Creating an “eye” necessitates also creating an “I”. The logistics of infertility are so demanding, that patients often lose their “I-ness” in the rush to get to the clinic at the crack of dawn, administer injections ... you know the list.

Creating an “I” can be defined simply as making time for self-care and self-connection. In this context, self-care means making the time to turn your attention inward and honor the way in which being tuned in to yourself can really matter. It means honoring the power of the mind/body connection. Self-care is at its finest when it is synonymous with self-connection. The simplest and perhaps the most profound way to be self-connected, is to follow the rhythm of your own breath. Think of the phrase “breathing in the now”. It is a double entendre. It is about being in the present moment and breathing. But it is also about taking the present moment in, and with it, your “I-ness”. Furthermore, by being in, really in, the present moment, you screen out the lure of both the past and the future. It is this high degree of focus which gives us the physiologic benefit which is earlier referred to as neutral.

Focused breathing is a technique that stands on its own. But there are other ways of connecting with oneself that use the breath as a launch pad. Eliciting the relaxation response, participating in guided imagery, hypnosis or self-hypnosis are four other techniques that individuals or couples can seek out with appropriately trained practitioners and leaders of mind/body support groups.

Although these other techniques are usually launched with the breath, guided visualization adds another dimension. Let's say that with professional guidance, or with the power of your own creative imagination, you can "take yourself" to a beach, smelling the salt air, feeling the warmth of the sun and the gentle breeze, hearing the waves lap up and over your toes, then feeling them get buried in the soft mud as the tide pulls back out, watching the sea birds swoop for their dinner.... Since all of this takes place in the mind, how can this account for a change in our physiology from red alert to neutral?

The structures in the brain that are responsible for this change are limbic system or mid-brain structures. These parts are also known as the emotional brain and it functions to connect the brain stem, which is all about survival, to the cortex, which is largely about cognition. The mid-brain is organized so that it does not know that we are not where we imagine ourselves to be. As far as it is concerned, it is at the beach. So if you are someone who actually goes into relax mode at the beach, you can bring to yourself the same physiological state of relaxation that would ensue if you were really there. This process is experienced as a wonderful antidote to stress.

The relaxation response, which can be learned from Dr. Herbert Benson's book by the same name, can be self-taught. This technique is another way of reminding your physiology what the neutral, that our system craves, feels like. Hypnosis and self-hypnosis go even further. Not only can an individual accomplish neutrality, but these methods allow us to engage in self-exploration ("I-ness") on a deeper level.

Any of these modalities – focused breathing, guided imagery, hypnosis or self-hypnosis – are skills. The more you do them, the easier they are to do. They all are valuable enhancements to top notch medical care. Can we say unequivocally that if you practice any or all of these skills you will become pregnant? No. Can we say that these modalities have no role in conception? No, no, no! The mind/body connection is no longer in dispute. Self-care and self-connection are about tuning in to the mind/body connection and thereby feeling empowered. To feel empowered addresses the nightmare of infertility at its primary stress level - feeling so painfully out of control.

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June, 2003