

ANGER AND INFERTILITY  
by  
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You always knew that some day you would have a family. Life went mostly as you planned it. Depending upon what aspect of the American culture you hearken from, you would have had certain expectations as to when the time would be right. The confluence of variables such as education, career path and meeting the right mate became settled and you were good to go. So you thought. Nature had another idea, and now your plan has exploded in your face.

Show me someone in this situation of infertility or questionable fertility and I'll show you someone who is either 1) openly angry, 2) coping with the very natural feeling of anger by denying it, or 3) using significant mental muscle to manage feelings such as impatience, disappointment and lack of control that are components of anger.

Especially in this age where women have been led to believe that they can have it all, to arrive at the brink of the next planned phase of life only to be met by what feels like a cruel joke is unbearable and enraging. And to make matters worse, it is typical in these times to buy into the myth that things should be easy. What makes the anger response to the infertility news so intense and yet so poignant is its attachment to an existential reality: the injustice of it all.

Your thoughts travel to how unfair it is. You can name a list of people who have children that they can only complain about. Then there is so-and-so who has children she didn't plan. You may find yourself thinking about someone from work who regrets having had a child. You feel sorry for the babies and damn it, you and your spouse know that you would make wonderful parents and you're so ready! How could this be happening? On good days, you feel your determination will get you through this nightmare. You and your spouse might even feel closer to each other because of this struggle. On other days, you could care less about rational thinking and derive a perverse pleasure from marinating in your anger.

Anger does have its rationale. To feel angry at your body for failing you, or angry at your spouse's body for failing him/her, makes sense. So does anger at the insensitive comments of well-meaning family members, friends or coworkers. Insensitivity of any kind makes your blood boil. Your medical team may be highly skilled as technicians, but why hasn't someone trained this doctor or that nurse or secretary to be more delicate with the presentation of facts or news? And let's not even talk about insurance companies. In fact there's hardly an aspect of life that is untouched by this predicament. Decision-making about career, housing, vacations and money, when so much is up in the air, is enough to make anyone feel in a real frenzy.

But anger can be sneaky and present with the violence of a tsunami without the recognition that it was the earthquake out a sea that caused the tidal wave in the first place. Likewise within us, sadness, disappointment, jealousy and other emotions happen (like the earthquake), and sometimes without conscious awareness convert into anger (the tsunami). Anger can always be

justified and is therefore an easier emotion to experience. Anger's energy legitimizes making its discharge feel like a relief; sadness, disappointment or jealousy demand self-reflection, which feels like a job for which you are in no mood. Though anger may seem easier, it is not without its cost. If we think about the energy it takes to be angry, we will realize that anger is a big emotion. Perhaps you want to scream, punch or stomp. If you have a habit of internalizing anger, it costs even more. Unless anger is attended to in one way or another, it simmers like a pot au feu. And like a pot au feu, is always hot.

Both the pot on the stove and the anger within us drain energy. Whether you are aware of feeling angry or not, if anger is part of the gestalt of infertility for you, then given the mind/body connection, the value in dealing with our anger has the enormous benefit of giving ourselves a respite from the physiology of stress. It is stressful to be angry. Although the anger is legitimate and may seem impossible to tame (unless a baby resulting from a full-term pregnancy could materialize in your arms NOW!) – taming anger is not impossible at all.

I have been working with infertility patients for over 27 years. I have the results of a currently unpublished study that I did with 39 respondents from 7 mind/body support groups that I ran between the spring of 2002 and the fall of 2005. For this study, the women were asked to fill out a questionnaire (which included 3 self-rating scales) before and after the 10-week group experience. My hypothesis was that by learning and practicing stress reduction techniques, participants could reverse the physiology of stress. These techniques are designed to intervene in the vicious cycle of stress from both mind and body perspectives. I predicted that changes would be measurable on the self-rating scales as improved mood and outlook and lowered subjective experience of bodily stress. To my delight, the data from all 3 assessment instruments demonstrated a trend toward improvement in mood and outlook and a lessening of physical tension. To my surprise, as a by-product of the mind/body interventions, there was a statistically significant decrease in levels of anger.

What does this tell us? For one thing, a mind/body support group for infertility patients, which includes instruction in a whole array of stress-reduction techniques, can be a real boon. These techniques must be practiced and if they are, we give ourselves a respite by returning our physiology to neutral as a balance for all of the demands on us at a difficult time. This alone, can make an enormous difference. (These techniques can be learned in private sessions as well.)

In addition, attending to our anger may mean teaming up with a therapist who can help acknowledge and examine, understand and discharge aspects of your anger which may be an emotional heirloom. An emotional heirloom is the inheritance of a family style of dealing with distress by imitating family elders. The process of imitation is largely unconscious and is so strong that it may as well be genetic. (But unlike the genetics of blue or brown eyes, emotional inheritance can be changed.) By becoming mindful of your anger, it is possible to transform the energy of it and thus dissipate it. This stops the leak of energy and allows for connection to feelings of well-being and emotional growth. This process ultimately enhances your sense of self rather than drains you – even under these painful circumstances. You always knew that some day you would have a family. You want to reclaim the confidence of this feeling and keep the space open for hope. Embrace the unwanted symptom of anger and learn from it.

