Diving Under the Turbulence of Infertility
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Anyone who has ever frolicked in the ocean learns to avoid getting knocked over by the waves. When a breaker is rolling toward you with its powerful churning energy, diving under it keeps you safe.

The imagery of the surf, with its potency and relentless momentum, is a fit metaphor for infertility. Infertility has the power to knock over Godzilla. In my 30-plus years of experience as a psychotherapist, I've seen infertility rob strength from the most stress-hardy. But, I've also been privy to the resilience that carries to parenthood those who, like yourself, have suffered under the strain.

Where does resiliency come from? The frenzy of infertility drains energy. But many apply mental muscle to fight the good fight, which under the circumstances can feel like a car in overdrive with the emergency brake yanked up. While applying mental muscle as a coping mechanism to push through the challenge can be effective, diving under the turbulence renews energy and builds resilience. Diving under the turbulence can be learned and earned. When under the turbulence, you let go of the infertility's traumas and create a respite into which resiliency can flow.

The October, 2009 issue of *Fertility and Sterility* published a report of a study in which "problem-focused coping" was contrasted with "letting-go coping." Problem-focused coping is about *doing* something different to alter the circumstances, whereas letting-go coping is about *being* in a different mindset by altering your emotional response to a situation that is out of your control. While *doing* is not to be disparaged and has its place in the infertility struggle, it's clear that infertility leaves everyone feeling out of control no matter what you seem to do. Giving yourself a respite from the stress is what you *can* be in control of. Letting go builds resilience for the next leg of the journey. And, by the way, letting-go coping is "significantly associated" with pregnancy in the *Fertility and Sterility* report.*

If infertility is anything it is a total mind/body experience. Mind and body cannot be pried apart. The anguish of infertility goes beyond the mental experience of it. As the mind tries to wrestle with the mental shock and the physical demands of trying to conceive, the mind/body expresses the stress in the form of physical, emotional, behavioral, cognitive, relational and spiritual symptoms.

So with mind and body in a frenzied state, how can one let go and dive under the turbulence? Infertility patients worry that the past is a predictor of the future. Little time is spent in the present moment, the only moment any of us have. The present moment is also the place from which the opportunity to dive under the turbulence resides and where the chance to return the mind/body to a state of neutrality and receptivity to a pregnancy is highest. There are lots of ways to dive under the turbulence: meditation, hypnosis, self-hypnosis and guided imagery are some of the better known among the letting-go techniques. For purposes of this article, the Relaxation Response™ can be easily learned and earned.

The Relaxation Response™ ** utilizes the power of the breath as a built-in tranquilizer to calm the autonomic nervous system. This means that if you breathe easily and rhythmically, as if all is right with the world *even if you do not feel that it is*, the brain stem responds by lowering blood pressure, heart rate and muscle tension and breaks the grip of other symptoms as well. If simultaneously you say a word with a positive association such as "love" or "peace" to yourself every time you exhale, you can "let go" of the panic or depression which keeps the stress physiology of infertility at a feverish pitch. This also keeps you in the present moment.

A variation of the Relaxation Response involves saying **half of a phrase** (such as "I am / at peace") **or prayer** ("the Lord / is my shepherd," for example) **to yourself on the inhalation and the other half on the exhalation**. By repeating a word, phrase or prayer in your mind for 10 to 20 minutes, in co-ordination with your breathing, you dive under the turbulence. You need to know that when you lose your place, let it go and start again. Take a few moments and try it!

Staying focused on the breath and simultaneously on a positive thought breaks the spasm of stress and allows you "catch a breather" and build resilience. The frenzy of infertility only intensifies if we can't let go; conversely we find serenity if we can. If the Relaxation Response becomes part of your daily routine, you will be pleasantly surprised at your power to manage stress.

Picture the experience of seeking cover under the churning surf. Imagine what it would feel like? Whether we dive under the churning surf or under the frenzy of infertility, the mind and the body can let go of fear. We can enjoy relief. And we can feel the power of resiliency to fortify us for the infertility endurance test.

*Nathalie Rappoport-Hubschman, M.D., Yori Gidron, Ph.D., Rivka Reicher-Atir, Ph.D., Onit Sapir, Ph.D., and Benjamin Fisch, M.D. "Letting go" coping is associated with successful IVF treatment outcome, *Fertility and Sterility*, October, 2009, Volume 92, No. 4, pp.1384 – 1388.

** The Relaxation Response was pioneered over 30 years ago by Dr. Herbert Benson, founder of the mind/body medical institute at Harvard and author of the book by the same name. Its efficacy has been field tested. When practiced regularly, the body reclaims a state of equilibrium that we lose when stress sends us flying into a state of physiological agitation.

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