

# The Twilight World of IVF Treatment

by *Attracta Gill*



*“Pain is the doorway to the here and now. Physical or emotional pain is the ultimate form of ground, saying, to each of us, in effect, there is no other place than this place, no other body than this body, no other limb or joint or pang or sharpness but this searing presence. Pain asks us to heal by focusing on the very center of the actual torment and the very way the pain is felt”*

*David Whyte*

## Abstract:

In this article I share with the reader my own personal experience of infertility and subsequent IVF Treatment. I hope to give you an insight into the complex suffering and pain that accompanies this process. But most importantly I have written this in order to share my humanness and my belief and experience that transformation out of hopelessness, despair and deep

pain can happen; that is with the support and love in relationship, and our capacity to go into deep resonance with the suffering of the other. My experience informs what I had already learned in practice; that technique is not pivotal in psychotherapy rather it is the new emotional experiences that the client feels in his/her body, within the secure relationship with the therapist that prove helpful.

## Background:

I stumbled into the dark world of IVF treatment through a series of unfortunate circumstances. My husband was diagnosed with prostate cancer just a year after we married. As the only life-saving option available for him was a full prostatectomy this would have serious consequences for our future together. In order to remove the cancer and save his life my husband would lose the ability to produce sperm. This threw us into a huge tailspin and it was only 2 days before his operation that we banked a small amount of sperm in a fertility clinic. Thankfully my husband made a full recovery and all cancer was removed from his body. He spent a year in recovery and then we embarked on what was to be the start of 4 horrid years of fertility treatment and 9 negative cycles of IVF.

## Treatment:

IVF treatment is a strange animal. It builds you up full of hope and promise only for your heart to be broken time and time again. The first time I cycled I was full of hope and enthusiasm and of course youth was on my side. I breezed through all of the twice-daily injections, scans and hospital visits. It had little impact on my work or social life. As one of the world's most natural optimists I just knew we would succeed. And I was right. I got pregnant first time and couldn't believe how easy it all had been. Naturally I didn't change my busy schedule of client work, teaching, training etc. in any way. What was the need? Our first scan was scheduled for the 8-week mark and the day before this, I happened to be working with a group of students in the country. During the class I suddenly felt a strange sensation of unease and disconnection from my baby. I knew

something was wrong, very wrong. And yet I continued teaching and drove home feeling full of dread for what might lay ahead. The next morning we arrived at the hospital and I shared my fears with the nurse. She didn't seem too worried and said that the scan would put all of fears at ease. During the scan I remember the silence, the stony look on the nurse's face and the humiliation of being in such a vulnerable position physically and emotionally. It seemed forever before she broke the silence and said 'I can't locate the heartbeat'. I remember crumbling on the examination seat, my legs still straddled in the air, I could not ground myself, I couldn't breathe and so I went into deep shock and trauma. I sobbed my little heart out, in this same humiliating position, for about 20 minutes. I felt degraded, cheated, bereaved, exposed, heartbroken and utterly bereft all at the same time. I was broken.

We were told that this was what was known as a 'missed miscarriage'. Our baby was still perfectly formed in my womb and it could take days or weeks to pass the little fetus. They recommended that I try to pass him/her naturally and I was sent home with some neurofen plus for pain relief. I was petrified and numb and had no idea what to expect over the next week or so. It was 2010 the Winter of the terrible snow in Ireland and as we live in the middle of the countryside we became totally isolated and my family were unable to visit and comfort me in any way. I sat in my conservatory, with my log burner, staring out at the snow and watching the little birdies feed from our bird feeders and I waited. I waited and waited for a week. During this time I let my tears fall until I felt there were none left, I prayed, I cursed and I sat in the

unknown wondering would I ever smile again. I travelled to the pit of despair deep inside my body and then, just when I felt I was lost forever I would come back up for air and have a small reprieve; only for it to start over and over again. And then the bleed started, followed by the most horrid pain and contractions. My body spent 3 days expelling all our hopes and dreams. And then the deafening silence after the drama; It was all over. One minute pregnant and the next minute emptied.

### *I had lost our baby and this was to have a deeply profound impact on my life.*

When I recovered physically and after a long break we resumed the IVF Treatment. Now despite our best efforts we could not get pregnant. As we continued over the years I felt more and more physically tired. My body was getting older and I started to slow down. The injections began to hurt my body, my optimism had wavered and for the very first time in my life, I felt beaten. This was an alien concept to me. I had always been determined, indeed to the point of stubbornness. I had worked hard in my life to open up possibilities; to transform childhood trauma into resources, to train to the highest standard in my much loved profession, to overcome any adversity in my life, I was always pushing myself forward. I was blessed with a happy and bubbly disposition and nothing ever knocked me for six. That is, until now. I could not control this outcome no matter how hard I tried and throughout 9 IVF Treatments I began to discover what it was like to surrender to my fate and the unknown. I could not control my destiny for this and so it was with

great kicking and screaming that I reluctantly stopped, embraced and surrendered to my fate. I realized if I could not succeed I would have to surrender.

### **Resources:**

My wonderful teacher and friend David Boadella taught me that we must always look for the resources out of the trauma or difficulty. Of course I understand that this is a great challenge for all of us human beings when we are faced with such horrid traumas in life. However, I'm relieved to say that throughout this journey I did find many resources within and outside of me. I realized that I could travel to a very dark place inside me that was full of despair and loss but equally I could surface for air and find my breath in the midst of drowning. I discovered a hidden depth to my personality, a compassion and somatic resonance for others and myself throughout their difficulties that I didn't know I had. "Pain is the first proper step to real compassion; it can be a foundation for understanding all those who struggle with their existence. Experiencing real pain ourselves, our moral superiority comes to an end; we stop urging others to get with the program, to get their act together or to sharpen up and start to look for the particular form of debilitation, visible or invisible that every person struggles to overcome", (David Whyte, 2013). I slowed my life down considerably and learned about the difference between my longing in life and ambition. 'Ambition takes willpower and constant applications of energy to stay on a perceived bearing; longing demands a deeper allegiance to unknown elements which are drawing us beyond ourselves, making us larger than an overdrawn, ambitious identity with set, unforgiving goals', (David Whyte, 2001:163). My longing in

life was to realize the ability to work with humans in distress and to help facilitate transformation out of suffering. This had always been my passion in life. However, I now lacked the drive to be 'ambitious' in my career and this felt freeing and joyous. I could let go of trying to get anywhere, as in a way I had already arrived. I learned about the painful art of surrendering to great emotional pain and sitting and trusting in the unknown for long periods. I realised that it is sometimes from this place that resources are created and problems are transformed. I learned about receiving healthy support from others. "In real pain we have no other choice but to learn to ask for help on a daily basis. Pain tells us we belong and cannot live forever alone or in isolation" (David Whyte, 2013). My beloved therapist provided a safe landing place for me throughout my despair. She taught me about unflinching presence and the wonderful mysterious dynamic that Patrick Nolan (2012) reminds us of: the 'potential space' for creativity and the healing that occurs from this place between therapist and client. Interventions of any kind would have been futile with me. It was her ability to sit and meet me in my despair and helplessness, and the strength of our relationship that helped me pull through. I am not ashamed to say that it was through this time of 'holding' that I experienced a deep reciprocal love. And this love helped me to heal. "Pain makes us understand reciprocation. In real pain we often have nothing to give back other than our own gratitude, a smile that

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looks half way to a grimace or the passing friendship of the thankful moment to a helpful stranger, and pain is an introduction to real friendship, it tests those friends we think we already have but also introduces us to those who newly and surprisingly come to our aid", (David Whyte, 2013). My supervisor supported my work with great humanity and professionalism. I cut back on my client hours, stopped my teaching work and with her support I created more time for my wonderful husband and myself.

Throughout the process I also discovered that some people were uncomfortable when I would even touch on the subject of IVF. It helped me greatly to talk about the process and I guess because I'm a therapist I believe in being open and discussing life's challenges. However I began to notice that some friends, colleagues and family would look to the ground or try to change the subject. Worse still, some people would ignore the word IVF altogether and not acknowledge what I had just said. I learned not to force the subject but equally I remember being bitterly disappointed in not being met in some way. Over time I learned not to take it personally and would remember a quote my friend had shared with me many times, 'Don't go to the goat house looking for

wool'. I am relieved to say that I have become an expert at walking away from goat houses.

I was also very blessed at the time to be working with David Boadella in Switzerland and was training with him in Biosynthesis Somatic Psychotherapy. My body and mind were suffering greatly throughout this emotional rollercoaster and David helped me enormously through his wonderful process work and his profound understanding of how trauma impacts on the human being. I learned that connection on all three levels of body, mind and essence (spirit) helps us overcome trauma. I developed healthy boundaries in relationships and learned how to look inward and outward for support and love. I started to write my poetry again (it had been nearly 20 years since I stopped) and this became a great resource for helping me express my pain and isolation. Most importantly myself and my husband became closer and learned how to support each other whilst also giving each other space to mourn separately. I also learned that the inclusion of the body in psychotherapy is of great importance or has simply become indispensable and that recent brain research corroborates this: the body and mind are in constant exchange (Schore, 2006). I will always be incredibly grateful for David's humanity and his influence on my life and my work.

There are many reasons as to why I felt compelled to write this article. I dislike stigma of any kind and yet at the time I remember feeling strangely stigmatized throughout the whole process of IVF. It was almost like IVF was a dirty word that some people did not want to hear or talk about. Of course people will have their projections and judgments concerning the whole process and I can accept

that. However, I refused to feel shamed in any way. I saw it as one of life's difficulties to overcome and/or surrender to and like any trauma it was an opportunity to find resources within and to build resiliency. Coupled with this, IVF can be very isolating as it happens in between our busy lives of work, families, special occasions, birthdays, Christmas etc. It happens behind our closed doors at night and in the Medical Clinics and Laboratories that leave you feeling cold, inhuman and worthless. It happens as family members, friends, clients and colleagues all become pregnant and have babies. In those moments I remember the stinging feeling of a knife slicing

trainings spread over 12 years and 9 years of sitting in the client's chair, it is clear to me that relationship and strong therapeutic alliance is paramount to affecting healthy change. What mattered deeply to me as client was to be met in love as a human being that was going through an existential crisis of enormous proportion. Everything else was secondary to this meeting. Let's find creative ways of helping our trainee therapists develop this inner compassion, this ability to sit and contain human suffering whilst supporting the client to find resources and pathways forward. Indeed it is not something you can learn from a book. However, as I

survive the trauma of infertility treatment but also to emerge with resources they never knew they had.

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*What mattered deeply to me as client was to be met in love as a human being that was going through an existential crisis of enormous proportion.*

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through my heart. I remember being conflicted within; one side feeling devastated, hard done by and jealous and another side feeling happy for their news. It was during those times that compassion and kindness for myself was paramount. It was important to embrace and welcome the jealousy, the hatred, the disappointment and the anger. When I allowed this to happen I found life again and this gave me space and courage to try another cycle.

I would like to be able to reach out to others that may be struggling with this process. I also believe that maybe in some of our core trainings in psychotherapy precedence is given to interventions, theories or models. Yes, these have a place and are vitally important for the therapists training and for professional standards, however throughout my 4 years of IVF treatment, 3 core psychotherapy

felt inspired to write this from a human being's perspective and not from a clinical one I will leave my hope's and vision's for the future of psychotherapy trainings for another day.

## Conclusion:

I wrote this article so that I could come out of the shadows and twilight world of IVF and share my story of how I came through the other side a fuller human being with deep compassion for human suffering. Infertility is a very complex process that calls on every fiber of our being in order to remain sane and emotionally well. It is a process that is deeply unjust and robs you of your ability to create a new life with your beloved partner. It is a miracle in itself not to become bitter and twisted. In my life's work I am inspired and look forward to helping some of my fellow human beings not only