

Practitioner Perspective

Fertility: What the statistics do not measure

By Esther O'Neill



The lives of those affected by difficulties with fertility are often coldly captured and represented by percentages and statistics, sorely neglecting the struggles and anguish that those facing fertility issues experience.

It is also likely that in the minds of many, these statistics are most often associated with the story of a couple. Isolated are the lives and hearts of those who may also be in turmoil as a result of issues relating to fertility. For example: the woman who had once hoped to have children but who has now entered menopause; the person who, due to medical or health reasons, will never conceive their own biological child; or those who are not in a relationship and who fear that the opportunity to have children is slipping away from them.

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Each story is unique and complex beyond words. However, what each person is likely to have shared is the discovery of how intense emotions and feelings related to fertility can be, and how impermeable these emotions and feelings are to rational thought.

Other people's stories of heartache around fertility often draws me back to my own years of struggles with fertility.

The loss of a loved one can be compassionately understood by many, but the loss of the baby that you have not yet welcomed into the world, or not yet conceived,

or perhaps are *never* likely to conceive, is often a loss that is carried privately and with grave sadness due to the lack of compassion and understanding by the outside world.

Never. How painfully impossible it feels to confront or contemplate that word.

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Another Christmas passes, a new year begins. A birthday approaches, another bitter sweet date on the calendar goes unnoticed. The birth of someone else's baby arrives to celebrate, and still you remain in limbo. You console yourself by saying it will all be different for the next new year, because it has to be, because surely you can't survive another year feeling like this.

This is the perpetual loss those experiencing fertility issues face.

Your heart sinks as your period arrives unapologetically and you feel so foolish for having ever hoped and dreamt that this could be the month where it all changes.

Your body is like an infuriating stranger, completely shut off from what you long for, and no matter how much you protest or the great lengths that you go to, it carries on oblivious to your pleas.

Anger steadily and silently rises with every story that is recounted to you about the woman who just stopped trying to conceive and it became as simple as that to become pregnant. How isolating it is for your pain and circumstances to be so sorely misunderstood.

Lives change, families are built. You standstill.

In your darker moments you search for the answer to what you have done to deserve this

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pain? Your greatest vulnerabilities and your darkest wounds are put forward as some sort of cruel and deserving rationale.

There are days when the intensity of these emotions are like a deep, powerful sea living just below the surface that at any point could turn into a tsunami wave ready to take you down.

To cope with this sea of emotion, you employ coping mechanisms. Sometimes these coping mechanisms are your blind spots. Sometimes you are very aware that you use them. Yet, to challenge you to let go of these survival strategies without giving you anything in return, is to elicit a state of panic that isolates you even further and causes you to cling to them more fiercely for fear that you may be left destitute and shattered without them. Each person on this path faces unique and painful questions.

- How does a person lift themselves up when they are at what feels like their lowest point and summon the immense courage, energy, and strength required to embark upon another round of fertility treatment?
- How does someone trust the

future when it continues to arrive and pass and offer no reprieve?

- How does a person allow themselves to risk experiencing another miscarriage when their greatest joy was so abruptly turned into their greatest sorrow?
- How does someone begin to grieve for a future that they have not known, but that they always expected would one day be theirs?

This piece of writing is not concluded with a simple answer to these great struggles. The answer for each individual and each couple facing this battle is as unique as each person is in this world.

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I am grateful to a counsellor who provided me with the greatest support within my time of greatest pain. She created the conditions within the therapeutic space to welcome and hold all of my irrationally, my overflowing pot of emotions, my misplaced anger, my projections, my loneliness, my loss. From there I found my way. 

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Esther O'Neill is a psychotherapist and counsellor in private practice in Meath. Find out more about her practice Present Moment and view more mental health related articles and resources by visiting her website www.presentmoment.ie.