

Emotional support for men

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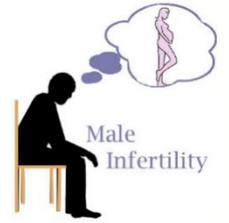
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WORDPRESS

Men and (in) fertility



- Men routinely absent from discussions around fertility and reproduction (Culley, Hudson and Lohan, 2013; Lohan, 2015; Inhorn, 2009)
- See this both within research and social life more broadly (Daniels, 2006)
- Infertility research that includes men is less common although some does exist (e.g. Barnes, 2014; Hinton & Miller, 2013; Webb & Daniluk, 1999; Herrera, 2013), often may involve couples interviews (e.g. Throsby & Gill, 2004) or be conducted in clinical settings
- Know that delayed conception can be troubling for both men and women (Shirani & Henwood, 2011) in terms of temporal horizons being disrupted, but we know less about how this is experienced and managed by men
- Men's voices are therefore less readily available in our understandings of fertility issues, especially around emotions where the narrative that men are 'less bothered' by infertility than women has not been challenged

Existing Research- Emotions



What do we know?

- Evidence suggests that men assume the role of ‘emotional rock’ in the context of infertility
- View ‘being strong’ for their female partners as their primary role
- This perhaps feeds the notion that women are ‘devastated’ by infertility and men merely ‘disappointed’ (Lloyd, 1996)
- In putting their partners first men are seen as adopting a traditional ‘emotional script of masculinity’
- Men therefore suggested to be more likely than women to keep their distress to themselves (Kowalcek et al., 2001)

Existing Research- Stigma



- Infertility is suggested to be particularly stigmatising for men
- Possibly due to fertility issues being frequently constructed as a 'women's problem' and the language to discuss infertility is often emasculating (e.g. 'shooting blanks')
- There is also seen to be a 'fertility-virility linkage' (Lloyd, 1996) in which sexual dysfunction is conflated with fertility issues in men which can be seen as a further source of stigma and ridicule for men
- However- the evidence around stigma is quite limited

Existing Research-Infertility as crisis

- Research also shows that fertility issues can be seen to be a 'life crisis' for men (Mikkelsen et al, 2013) and can be very stressful and traumatic as a result
- Some research also shows that men can feel their masculinity is compromised if infertility is due to male factor issues and this can cause a further crisis of masculinity
- One study found that men used a variety of strategies to 'build up' their masculinity in such contexts, including one man reporting having an extra-marital affair to 'restore' his maleness after diagnosis (Webb & Daniluk, 1999)

What does this mean?

1. We actually still know very little about how men feel about infertility (whether male factor or otherwise)
2. If men do find infertility a source of distress, stigma or crisis AND are less likely to share those feelings about it, then the need to provide appropriate support becomes more pressing
3. The construction of who is 'more' distressed is not very helpful- we need to support all people going through fertility issues; emotions are relative
4. If men are side-lined in understandings of infertility then the construction of fertility as an issue for women is more easily perpetuated- this is not helpful to women or men

Our Research



- Conception in heterosexual relationships is dyadic so it is important to understand experiences of both parties
- We wanted to move beyond clinical focused or couple based research- so looked to where men were speaking with other men
- Have examined a number of online forum settings to understand how men are sharing in a man-to-man anonymous context
- Work from a psychosocial perspective (looking at both what is said and the wider meanings of the things that are said) and we prioritise depth of insight over volume of posts

Why research online?



- Was some precedence around online forums and male infertility (i.e. Malik and Coulson, 2008) but this showed that online spaces still required further examination
- Online spaces have been examined in relation to a variety of other men's health topics, such as depression (Gough, 2015), male grooming (Hall, 2015), eating disorders (Day & Keys, 2008; Flynn & Stana, 2012)
- Such spaces are viewed as a useful means for accessing men where they are, and as offering naturalistic access which may not be otherwise available (Kozinets, 2002; Langer & Beckman, 2005)
- Also being found in research to be spaces that (some) men find useful to help manage difficult or sensitive or health related issues

Men's voices....



hopefully we can help if there's anything that you want to get off your chest. (FP8)

Blokes find it hard to talk and frankly usually don't want to, so is it so surprising that the ladies (who often have 'talking' to spare) tend to speak for them in doing so, take the spotlight? (FP2)



Men's voices from the forum



I'm quite a private person (you may laugh as I am telling you all my thoughts and life story on here but its anonymous). (FP5)

I have been feeling pretty down about the whole thing and really wanted to find somewhere to chat with other people who had been through it all as you do end up feeling like there isn't anyone you can talk to. (FP1)

How infertility impacts on men

1. Feelings and emotions

Infertility as an emotional rollercoaster:

In our research we found that men emoted infertility through the rollercoaster metaphor:

“I wish all of you who are going through IVF the very best of luck. It has been the biggest rollercoaster of my life and I wouldn’t wish this on anyone”

- Men talked about the highs and lows of fertility issues
- There were seen to be vast fluctuations in feelings- from the highs of hope after treatment, to the low’s of a negative pregnancy test
- The experience was therefore seen as site of trauma and struggle for men

“I’ve had a shocking week. The worst yet, I’m afraid ... I hate infertility and all of the traumas that come with it (physical, mental and emotional) with all my heart ... never underestimate the traumas of infertility”

Infertility as tyrannical

Men narrated infertility as being tyrannical within their lives

“What about freedom from the tyranny of infertility ... or is it more important to plough on, never give up in the face of doubt and uncertainty?”

- They depicted the experience as being all consuming and often overwhelming- life was stalled by the experience and process of not being able to achieve conception

“It’s so difficult to remain positive when life is so much on hold” (FP9)

- Men then described being powerless when experiencing infertility and undergoing fertility treatment

Infertility paranoia

- Men depicted the emotional impacts of infertility running beyond treatment
- If conception is achieved it was not always full of the joy envisioned but a new source of anguish- specifically what could 'go wrong' in pregnancy
- *“Infertility robs you of so much and here I add another score ... it robs you of the joy every couple in the world should have when they get a positive test. How can you possibly feel joy after so much consistent disappointment?”*
- In relation to this a notion of a normal v an infertility pregnancy was often discussed
- *“We know it's still very early days as we are only at week 6 and know there is a long way to go. I keep saying to her that if this was a normal pregnancy i.e. it happened straight away without the need for treatment then we would not be over thinking things too much but after 5 years you do”*

How infertility impacts men

2. Relationships

Weathering the storm

- Infertility was seen as all encompassing within relationships which could swallow up other aspects of life and become very dominant

“At the moment it is so hard to stay focused on everyday life, [my partner] is a mess, she is so

angry and upset and all I want to do is protect her and give her what she wants, I’m sure things

will get easier but I don’t know what to do for the best sometimes”

- Men also shared their uncertainty about how best to support their partners, finding it challenging in a context where they may feel powerless
- Infertility was therefore viewed as something that couples had to be strong to cope with
- *“The best advice I can give to you is to be there for each other, you will both experience a lot of different emotions but you must try and stay strong and support each other. Remind yourself why you are doing this and it will hopefully make sense”*



The challenges to relationships



- Ultimately choices about fertility, treatment, stopping treatment, other avenues to parenthood all involve complex decisions that potentially generate challenging emotions for couples

“We have tried [number] IUI’s now and 1 IVF all failed :-[I want us to stop the merry go round and try adoption but wife dead set against it. Part of it has to do with the money ... but mostly it has to do with not being able to help my wife deal with the extra hormones”

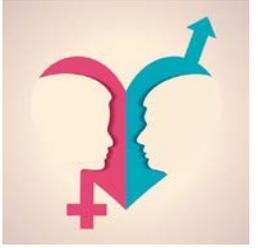
- Forums then provided a space to share advice about how to help one another cope with these challenges and cautionary tales of people separating as a result of fertility treatment *were often used to try and offer perspective*

*“We’ve heard too many stories of couples who’ve split up before or even after an IVF pregnancy (that to me is like spending ten years building your perfect house to just demolish it after you’ve moved in. Nuts.) to take what we have for granted. We’re stronger, more sharing, more **together** than ever, we’re just ... sadder ... as well”*

How infertility impacts men

3. Masculinity

Differences between men and women



- Men often discussed differences between men and women's ways of coping etc on the forums- and whilst men were described as being less prone to 'sharing' their feelings men identified the importance of doing so

"I know it can be hard to open up when it is something so private but after all we might be blokes but we still have the same thoughts and fears that ladies do, we just deal with them in different ways"

- Men also suggested that women 'suffered more', perhaps reflecting the embodied experience of particularly fertility treatment, which happens to women's bodies but that men can feel 'pushed out'

"My point is the need for support for a girl is so much greater than the needs of a bloke. So it stands to reason that everyone, including the bloke will prioritise the feelings of the woman. They express more need so they are prioritised... Blokes find it hard to talk and frankly usually don't want to, so is it so surprising that the ladies (who often have 'talking' to spare) tend to speak for them in doing so, take the spotlight?"

Masculinity and support



- Men presented different formations of masculinity on the forum, some men expressed a desire for formal professional support, or that they had engaged in such support

“...during this whole period [diagnosis] I was not offered counselling or put into contact with other men who have been through this. I have just had to put on a brave face for my wife, grit my teeth and get on with it”

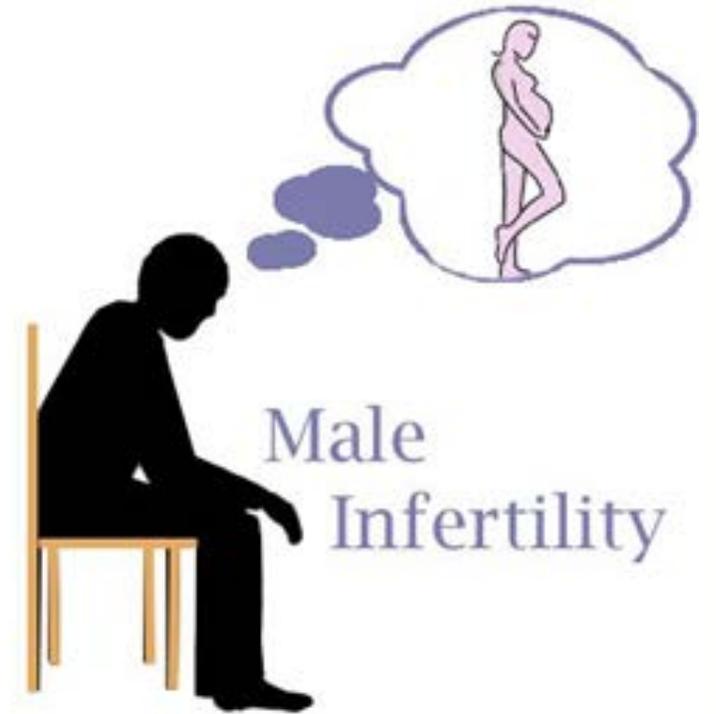
Others were keen to stress that forums or other informal support mechanisms were not the same as formalised support services or settings

“It’s not counselling or psychiatry, it’s just getting it off your chest”

- Therefore a myriad of ways that men may want support, cant assume that one size will fit all especially around masculinity; men on the forum showing both traditional masculinities but also more ‘emergent’ (Inhorn, 2012) or nurturing reproductive masculinities

What does this all mean?

- Men can then find infertility a very turbulent experience
- Variety of emotions experienced (highs and lows) and it can be isolating for men knowing who to share those with
- Men often more likely to talk with their partners about feelings yet can feel constrained by the need to support their partner and be the 'rock'



Concluding remarks

- Online settings can be part of the offer for supporting men- and we need more research to understand men's experiences better, including support needs
- But other opportunities on and offline to share and talk are needed that feel appropriate to men
- Relationship impacts can occur when dealing with infertility, so support for both men and women is of course vital
- However investing time and effort into think about male friendly approaches to support can ultimately be valuable to both men and women

Thank you!

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