

Empty Arms Encircle Each Other

by Tina Smith

The struggle of women who want children but have not yet been able to have them isn't usually a topic of conversation at neighborhood barbeques and church picnics.

One in six couples in the United States or as many as 10 million have trouble conceiving or carrying a pregnancy to term, and yet the journey of infertility is lonely, embarrassing and misunderstood. Talking about unconventional options, invasive treatments and miscarriages can make even the most supportive friend or family member squirm or quickly change the subject.

Truth be told, the topic of infertility typically prompts hurtful and ridiculous responses, even from the well-meaning. *Are you sure you are doing "it" right? God will give you a baby if he wants you to have one. Maybe it's just not meant for you to be a mom. If you go to a fertility doctor, you're going to end up with a dozen babies. Just adopt and you'll get pregnant.*

Infertility is such a personal issue that some women find it too difficult to discuss their struggle with those closest to them. These private matters can be more easily verbalized among other ladies who are fighting desperation and finding themselves disappointed when traditional approaches to fulfilling their dreams for motherhood aren't working.

Fortunately, there is a place where an infertile woman can find comfort instead of criticism. Empty Arms, a free community support group, meets twice each month at the Fertility Center in Chattanooga. Every second and fourth Tuesday evening, women come together and share their experiences, listen to each other, laugh and cry together, and take a break from holding everything inside. Here they find an hour or two of relief in the company of others who understand exactly how it feels to live life on an emotional rollercoaster, not knowing how or when the difficult journey of infertility will end.

Some ladies who attend have never been pregnant; others have had numerous miscarriages. Many are pursuing reproductive assistance, while a few have not yet seen a fertility specialist. Each is desperate to become a mommy – the common thread that brings them together.

Empty Arms facilitator Tina Smith spent nearly a decade trying to start a family with her husband and founded the support group after she lost her first pregnancy through miscarriage. Following her third in-vitro procedure at the Fertility Center, Tina carried a son to term. A daughter arrived just sixteen months later without any reproductive assistance. Despite her joy at finally becoming a mother, Tina still carries the scars from her infertile days and feels a connection with women who have not yet found resolution or a happy ending. She continues to make the voice of the infertile heard and is committed to helping other women survive infertility and find healing through fellowship.

A library of support books is available to give women in the Chattanooga area yet another resource for dealing with the challenges of infertility. Informational and comforting words can help a woman who is trying to keep her life in balance or save her marriage from being torn apart by the stress and unpredictability of infertility. Books dealing with relationship issues, secondary infertility, loss, grief and adoption also can be borrowed from the library, which is housed in the Fertility Center.

When the Smiths encountered unplanned obstacles on the path to parenthood, they turned to the Fertility Center for help and found confidential, personalized patient treatment from consultation through conception. With some of the most progressive technology in the Southeast, the facility has had hundreds of patients deliver ART babies.

“We’re the only medical group in Chattanooga that offers a full range of infertility services,” says Reproductive Endocrinologist Dr. Joey Bird, F.A.C.O.G. “We have our own embryologists on site as well as a state-of-the-art laboratory for fostering the growth of embryos and storing them.”

When a couple decides to pursue assisted reproduction, both the husband and wife undergo tests and possibly treatments. About 40 percent of infertility is related to a male medical factor while another 40 percent is caused by a female medical factor. Other cases of infertility either have unknown causes or involve both male and female factors. Some health insurance companies will provide coverage for diagnostic testing related to infertility, and a few will pay a percentage of the costs for medications and procedures. Financing is available through several reputable lending agencies.

Many high-tech infertility procedures – such as blastocyst transfers, in vitro fertilization, egg donation, sperm aspiration, cryopreservation – leave the average person with more questions than answers. Most don’t realize how these steps simply give Mother Nature a nudge in the right direction when conceiving a baby doesn’t happen for some couples. Patients who frequent the more than 400 fertility centers across America also include women who are struggling with menopause and men who would like to have their sperm preserved prior to radiation treatments.

The first step for most infertile couples is a consultation with a reproductive specialist, followed by in depth blood studies that screen for type and Rh factor, HIV, Hepatitis, Rubella and the Cystic Fibrosis Carrier, among other conditions. A semen analysis determines sperm counts as well as motility (movement and speed). Another test can be performed to determine how well sperm can penetrate the thick, dense wall of the oocyte or egg. Most women undergo preliminary procedures such as a hysterosalpingogram to check for blockage in the fallopian tubes and a saline-infused ultrasound to check for fibroid tumors, polyps or septums in the uterus.

When a couple decides to attempt in vitro fertilization, the woman takes medications to stimulate egg production, control the timing of egg maturation and increase her hormone levels. Some drugs are administered by injections just under the skin or into muscle; others can be taken orally. The dosage of medications as well as the side effects vary from person to person.

Timing is critical for egg retrieval, which requires sedation of the patient. After retrieval, the mature eggs are placed together with sperm in a special culture fluid and kept under incubation for several days. During this time, the eggs undergo fertilization into embryos. After reaching a blastocyst stage several days later, one or more of those embryos are transferred back into the woman's womb. Embryos not used during the cycle can be frozen through cryogenic preservation to be used in future cycles. The couple then waits for a pregnancy test two weeks later.

Fertilization may require micromanipulation services, such as Intracytoplasmic Sperm Injection – the process of injecting a single sperm into the center of an egg to allow men with low sperm numbers and motility to father a child. For women over the age of 35 who have an abnormally thick zona or egg shell, creating a small opening in the shell (known as assisted hatching) prior to transferring the embryo back into a woman's uterus can improve pregnancy rates.

If a woman's preliminary test results show that her body no longer produces quality eggs, she can choose from a pool of screened donors who have agreed to share their eggs. The donated eggs will be fertilized in the lab with the infertile woman's husband's sperm. If the procedure is successful, the baby will have genetic material from the husband, and the wife will have the opportunity to bond with the life growing within her during pregnancy as well as to experience childbirth. Alternately, a couple struggling with male factor infertility can choose a sperm donor.

“It’s not just what we do,” Dr. Bird says, “but how we do it. We pride ourselves on giving a very clinical experience a warm and personal touch. We doctors and our staff take the extra time to listen or explain something a second time. We’re as frank with our patients about their odds of not becoming pregnant as we are with predictions for success. We also provide special services, such as massage therapy and counseling opportunities, to do everything in our power to help couples have babies and keep them as comfortable as possible during the process.”

Therapeutic massages help put women at ease, enhance relaxation, increase the effectiveness of medications and raise the level of optimism about treatment outcome. Even though infertility is seldom the result of psychological factors, the struggle to conceive a child can cause additional stress on both a person’s mind as well as her body.

Ask yourself if you’d seek medical help after being diagnosed with diabetes or cancer or some other debilitating disease or condition. Would you turn to experts for recommendations and treatment? Would you take medications or consider procedures that could make you well? For many couples, being in top reproductive health is no different than undergoing regular physical exams or picking up prescriptions at a local pharmacy to keep a heart condition under control.

“What we do here can seem intimidating, but it’s really extraordinary,” explains Reproductive Endocrinologist Dr. Barry Donesky, F.A.C.O.G. “People who have very little or even no chance of getting pregnant without medical assistance have multiple options to increase their odds of having a baby.”

For more information about the Fertility Center, which has an office in Knoxville as well as in Chattanooga, log on to www.MyFertilityCenter.com. Other helpful infertility web sites include:

- www.resolve.org – The Resolve organization with a network of infertility chapters across America
- www.theafa.org – The American Fertility Association dedicated to assisting those facing reproductive health issues
- www.asrm.org – The American Society for Reproductive Medicine devoted to advancing knowledge and expertise in reproductive medicine and biology
- www.bethany.org/step -- The Stepping Stones ministry of services (newsletters, books, forums) offering Christian support for couples facing infertility or pregnancy loss

Details about Empty Arms can be found at www.emptyarmssupport.org.

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“I search for women who understand my story. Even friends and family who have been my strongest supporters throughout life's ups and downs have not been able to lessen my childless grief. My soul longs to know those who have felt the same disappointment. We can help each other on this journey, even if we are in different places along the way.” – Empty Arms member

My friends and family got tired of hearing about the procedures, the feelings, the ups and downs. When I found Empty Arms, I found a group of caring women who had been through the same things I had. Someone to listen, to cry with, to celebrate with. Without Empty Arms, the silent struggle would have been harder to deal with and I probably wouldn't have continued the long road without their support – Empty Arms member

author bio

In addition to facilitating Empty Arms, Tina Smith encourages infertile couples and coordinates patient support at the Fertility Center. She and her husband, Bo, celebrate 17 years of marriage this month. They enjoy boating and parenting their long-awaited toddlers, Tré and Carolina. The family lives in Apison. Tina talks with women and men free of charge at the Fertility Center on Tuesday afternoons and Friday mornings and can be reached at 423-899-0500 ext.224 or 236.5157.