



# PROPER ETIQUETTE WHEN TALKING ABOUT FERTILITY

by SUE DUMAIS

Many couples struggling to conceive tend to keep it to themselves. They don't often share with work colleagues, friends and even close family. Many of my clients haven't even told their own parents. On the occasions where they find the courage to share some of their fertility challenges, responses from others feel insensitive and, in some cases, downright hurtful. Once bitten, twice shy, they quickly realize that telling others about their fertility is not in their best interest. Whether it is for fear of judgment or worry of what others might say, over time, their fertility journey becomes very isolating.

Unless you have had a personal experience with fertility challenges you can never truly understand the depths of

this deeply emotional journey. How can you respond in a supportive way when you have never had issues with your own fertility? What can you possibly say to woman that has just had a miscarriage that would feel comforting and supportive? Each week I hear my fertility clients say over and over again that other people in their life "just don't get it." People often dismiss their worries or anxiety by responding, "Just relax and it will happen." What they don't realize is that the high level of psychological distress makes it difficult to "just relax." A common response is "Don't worry, you can always adopt" – as if adoption were a simple and easy alternative.

DON'T	INSTEAD
DON'T tell them they can always adopt.	Ask them if they have considered all their options out judgment.
DON'T interrupt them as they are telling their story – you are not there to fix it.	Listen carefully! Often they just need someone to listen without judgement.
DON'T give them medical advice or suggestions on what treatment to try.	Teach and encourage them to make decisions from their heart or using their intuition for guidance and direction.
DON'T tell them they should go to the baby shower (birthday party, family get-together, etc.).	Encourage them to take care of their needs first even if that means declining an invitation.
DON'T interject your own personal opinions and judgments.	Practice deep listening. Be non-judgmental and open.
DON'T give them advice about what worked for others you know.	Be sensitive to how you offer suggestions and share information. When in doubt, leave it out.
DON'T forget about the emotional challenge they face around holidays, especially Christmas & Mother's Day.	A couple of weeks before ask about how they are feeling about Mother's Day. Suggest they plan something special with their partner or a friend.
DON'T say there is always next month when they share they are upset about their menstrual cycle starting.	Each menstrual cycle can feel like a loss. Loss of hope, loss of a baby. Treat it as if you were supporting someone through a loss.

SUPPORTING THROUGH MISCARRIAGE	
DON'T say "you can always try again" or "it just wasn't meant to be" when a woman tells you news of a miscarriage.	Respond as you would if they were sharing about the loss of any other family member.



Recent research has shown that, for many women, fertility issues can create levels of anxiety and depression equivalent to those experienced by women with cancer, HIV or heart disease. Telling a woman that she can always adopt is like telling a breast cancer patient not to worry, she can always get another breast. No one would ever do that, but to a woman with a deep desire to have a baby, this type of response can feel equally insensitive.

I know that people don't intend to be hurtful, and I remind my clients of that on a daily basis. I remind them that they are not hurt by the words themselves – they are feeling hurt by the meaning they are placing on those words.

Here are some of the ways my clients interpret the comment about adoption: "It's not going to work anyway, I might as well give up."

"I am a failure."

"No one believes I can get pregnant."

"I might as well accept defeat."

#### SO WHAT SHOULD YOU SAY?

What can you say or do to be supportive? I have created a list of suggested responses to specific challenges couples face on their journey. Keep in mind that sometimes the best response is no response. Often they just need you to *listen*.

What is the best way to respond to news of a miscarriage? Friends and family often ask this question. Each woman will cope with the experience of a miscarriage differently. The first thing I would say is, "I am sorry for your loss". This feels supportive, whether they are deeply affected by the loss or they are managing well. Give them time to talk and express their emotions if necessary. They may not feel comfortable or ready to talk about it. Ask them "How can I support you?" or "Is there anything I can do to support you?" Although you might think saying something else would be supportive, the two previous questions are your safest response. Until you

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have an opportunity to find out how they are coping with the loss, I would recommend deep listening and holding a space for them to share.

Whether you have or haven't experienced fertility issues, you can begin to imagine how they are feeling, but you will never know exactly what another individual is experiencing. In order to provide emotional support, it is important to understand the difference between having sympathy for them and being empathic.

**Sympathy** means sharing their experience or feelings by feeling bad or sorry for them. The last thing they need is for you to feel sorry for them. Sympathy often comes with judgment, as you begin to guess how they must be feeling and think about what they should do about it. This response

makes them feel more like a victim with no personal power.

**Empathy** means sharing in their experience as a witness. It means listening deeply and holding a space for them to express how they are feeling, without judgment! Just be present and observe. Responding with empathy feels supportive and empowering. For example, responding, "I can see how upset you are by all of this. What can I do to support you?" allows them to feel heard, and even encourages them to look inward to see what they actually need from you in the way of support. Validate their feelings without trying to fix them.

You won't always know exactly what to say. Sometimes silence is exactly what they need.

### About the author

Sue Dumais' own struggles with fertility combined with her passion for yoga inspired her to co-found Family Passages Mind Body Fertility Studio in Vancouver where women and couples can experience mind body programs, Yoga for Fertility and self care designed to support them on their fertility journey. Sue has recently published a *Yoga for Fertility Handbook and A Strong Core for Life*. She has also developed several online audio classes and self help programs as well as a Fitness Fertility Specialist Certification and Yoga for Fertility Instructor Training courses. Sue can be reached at 604-266-6470 or visit [www.familypassages.ca](http://www.familypassages.ca)



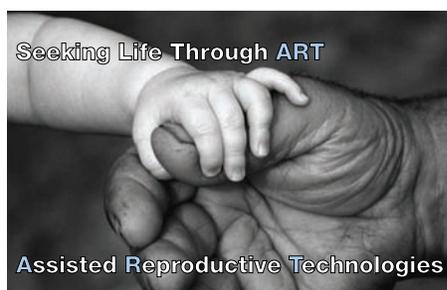
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The hospital has a long and distinguished history of offering the most advanced assisted reproductive technologies. As far back as 1972, physicians associated with the hospital were offering patients insemination services using a sperm donor (DI). In 1984, with the advent of In Vitro Fertilization (IVF), the Reproductive Endocrinology and Infertility service was established as one of the first and largest IVF programs in North America attracting couples from across Canada and around the world. Since then, the scope of patient services has expanded to include Intrauterine Insemination (IUI), Intracytoplasmic Sperm Injection (ICSI), Microsurgical Sperm Retrieval, Laser Hatching of Eggs, Embryo Freezing, Egg Donation and Sperm Banking. Our experience providing innovative and caring infertility treatment has resulted in the birth of over 3500 babies.

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