

Attuning to Someone with Infertility

Infertility is a unique condition that not only affects mental health and the emotional life of women and their spouses, but it is also a medical condition. Therefore, when understanding a woman's experience with infertility, you must also consider her experience in her body. Imagine how her nervous system and hormones are interconnected with her emotions and how she interacts and responds to her environment. Also, imagine how it impacts all the relationships in her life. All these factors impact her sense of identity, well-being, purpose, and meaning in life.

Physical

Imagine: *Never-ending cycles. Here we go again.* Walking into the reproductive clinic by 7am. The waiting room is already full. Called to the blood draw station. Needles. Pricks. More waiting. Called for the doctor's examination. Being touched in private areas. Administering your own hormone injections. Needles. Trembling hands. Pain. *Why am I crying? Why am I fine one minute and crashing the next?* The hormonal roller coaster. Irritated. Angry. *Is this me?* Schedules. Invasive procedures. Hope, faith, trust. Blood. Devastation, shame, despair. *I'm so tired, I want to die. But don't give up. Just do it! Just one more time.*

Notice thoughts and feelings: "My body is 'defective' and cannot produce." "I'm deficient." "I'm a failure." "I don't know why I can't stop crying." "I feel so helpless and useless."

How can you be present?

- Attune - Tune in to what the person is feeling and experiencing: *It sounds like the treatments and procedures are really painful and exhausting and that you're feeling helpless.*
- Respond with comfort, care, and kindness: *I can only imagine how uncomfortable and scary that must be, and I hope you know you're not alone.*
- Engage to come alongside in the journey: *Would you feel comfortable if I accompanied you on your next visit? Maybe we could grab coffee together after?*

Spiritual

Imagine: Weeping bitterly in anguish until your body aches, like Hannah, begging for God to open your womb. *Does God hear my prayer? Why is he not answering?* Being angry and desperate like Rachel, *Give me children or I'll die!* Cynical and hardened like Sarah (in the book of Genesis) and Zechariah (in the book of Luke), who questioned God. Undergoing lifetimes of shame wondering, *Is God punishing me?* and then wondering, *Am I not trusting God enough because I have all these feelings and thoughts?*



Notice thoughts and feelings: "Am I being punished?" "Am I cursed?" "I've repented for everything I could think of. Is there something I still need to repent for?" "God must want to teach me a lesson." "Is my faith not strong enough?" Feelings of isolation, anguish, confusion, sadness, anger, doubt, and abandonment.

How can you be present?

- Attune - Tune in to what the person is feeling and experiencing: *I hear that you are feeling confused and doubtful about whether God is with you and hearing your prayers.*
- Respond with comfort, care, and kindness: *It makes sense that it's confusing that no matter how hard you call out to God, you haven't gotten pregnant, so it feels like you're alone in your anguish.*
- Engage to come alongside in the journey: *It is okay to bring all your feelings to God. How are you bringing all you're going through to God? Please let me know what you need or how I can help. Are there specific ways I can pray for you?*

Family

Imagine: The parents or parents-in-law are over. Looking on their phone at family photos or photos of their friends' kids that have had kids. "When are you going to make us proud grandparents?" they ask, or maybe it's something else like, "I can't believe you won't be able to give John a baby." Or, "It's always been my dream to see you as a mother."


Notice thoughts and feelings: "I'm deficient." "I'm a disappointment." "I'm nothing they can brag about." "They prefer someone else." "I'm wrecking the family." "I'm ruining their dreams." Notice feelings of expectation, rejection, sadness, guilt, and shame.

How can you be present?

- Attune - Tune in to what the person is feeling and experiencing: *It seems like there's a lot of pressure with your family with their hopes and dreams for you.*
- Respond with comfort, care, and kindness: *That sounds difficult that you must care for your family's expectations when it's been so tough for you already.*
- Engage to come alongside in the journey: *If you need someone to process with you about your family's response, I can be a listening ear.*

Social

Imagine: All the women in your age group have clustered around in the kitchen and they are talking about important mom issues. They're laughing, giving tips, and telling cute and funny stories—a natural connection. You jump in, "Well, when my niece did _____, I felt so _____" Some women nod, but then some other woman pipes in, "It'll be different when you



have your own kid." You might keep trying and standing at the edge of the group, or you might drift over to where the younger women or men are hanging out. At least they can talk about topics other than just their kids.

Notice thoughts and feelings: "I'm a nobody." "My experience is not legit." "I can't fit in." "No one's interested in me." "I'm not valued here." Notice feelings of loneliness, rejection, disregard, unworthiness, and shame.

How can you be present?

- Attune - Tune in to what the person is feeling and experiencing: *That does sound really isolating and lonely when you want to connect with friends, but talking about kids is really painful for you right now.*
- Respond with comfort, care, and kindness: *It must be hard to attend gatherings and know how to connect when you're going through all this.*
- Engage to come alongside in the journey: *I'm interested to hear what you've been going through these days. How are you growing and cultivating different areas in your life?*

From those major categories alone, we can see how a woman's experience of infertility permeates every area of her life in significant ways. It can be very isolating and demoralizing. It can feel like everyone is moving forward, sometimes even those they've previously connected with because they also dealt with infertility for a time, but they are stuck in their grief and loss. Each person experiences their grief differently, and there is no "right" timetable or "right way" to grieve. In the midst of their ups and downs, those who can attune, respond well, and engage with their suffering, can also hold out hope of Christ's unfailing love and comfort as we overflow his care for them. As we journey with them in all aspects of their lives, we help restore their dignity and celebrate their identity and place in God's kingdom.