Managing stress & anxiety through IVF treatment

Coping strategies
Stress and anxiety tend to feed on themselves, particularly in couple relationships. Often there is no one cure, but interrupting the cycle by doing something different can offer possibilities for change. Holding on to the way we are managing a situation ensures that nothing will change. Taking on an experimental mindset may allow some new behaviours to be trialed. Amongst the following strategies, you will find some changes you can make to help reduce the effects of stress and anxiety in your day-to-day life.

Some final thoughts
Remember that the vast majority of people with fertility difficulties are normal people in abnormal circumstances doing the best they can at that time. This includes your partner. Although lots of helpful change can happen through acceptance and compromise, it is more helpful to respect each other's differences rather than trying to change each other.

More information
Melbourne IVF has one of the most comprehensive specialised fertility counselling services in Australia. Counselling is available at any stage before, during and after treatment and is available at all Melbourne IVF clinics in and around Melbourne. Contact the Patient Liaison Administration team about organising your counselling appointments.

Stress and anxiety are a natural response when we are frightened or threatened in anyway. Fertility problems and IVF treatment can represent a threat to your control, future dreams, self-esteem, intimate relationships with your partner, sense of normality or other relationships.
What is all the stress about?

Stress and anxiety are natural responses when we are frightened or threatened in any way. Fertility problems and IVF treatment can represent a threat to your control, future dreams, self-esteem, intimate relationships with your partner, sense of normality or other relationships. No wonder you feel anxious!

A level of stress and anxiety is almost inevitable in IVF, however there is no convincing research evidence to prove that stress levels affect the outcome of treatment. In fact, stress and anxiety can be productive, for example, in helping identify problems and feeling motivated to solve them.

This brochure gives some practical guidance on responding to situations where stress and anxiety have become obstacles to effective living.

What are the symptoms?

Stress and anxiety can present in many ways:

- Physical symptoms, including muscle tension, hyperventilation, palpitations, nausea or sleeplessness.
- Changes to thinking patterns, including chaotic thoughts, irrationality, irritability, extreme sensitivity or bewilderment.
- Behavioural changes, including introversion, aggression, needy or clinging behaviour or loss of confidence.
- Reversion to old ways of coping, including withdrawal, emotionality or dependence.
### Physical
- Regular exercise
- Yoga/meditation/relaxation techniques/massage
- Herbal therapies (but please inform your IVF Fertility Specialist of the details when you commence any such therapies)
- Sleeping (either more or less)
- Crying or laughing

### Behavioural
- Find achievable projects at home or work which make you feel productive
- Plan with your partner to look out for each other at social events – ask how the other is feeling before you arrive and during the event
- Plan other activities to look forward to
- Join a support group/chat room
- Review your work hours (refer to our brochure titled Balancing Work and IVF)
- Take breaks from treatment, even if just for a month or two
- Shorten visits to newborns, children’s birthday parties, etc. (instead, deliver a cooked meal or write a letter)
- Share “doing” activities (like movies or sport) rather than talking activities with friends
- Seek out other community groups that focus on interests other than children, for example, a book club
- Educate friends and family who are interested and keen to support you
- Identify your underlying feelings, for example, anger generally masks fear/helplessness, and bitterness masks pain

### Emotional
- Share your true feelings with your partner
- Accept that your partner may be emotionally different to you
- Discuss with your partner what helps and what doesn’t
- Adopt a “best friend” attitude to yourself, for example: accept/forgive rather than blame yourself
- Share your feelings with someone else
- Identify people who can and will hang in there with you (you may be surprised)
- Write down your thoughts and feelings in a diary or journal
- See a good GP or counsellor if you are worried about persistent anxiety, depression or other symptoms

### Cognitive/Intellectual
- Remember that you and your partner may not always be on the same page regarding how you think or feel about your treatment
- Give each other as much time as you can to consider new ideas – attitude changes take time
- Modify your expectations of friends/family
- Accept that your feelings are inevitable when negotiating a chaotic life path
- Distinguish between the things you can and can’t influence
- Learn about the treatment, ask lots of questions to help you feel more in control
- Develop a good working relationship with your doctor/nurse/counsellor
- Try not to place too much importance on a particular cycle
- Refuse to accept unfair judgements about you or your treatment choices
- Try to visualise many varied futures, do not just focus on one – discussing a Plan B won’t reduce the chances of your plan A working out
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