

Do you *Love* someone who is **Infertile?**

What you can do to help her,
What to say to support her, and
What you should *never* do or say.

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and Julia Fichtner Krahm



www.StewartInstitute.org

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Second Edition

To our husbands and children, Your love and
patience make everything possible.



“The mission of The Stewart Institute for Infertility Foundation is to raise awareness of and provide emotional and practical support and guidance to women and couples struggling with infertility.”

Visit our website, www.StewartInstitute.org for additional information, resources, articles, or to submit a question or comment.

Contents

Before we begin. 1

From one infertile woman to another: You are not alone.

Helping you help her. 4

You are one of the few people who can walk alongside her as she desperately seeks to be a mother. We will help you.

Is she obsessed? 12

What looks like obsession is the love of a mother.

Her world. 22

Understand her feeling of barrenness and encourage her to recapture what has been life giving.

The gift of anger. 28

The journey of infertility is a fight—and how can you fight without anger?

She always dreamed of having children. 34

Husbands, while you can't "fix it," here are the things that you can do to help her.

She's with other people . . . but feels isolated, alone, and barren. 41

What's helpful, what's not . . . and how to know the difference.

When God feels silent, offer no simple answers. 56

Be the rare person who listens without judgment as she reconciles her faith with her pain.

Bad news. Good news. 61

She is facing the crisis of infertility treatment. You will be surprised how your support, or lack of support, will change her life and your relationship.

What do I say if she's considering discontinuing treatment? 77

Be relieved! She is not looking for you to provide the right answer. Here's what she is looking for.

How to recognize the hidden dangers of her everyday life. 84

Mother's Day, baby showers, and Christmas morning: infertility landmines and how you can protect her.

What you don't know might hurt her. 95

Infertility may be her time of greatest loss, resulting in her greatest risk for depression.

What you do today will change her life forever. 104

She will always remember that you were with her during one of the most difficult times of her life.

Personal Journal. 107

Authors' Biographies. 110

Before We Begin

From one Infertile woman to another: *You are not alone.*



“I NEVER THOUGHT I WOULD BE HERE...”

Those of us who have faced infertility have found ourselves saying these words again and again, each time with growing disbelief. Many people have no idea that you spend your time caught between two worlds: the life you always imagined as a mother and a frightening place where that dream keeps slipping beyond your reach. The fear and grief you are feeling are more than enough with which to contend, but added to your burden is a world in

which no one seems to “get it.”

In our society, there is a lack of awareness about the emotional cost of infertility, and that the loss of a cycle or a failed procedure feels like the death of your child. Because most people do not understand your pain, you feel an immense amount of turmoil in daily interactions. At a nephew's birthday party, you don't want to burst into tears out of respect for his special day. As a result, your pain is multiplied as you experience one set of feelings, while showing the world another. Finally, infertility is not one loss, but a succession of losses. Your husband, your friends, your family would expect you to be wounded if you lost someone you loved. But because your losses come cycle after cycle, year after year, your loved ones' empathy and compassion can wear thin.

You are called to be a mother. It is not a whim or a phase through which you are going. It is as deep and necessary to you as breathing. You can no sooner “just let it go” than you can give up being you. You cannot take away your hunger and

longing to hold your child anymore than you could wish away the need to eat and drink.

The good news is, while it's not how you imagined you would conceive your child, modern medicine offers you opportunities that were unavailable only a few years ago. As a psychotherapist and an infertile woman, I have traveled your road. After many procedures and previously unimaginable options, I have given birth to two sons. In my psychotherapy practice I have been privileged to join hundreds of women as they've struggled, grieved, raged, hoped, despaired, and rejoiced in this essential desire to be a mother. Together we have learned many difficult lessons about managing this time of infertility. Our desire is that the hard lessons learned by other infertile women can ease your path and help you avoid unnecessary pain. Our hope is that you will know you are not alone.

This particular guidebook is written, not for you, but for your friends and family. Many of the people in your life want to lovingly support you, but may not know how. You and I wouldn't have understood the needs of an infertile woman before our own diagnoses. This book gives your friends and family insight into how infertility impacts your life, and it guides them in practical ways to love and support you. If you offer this book to your husband or friend, affirm the love and commitment in the relationship: *I know you love me. I think you don't always know how to support me, and I'm uncertain how to tell you what I need. This guide can be helpful to both of us.*

Wherever you find yourself on the journey with infertility, I count it a privilege to travel alongside you.

Shari

HELPING YOU HELP HER

You know it and so does she. This amazing woman in your life—loving, kind, funny, and smart—would make the most wonderful mother. You have watched, often feeling helpless yourself, as her dream, her need, and her longing to hold her child eludes her.

When you love and care about someone caught in the painful world of infertility, you may be uncertain how to respond to the intensity of feelings spinning around you and this loved one. It is not an easy world to enter, nor in which to remain. You may be invited into the details of her journey one moment, only to feel pushed away the next time.

As an infertile woman, I experienced years of feeling battered and broken by my inability to conceive a child. I often felt alone in the desperate search for my babies. I never dreamed that my most sacred desire would lead me through my

“No language can express the power and beauty and heroism of a mother’s love.” —Edwin H. Chapin



Almost always, I hear later about the few people in an infertile woman's life that helped her through:

"I couldn't have made it without her."

"I don't think I would have survived without his support."

greatest suffering. My marriage gifted me the privilege of mothering four beautiful children who, with time, became my own. My love for these children served to intensify, not quench, my ache. After eight fresh and frozen in vitro fertilization procedures, I can joyfully say that my husband and I have welcomed two sons to our family. In my profession, as a therapist working with other infertile women, my experience has given me a deep bond and connection with my patients. It is a profound privilege, to hear the real-life stories of women struggling to find their babies. Their words echo within me: the grief, the shock, and the isolation

as well as their profound joy and deep fulfillment in motherhood—motherhood that is not guaranteed at the end of this road, but, thankfully, does come to many infertile women.

Perhaps you purchased this book yourself, or you may have received it from the infertile woman in your life. If it was given to you, then this woman is entrust-

When you look back and see your own handwriting, you return to that place of insight and understanding within yourself.

ing you with her pain and vulnerability. She is experiencing one of the darkest chapters of her life and she needs you. You are one of the few people who can walk alongside her while she is desperately seeking to be a mother. Your sup-

port of her during this time will change your relationship with her forever. In this guide, you—the friends and family of the infertile woman—will gain insight into her experience. You will learn practical information so you can support



Shari's Story

What could have driven us apart has brought us closer than ever.

The most important relationships in my life have been changed forever by my years of infertility. Infertility has been a furnace of pain and grief that has strengthened some relationships and burnt away others—or parts of others. Of course, I still see and often love the individuals in this latter category, but there are limits: we have changed, or at least, I have changed. There are places of vulnerability I will not go with them. There are areas of my life I keep separate. I love them, but I cannot trust them with my deepest longings and joys.

As irony would have it, my best friend for many years, Julia, is the most fertile woman I know. Somehow her love for me reached across the chasm separating her experience from mine. She listened; she held me when I cried. She gave me the opportunity to choose whether I wanted to

and love her. And you will be reminded of what you already know: you cannot fix her infertility. Instead, the most important thing you can do is remain beside her, through extremes of emotions and experiences. Your love and support and presence will be an anchor as she sometimes feels lost in the tumult. You will learn that some of her pain is compounded by misunderstandings and common daily encounters—even her encounters with you. We'll help you avoid adding to her difficulty. We'll show you how you can be an advocate for her. We will help you find words that truly feel helpful to her.

As you are reading this book, we encourage you to respond to questions,

*This loved woman in your life
feels called to be a mother.
She is, in her heart, already
a mother.*

talk about my pain and she let me decide when I did want to hear about her own pregnancy and ultrasound results. Somehow, she “got it.” She understood my infertility as I have seldom seen from a woman who hasn’t experienced it. I call her the most “infertile” fertile woman I know.

The gift of Julia’s commitment has now led us to a whole new creation, as we have become writing and business partners. In a very real way, out of that time of darkness, new life has emerged. My friend, who understood me through so many years, now offers the gift of her writing. We talk and process a topic or idea for hours, and she is the one who translates the work I do onto the written page. She is close enough to understand what I am explaining, that she writes with integrity about infertility, and she offers insight into the experience of the one who loves an infertile woman. Infertility was a crisis for me and for my relationships. Like any crisis, it tested the strength of each bond: some held firm and others bent or twisted—all of them were transformed.

and to write down your thoughts and insight. Please circle, highlight, or mark anything else that feels helpful. When you finish reading and writing, you will have not only a guide, but your guide in this aspect of infertility. Your writing magnifies and focuses the usefulness of the guide because it allows you to take our general suggestions and apply them to your situation. Your notes can later serve as quick and powerful reminders in the middle of a crisis or when you feel uncertain or confused. As you read and write in this book, many things will make sense you didn't comprehend before, but because you do not live in this world of infertility on a daily basis, the understanding will fade. When you look back and see your own handwriting, you return to that place of insight and understanding within yourself.

This infertile woman may be your wife, a dear friend, your sister, or your daughter. Throughout the guide we will alternate between these various relational terms for ease in reading and writing; you can mentally shift the term to



Julia's Story

I asked her to teach me.

To hear Shari tell it, I did everything right when she went through the greatest pain I have ever seen her experience. Thankfully, her memories are edited by love, because many times I was inept and sadly, thoughtless. I actually fear that Shari set the bar pretty low: as long as I didn't ignore her primordial keening with, *"enough about you ... let me tell you about my stretch marks,"* she seemed to think I was great. Here is the reality from my perspective. I did just a few things right, and our love and friendship stretched over my inadequacies. First, I asked her to teach me. I became the master of prefaces: *"Do you want to talk? How would you feel if I ...?"* Second, when I made mistakes, I learned from them and tried to make it right. *"I realize I just spent twenty minutes discussing diaper rash. Is that what you need to talk about?"*

You will find three components in the pages that follow:

1

What does she feel and experience?

Unless you are infertile yourself, you cannot fully understand her pain, but there are places of pain, loss, or joy in your own life through which you can connect to her.

2

Understanding her.

Sometimes we will offer new information and other times we will suggest a different perspective than what you might have previously considered.

3

How you can help.

We will give you specific suggestions and guide you in a writing process that reflects the wisdom you already have about your beloved sister, daughter, friend, or wife.

I will say I had an advantage I didn't recognize as such at the time. Prior to meeting Shari, I experienced a painful betrayal from which I spent several years gradually recovering. I realized during that time how maddening I found banal platitudes like, "*It was just meant to be,*" or "*It's the Lord's will.*" I remember how I disliked phrases about the listener that seemed to put pressure on me to comfort them, "*I wish I knew how to help you..... I wish I knew what to say....*" I am so grateful for the few people who sat near me, not fixing, or running away, or filling the emptiness. A simple, "*I am so sorry*" was a place of brief respite where I could take a deeper breath. These friends' acknowledgement of my loss helped me accept what was happening, and in the acceptance I felt an inkling of hope. I wasn't running from or distracting myself from my sadness; I was facing it, and I was surviving.

It is the rare adult who hasn't experienced grief or pain in some form. We who have never been infertile cannot fully comprehend the fear and grief of infertility. We can touch our own pain in a way that allows us to reach out to and love this woman in what is likely her time of greatest need and pain.

whichever is appropriate in your circumstance. We will make it clear when we are specifically addressing one particular group such as “husbands” or “friends”.

Your love is a beautiful gift

It is perhaps one of the most selfless gifts you can give her because in the midst of her grief she may not always be able to appreciate your care and support. Almost always, I hear later about the few people in an infertile woman’s life who helped her through: *“I couldn’t have made it without her.” “I don’t think I would have survived without his support.”* This loved woman in your life feels called to be a mother. She is, in her heart, already a mother whose arms are nevertheless empty. This guide will help you help her while she moves toward becoming a mother.





Is she Obsessed?

I know how wonderful and important children are. I love children and I understand how much my sister/wife aches for them. I get it. I just think, well . . . maybe she's lost some perspective and is a little obsessed. I mean, it feels like everything else in her life has taken a back seat to this all-consuming drive to have a child. I wonder if even I am as important to her these days?

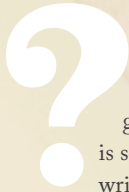
The messages are often subtle and expressed in an “*I’m just concerned*” manner, and yet repeatedly she is told that her need is too great, too extensive, and too pervasive.

I know you think you understand, and yet the number one thing said to me about friends and family by an infertile woman is, “*They just don’t get it!*” “*They*” in this context means everyone

else in the world who is not also an infertile woman. Like it or not, “*they*” almost certainly includes you.

From the people she loves, and from whom she most needs understanding and support, your friend hears words that bring her added pain. The messages are often subtle and expressed in an “*I’m just concerned*” manner, and yet repeatedly she is told that her need is too great, too extensive, and too pervasive.

For those of you who are already parents, can you think, write, imagine what you would overcome if the life of your child were threatened? Is there anything you would not do or withstand if it would mean your child would live? Can you take a moment to write down these thoughts and feelings?



Why do we encourage you to write down your response? Reading the words on a page can be useful and give you insight. However, reading is somewhat passive. The thinking and writing that occurs with journaling engages additional areas of your brain so that you access insights that were not available through reading alone. Your personal experience expands the material we have provided, making it more useful. Before you skip the journaling section, we invite you to risk trying these first few written responses, and see for yourself the added benefits.

Julia's Journal:

I remember once reading a poem that said something like, "Before you were born, I loved you. Before you were an hour old, I would die for you."

I thought those words were an exaggeration before I became a mother. Now, I lay beside my children while they sleep at night, and breathe in the scent of their hair and skin. My nose is close to theirs and I draw into my lungs the air that has just left theirs. I used to tease my mother when I was younger, accusing her of worrying too much about her children. Now I understand it. When you love so fiercely, you know how much you have to lose. Do I understand what some call "obsession" on the part of an infertile woman? Yes. Were I in her place, knowing the magnitude of my love for my children, I would be as passionate as she, or more so.

—J

It is not.

It is essential for loved ones to understand her longing to be a mother is primal. To you, her focus on becoming pregnant may seem obsessive. For her, the need is as fundamental as breathing, eating, and sleeping. It is who she is, and the threat of going through life as a childless mother is more than she

can bear. She is not, and may never be, part of the club of women who share their stories of pregnancy, labor, and childrearing joys and woes. She fears she will forever remain separate from this experience through no choice of her own.

Hers is the love of a mother. What she feels now is the same maternal protectiveness she will have for her child throughout his or her life. It serves an invaluable purpose: her love, longing, and obsession enable her to move forward with the next infertility treatment until she can hold her baby in her arms. And that anger she feels—the jealousy, the rage? It is real and true and normal. I have yet to meet an infertile woman who didn't call this journey a "fight"—and how can you fight without these fierce emotions?

Biologically, physiologically, and socially within this woman, the ache to be a mother has been ingrained, probably since childhood. As a young

girl, she likely played house and used phrases such as "When I'm a Mommy..." She may have been the special "helper" of young children or babysat through her teen years, all in subtle preparation for being a mother. Decisions about education, career, marriage, and lifestyle were made with some awareness of how and when children fit into the picture. Her body cramped, bled, and PMS'd every month since she was twelve, in an unspoken agreement that it would all be worthwhile because, when the time was right, she would have a baby.

Boys and girls are different.

And to you guys (mostly husbands) who are reading this material: please notice how her life has been different from your own. Boys almost universally define their dreams in terms of desirable occupations. Even though

**"Nothing has more strength than dire necessity."
—Euripides**

you are struggling with your own feelings surrounding infertility, your emotional experience was very different from hers. At age five, she was protectively holding baby dolls and pretending to be a mommy; you may have been creating a rocket out of cardboard and pretending you were flying into space. Most likely, you weren't thinking of the day you would become a father.

Infertility is a diagnosis and issue for the two of you as a couple. You are infertile together. However, this book addresses the needs of your wife because her experience is different from yours. You did not have the same childhood dreams. Since she was twelve her body has reminded her every month of its reproductive function. She dreamed of growing a baby within her body and watching her belly swell with new life. She longed to feel her child move and kick within her. She bears the brunt of almost all testing and treatment procedures. She is the one who must take powerful medication, and endure painful injections, frequent blood draws and ultrasounds. She is surrounded by other women

discussing their pregnancy symptoms, childbirth stories, and child-rearing anecdotes. A gathering of men will seldom spend much time discussing

*Can you see that what
looks like an obsession is
actually a gift?*

children. Husbands, you will at times share her loss and pain. At other times your experience will be more like that of family and friends—uncertain how to care for and reach out to the woman you love.

**She has the love and
strength of a mother.**

Can you see that what looks like an obsession is actually a gift? The willingness to endure almost anything for her child is the strength of motherhood already alive inside of your daughter, your wife. It is a powerful force that allows greater feats than ever imagined. It allows her to fight for the sake

of her child much as a frontier mother might face down a wild animal threatening her children. Indeed, she fights for the very life of her yet-to-be child.

HOW YOU CAN HELP:

What looks like obsession is actually single-mindedness.

Acknowledge her grief.

There may be very few people who have acknowledged how difficult and painful her situation is. If you do only one thing to support an infertile woman, offer her a simple phrase that says she is not crazy—“*of course this is difficult.*” She fears the loss of perhaps her greatest dream and often no one around her recognizes or realizes the extent of her pain. You might say:

- *I am so sorry.*
- *I know you have always dreamed of being a mother; this must be incredibly hard for you.*
- *I can't imagine how difficult this must be for you.*

What words do you think would be best to use with your friend?

“Journal writing is a voyage to the interior.”
—Christina Baldwin

“Where there is no vision, the people perish.”
—Proverbs 29:18

Help her hold her dream when it feels like everything is conspiring to pull it away from her.

What would be a good way to let her know you trust her maternal instincts—a card or a comment the next time you two talk? Maybe some of the thoughts you wrote in the journaling about your own fierce mother love? Perhaps one of the following:

- A simple message—“I don’t know what will happen. What I do know is you would be an amazing mother”—acknowledges her uncertainty, but also affirms her single-minded journey.
- What would it mean for your daughter to have you, her mother, say, “I can only hope your child gives you as much joy as you have given me.”
- For some infertile women, the firm hope and belief that “Some day in some way, I will be a mother” is a life preserver in the midst of fear and uncertainty. For this woman, an overt baby gift such as a picture frame or a baby blanket may mean everything.
- For other women, it may be financially or emotionally difficult to try again if this procedure fails. You can still reach out to her, but the message will be more muted: “I am very proud of you, going through so much. Any child would be blessed to have you for a mother.” Or, “You have the strength and love of a mother inside of you and whatever happens, it is beautiful to see.”

Honoring her dream and all she is enduring is different from empty assurances that “*everything will be alright*,” or “*I’m sure it’s just a matter of time*.”

Based on what you know about her, what inexpensive token; piece of jewelry; or collection of music, words, or pictures would remind her she is not alone in dreaming about her child?

Honoring her dream and all she is enduring is different from empty assurances that “everything will be alright,” or “I’m sure it’s just a matter of time.” While you wish you could alleviate her suffering and give her hope, there is no guarantee this cycle or procedure will be successful. To promise something she knows may not be true creates frustration or turmoil within her. You might want to

*Whatever you have to go
through, I will be with you,
as long as it takes.*

give quick assurances when you yourself are most uncomfortable, perhaps frightened by the intensity of her feelings. You may think you’re supposed to feel as miserable as she is, and reassurances are an attempt to put a Band-Aid on the pain you both feel.

Your greatest resource is to walk alongside her, not in her shoes. It doesn’t help her if you try to feel her pain at the same level she feels it. Indeed, to do so shifts your focus from her needs and hinders your ability to support her. Rather than assurances about the outcome, you can make promises about your constancy and presence along the journey: “*Whatever you have to go through, I will be*

with you, as long as it takes.” And then, follow through so she is not alone: go with her to appointments, watch a DVD with her when she is on bed rest, invite her to go for a walk with you.

And here is one more nuance: Husbands, there are promises only you can give. If you are as determined to have a baby as she, and you know you will pursue all of the options available, then tell her: *“We will have a family. Together we will do whatever it takes to get our baby.”* What is important is she knows, and you put into words, your commitment to be an equal partner in this quest for a child—it is not her fight, but our fight!

Protect her from the well intentioned, but hurtful words of others.

You be the one at the Thanksgiving dinner who answers the abrupt question, “So, when are we going to see your children?” You don’t have to reveal her infertility if it’s not common knowledge: a simple *“Babies come when they come. Pass the bread, please.”* will allow your sister to recover from a blow that feels physical as she struggles to regain her breath and equilibrium. If you know “Aunt Carol” is inclined to ask such questions, find a few minutes with her in private, before the meal, and ask her to refrain from the subject.

Are there people or places where you can anticipate she will need some support and maybe your intervention? Right now, you have the luxury of being able to think about and plan for these events that she, in her crisis mode, may not have the resources to tackle.

While Thanksgiving only comes once a year, she may face intrusive questions on a weekly, even daily basis. I know a woman who, in her small community, can barely go to the grocery store without some acquaintance asking her when she is going to have children. She may be grieving a miscarriage or failed IVF cycle while she attempts to graciously evade these painful questions. You cannot protect her from all of the questions, but maybe you can prevent some of them.

Tell her how proud you are of her.

She is obsessed and rightfully so. Yet, look at all she is managing to do. She may want to spend the day alone, curled into a ball. Instead, she is walking, breathing, and, on a good day, wearing make-up, and with her hair fixed. Yes, we are saying it is normal for her to FEEL obsessed. In fact, there will also be times of acute grief when she cannot even function. In other guides in this series, we will encourage her to still remain functional in her life. She feels obsessed, but will choose to not always act that way for her own health and for the sake of those around her, including her husband, friends, and family.



My sister's eyes shone as we climbed the stairs to my bedroom. She said she had something special to tell me in private!

I already suspected her news, yet it was wonderful to watch her face when she said she had decided to get pregnant! A year out of law school, having passed the bar on her first try, and two years into marriage, she was ready to start trying! The glow on her face was beautiful. My mature, business-like little sister giggled like we were children, and told