

# COPING WITH THE LOSS OF FERTILITY

Coping with a cancer diagnosis, though daunting, is oftentimes only the beginning. It inevitably weaves itself into all other parts of one's life—school, career, finances and even family planning. For those affected by cancer, coping with the loss of fertility can seem secondary. But for many it is viewed as something everlasting, staying with them long after there is no longer evidence of cancer.

## COPING WITH THE LOSS OF FERTILITY

Like cancer, the loss of fertility can touch every aspect of one's life—from the way you feel about yourself, to your relationship with friends or loved ones. It can even affect future relationships that have yet to develop. Although having children may not be in everyone's future regardless of cancer, for some, it is the lack of choice that is the most difficult to cope with—"I lost my ability to have children even before I knew I wanted them."

Unfortunately this reality is not at all uncommon. The pressure to raise a family can be enormous. What you once imagined your life would look like now looks quite different. As overwhelming as this new normal may seem, there are ways to cope with the feelings that may arise.



**Let yourself FEEL.** There is no right or wrong way to feel. One thing is certain though, bottling it up will only ensure that at some point those feelings will burst free. More than likely it will happen when you least expect it—when you're with friends, at work or in a crowded train car. Allow yourself the time to grieve the loss and feel the sadness, anger and guilt that may come. Find new and unique ways to express these feelings: scream into a pillow or punch a punching bag to express your anger, or keep a journal for those feelings you wouldn't dream of verbalizing but feel compelled to express.

**Educate yourself.** Uncertainty of the future and what it has to offer can cause stress. While you may have lost the ability to have or carry children of your own, there are options. Speak with your oncology medical team to stay up-to-date with your cancer diagnosis, active treatment and post-treatment care. They can connect you to fertility specialists that can help answer questions regarding fertility options and give clarity on alternatives such as adoption. Although it is impossible to plan for every conceivable outcome, having this knowledge can give you a peace of mind the uncertainty did not.

**Communicate.** The loss of fertility can take a toll on relationships. The need to steer clear of certain functions (for example: baby showers, birthdays, family dinners) is natural to avoid often unspoken resentment or feelings of inadequacy. Give yourself permission to decline these invitations or at the very least to have a good cry afterward. If your friends and family have been kept in the dark, it may be helpful to educate them about what you are going through. Offer insight and explain how certain comments, though innocent and unintentional, may be insensitive. Doing so can help friends and family learn how to support you during the tough times. Staying connected in this way to family, friends and those who are closest to you to offer their love and support can be monumentally healing.

**Don't play the "Blame Game."** Just like with your cancer diagnosis, there is no one to blame. It can seem easy to replace feelings of sadness with anger. Displacing such feelings and "giving" them to someone else can feel like a relief. However, blame of any kind, especially self-blame, is not helpful. These misplaced feelings use a level of energy that would be better suited or redirected to an activity that gives you pleasure—yoga, meditation, art, or music.

**Teamwork.** If you are in a relationship, you and your partner can help support one another. The way you feel will change day to day. Just like your feelings will change, so will your partner's. But that doesn't mean that you will feel the same feelings at the same time. This is normal! Work as a team to find ways of staying connected and supporting one another—go for a walk, hold hands, make and share in a meal together.

**Get support.** You are not alone! For some, the loss of fertility may seem secondary to cancer, but for others it is just as devastating. At times these losses go unnoticed, which only adds to the feelings of shame and isolation. As difficult as this is to remember, there are people out there who want to help. Whether through friends, family, professional counseling or support groups, finding somewhere to talk with people who understand can help you feel less alone and build hope for the future that lies ahead.



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