

The Spiritual Crisis of Infertility

By Silvia Schneider Fox, Psy.D.

Q: I have always been able to rely on my faith to cope with difficulties. Now that I am infertile, my feelings toward God have really changed and church is no longer a comfort. How can I keep my faith going while also dealing with my anger at God?

A: My thoughts go out to you as you encounter such a powerful crisis of faith. What you are dealing with is not a minor matter. Infertility is a deeply distressing time in the life of a couple. We frequently recognize that it creates a physical, emotional, and financial setback. We are less likely to recognize, though, that infertility often also triggers a deep spiritual crisis.

Psychoanalyst Carl Jung pointed out that somewhere around the mid-to-late thirties an individual arrives at a stage of life where he or she starts to turn inward. This phase of life generates a process of inner search and growth that often culminates in a resurgence of spirituality. For many couples, however, this is also the phase of life when the reality of infertility first strikes. When the soul-searching coincides with the painful predicament of infertility, it frequently creates powerful spiritual conflicts. It is one thing to "rediscover" or "renew" one's spirituality with a baby in one's arms. It is another thing to sit at a service and choke back tears of grief or rage because one feels excluded from what is, for most people, a basic life event.

Like you, many individuals say they struggle to reconcile their spiritual lives with their infertility. After all, infertility rattles the deepest parts of our being. It makes us question the fairness of life, the predictability of the future and our control over it. It unravels our existence and our whole view of the world. When this view has been guided by a religious doctrine and a faith in a Higher Power, the result is a crisis of vast proportions.

Indeed, a recent study shows that people who are religious or who have grown up in religious homes have the hardest time with infertility. Many of them have been raised to believe that if they do the right thing, pray the right prayers, meet God in the right places; they will be rewarded with answered wishes—including the wish for a child. When the pleading for parenthood goes unmet, week after week, month after month, year after year, their entire spiritual foundation begins to shake. They may wonder if God is punishing them, if God does not think they are deserving of a child or if God is simply not listening and not caring. They feel forgotten and abandoned by their Higher Power and as a result they often become angry and resentful at it. Some stop going to their house of worship, others stop praying. Frequently, they feel guilty and ashamed of their negative feelings toward God and religion, feelings that only exacerbate the distress.

And being part of a large religious group seldom helps: Religious women often face implicit and explicit expectations -- embodied in society standards and biblical commands -- that they "be fruitful and multiply". Community members' well-intentioned but ultimately insensitive comments to couples and the extensive focus of many

communities on families with children, all contribute to feelings of loneliness and alienation.

The religious crisis generated by infertility comes in several stages: disbelief ("Why me, God?"); guilt ("I must have done something terrible"); atonement ("I'll just be a better person"); and disillusionment ("Since nothing works, I will forsake my religion"). The first step toward resolving this spiritual crisis is recognizing that your feelings are normal, legitimate and shared by many others. Allow yourself to express them as openly as possible. This can be a difficult task if you grew up believing that questioning your Higher Power and resenting it is blasphemous or if you are afraid that your anger will provoke God's ire. And yet, many spiritual leaders point out that you must let God know how angry and disappointed you are in order to make peace with God.

Some people find that searching for a deeper meaning in their infertility helps them cope with it. For some, that meaning is about giving up control, sort of a "letting go and letting God" attitude. For others, it is about discovering unexpected strengths in themselves and in their marriages. Still other people find solace in evoking the Old Testament matriarchs who struggled with infertility. Try asking yourself how has infertility changed your own deeper truths. Consider reading some of the classic books written on the problem of pain from a spiritual angle. Such books include: *When bad things happen to good people*, by Rabbi Harold Kushner (from a Jewish perspective), *A grace disguised*, by Gerald Sitter, and *Disappointment with God* by Philip Yancey (from a Christian perspective) and *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times* by Pema Chodron (from a Buddhist perspective).

Look for a supportive community of people who understand. You might try any one of the groups RESOLVE offers, where you can talk to people who struggle like you do. Or, perhaps there are those in your congregation or extended family who have gone through or are going through a similar crisis. Try talking to your religious leaders about infertility, educating them about what it means to you (RESOLVE has a letter that you can send to your clergy anonymously, if you prefer). Alternatively, consider exploring other spiritual centers. Many of them are actively seeking ways to become more inclusive of non-traditional worshipers and non-traditional problems. Some are realizing that services that are solely focused on families are causing pain for single or infertile individuals. Look around until you find a community that fits. Finally, contemplate an individual spiritual endeavor, such as planning your own spiritual retreat, creating a personal ritual of faith or talking to a professional who is sensitive to spiritual issues.

In the end, no matter what spiritual path you take, I hope your journey leads you from the dark night of the soul to the gentle light of healing. Good luck!