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Coping with Infertility During the Holidays (and Really, Everyday)

The holiday season is here, and it is often a time full of joy, cheer, and family gatherings. However, for people dealing with infertility, the holidays can be a painful reminder of their grief - of what they don't have.

I recently celebrated my 31st birthday, just before Thanksgiving. It was a difficult day, as many milestone markers can be with infertility. When my husband and I started trying to have a baby four days after my 30th birthday, I never could have imagined I'd be celebrating my 31st with an infertility diagnosis. My 31st birthday came just five days after yet another negative pregnancy test. It was a rough day because I was grieving, but also because I was reflecting. Reflecting on a year that was long, frustrating, and scary. A year full of countless and constant doctor's appointments, diagnostic procedures, surgery, infections, a precancerous finding, and enough pokes and prods to last a lifetime. When people called to wish me a happy birthday, I'm sure they could hear sadness in my voice. Of course I was sad. That day, for me, was a reminder of what wasn't.

I have learned this year that gratitude and grief are not mutually exclusive. I can be both grateful for all my blessings, and still grieve what isn't. Infertility is grief over the loss of an idea. The loss of a baby you never made. It's the loss of hope. It's the exasperated voice in the back of your head thinking, "How can we go through this another month?" Quite a few people - people who know about our struggles with fertility - asked me on my birthday one question with words to the effect of: "Can't you just find some joy in the day today?" People mean well, but unless you've been through infertility or fertility treatments, you cannot possibly understand this grief. You also may not understand that our grief is completely normal. This leads to us feeling even more alone and

judged. So, in light of my experiences on my birthday, and with the holidays now upon us, I've compiled some tips to help you get through the holidays. It's some of what has helped me deal with my grief this year - while the tips may be helpful during the holidays, they're also helpful for day-to-day life.

1. **Recognize that infertility is not your fault.** It is a medical condition. Similarly, understand that stress didn't cause your infertility, but instead, that infertility causes stress. People will ad nauseam inundate you with anecdotes of how they got pregnant when they finally relaxed or stopped keeping track of their cycle days. That's because those people were otherwise fertile and bound to get pregnant anyway. For people with infertility, that's not the case. People with infertility have an actual medical reason (that isn't stress) that is causing their troubles conceiving. If you can really internalize this notion, your holidays may be a bit better - you shouldn't have to feel guilty or that you're at fault.
2. **Choose carefully who you tell.** If you're like me and open about your infertility journey, you know people often don't know what to say. I'd prefer people say nothing and just listen as I talk, but because that rarely happens, it's important to be discerning with whom you tell and when, especially during family holiday gatherings.
3. **Set boundaries.** It can feel like everyone around you is pregnant or has a baby. Have honest conversations with your friends - tell them seeing pictures of their babies is hard for you. Explain that you don't just get sent pictures of their baby - you get sent pictures and videos of all your close friends' babies, and that can just be too much as a

whole. You love your friends, and you love their babies. But during infertility, you also have to really love and take care of yourself. Explain to your friends that seeing pictures of their babies or their holiday family photos is yet another reminder of what you don't have, but are working so hard to achieve. In setting boundaries, you're not being resentful or jealous. You're just trying to limit the emotional triggers of your grief. Also, consider a game plan for opening people's photo holiday cards as well. Perhaps you'll stick them in a bin and open them someday when you're ready, or maybe you won't open them at all.

4. **Stay off social media.** Ask yourself whether you need to know that Becky from Psychology 101 ten years ago is pregnant. Ask yourself whether seeing people's family holiday pictures or cute holiday pregnancy or birth announcements will bring you any joy this holiday season, or whether it will just compound and add to your grief.
5. **Decline invitations if you need to.** If you know a holiday gathering will be hard because of babies or pregnant women, decline politely. It's against my nature to put myself first in life in general, but with infertility, I have learned how to protect myself, and not place myself in situations that I know will be difficult to get through. Along those lines, have an escape plan if you're at a holiday party and it becomes too much for you.
6. **See a therapist.** A therapist can help you process your grief each month, and can also help you get through the holidays. Try to find one who specializes in treating people dealing with infertility or fertility treatments, and one who has been through it personally as well.
7. **Take care of yourself.** Infertility is a journey with no end in sight. When I was deployed and homesick, every day was one day closer to coming home. Infertility doesn't have an expiration date. Try to take care of yourself in the meantime, and not let infertility run your life. Do the things that made you "you" before you were dealing with infertility. It will help give you peace and normalcy.
8. **Show appreciation.** Take time to show your partner, this holiday season, but every day, how

much you appreciate him or her. My husband has been there for me preparing and administering my injections, doing all the housework while I recovered from surgery, attending doctor's appointments, carefully listening and taking notes while I tuned out anything the doctor said after he delivered bad news, and grieving with me. Our partners are hurting, too, and the holidays are a perfect time for a thoughtful note to show appreciation for them.

Hopefully these tips help you throughout the holiday season and beyond. Remember to take good care of yourself and know that infertility is a personal journey, but you are not alone in your struggle.

If you are interested in speaking with this writer directly please send emails to InfertiliTalk@gmail.com.