



LIVE WELL

with Kids

If you're dealing with infertility, it's vital you get ample support. Hear from people who've been through it plus experts and options in Singapore that may help.

By Willaine G. Tan



When the

STRUGGLE

is Very Real

Warning: This article contains real experiences of pregnancy loss. Please read with care.



“**T**hree pregnancy losses. The third one was the hardest as I needed to deliver the baby just like a natural birth. I clearly remember having to go through life for one week with my deceased baby inside of me before my body was able to deliver it naturally.

I am familiar with the grief and pain women go through when they lose their baby. The endless crying and ‘why’, the guilt and blame of how or what we could have done to avoid it – was it something we ate or was it something else that caused it?”

– *Vernessa Chuah, founder and director of child-parent physical platform Mindful Space*

“After trying for about six months, we decided to try IUI [Intrauterine Insemination] again, but this time, the procedure failed. Honestly, I really didn’t like taking hormone medication. I had side effects like bad tension headaches, and felt my body was thrown out of whack. So after that failed IUI, we decided that maybe we could give TCM [traditional Chinese medicine] a try.”

– *D., a specialist tutor for children with learning difficulties who asked not to use her full name in this story*

“I struggled with infertility – it took us a very long time to conceive both Raph and Remy, whom I call my ‘rainbow baby’.

I think one of the hardest things to hear is ‘you just need to relax and not stress, then it will just happen’, from both doctors and friends. It infuriated me beyond words.

It’s so stressful, no way around that – not a thought-tap you can just ‘shut-off.’”

– *Tiffany Okumu, owner and creator of RAPH&REMY baby essentials brand*

“I, along with a lot of men out there, was intimidated by subjects related to pregnancy loss. These sorts of topics have generally not been spoken about freely and in some circles are even taboo – leading most women to feel like this is only happening to them and blaming themselves, as if they’re the problem and something is wrong with them.

This, combined with the impact of social media and marketing – where everything is filtered and airbrushed, and we only show our perfect self, hiding all weaknesses out of sight – has only further compounded the problem.”

– *Eric Okumu, co-founder of RAPH&REMY; husband of Tiffany Okumu*

These words are from people who have gone through the journey of infertility while living in Singapore. Of course, no two couples’ paths are the same. But it is obvious from the experiences shared here, the situation can be frustrating, stressful and emotionally and physically traumatic – to say nothing of financially challenging! And these individuals are hardly alone. “Infertility affects an estimated 15 percent of couples globally, amounting to 48.5 million couples,” found U.S. researchers who specialise in reproductive medicine in 2015.

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Who We Consulted...



Dr. Kelly Loi
Medical Director,
Mount Elizabeth
Hospital Fertility
Centre

Has 20-plus years of obstetrics and gynaecology experience; specialises in In-vitro Fertilisation (IVF) treatment (healthfertility.com.sg)



Dr. Stefanie Liao
TCM Physician,
Thomson Chinese
Medicine and at-home treatments

Since 2015, has specialised in TCM infertility treatment and gynaecology, pain management, ophthalmology and paediatric massage (thomsonctm.sg; 9818 8255)



Angelia Ng
Owner, Babies Bliss

Has 20 years of experience; specialises in alternative fertility therapy, such as Certified Fertility Massage Specialist and Fertility Strengthening (FSM) Massage. (babiesbliss.com.sg)



Tanja Faessler
Founder and Owner,
counsellingconnectz
Certified Fertility

Coach and Physiological Counsellor with more than 20 years of professional experience (counsellingconnectz.com)



Dr. Sebastian Liew
Founder,
Leaf to Life

The first Asian-Western medical herbalist in SG; has more than 20 years of experience (leaftolife.com.sg)

What is Infertility?

First, let's understand exactly what we're talking about.

According to the World Health Organization, infertility is "a disease of the reproductive system defined by the failure to achieve a clinical pregnancy after 12 months or more of regular unprotected sexual intercourse." These are some contributing factors:

- **Age** "Women are born with a fixed number of eggs," explains IVF specialist Dr. Kelly Loi. "With increasing age, there is a fall in the number of functioning eggs left in the ovaries." Though fertility begins to drop in the late 20s or early 30s, and falls more rapidly after the age of 35, the beginning of the decline and rate at which it progresses can vary widely, according to ReproductiveFacts.org.
- **Diet and lifestyle** It's no secret: Having a healthy diet and leading an active lifestyle can improve your overall quality of life. On the flipside, some lifestyle factors can contribute to infertility, including stress, a poor diet, heavy alcohol use, smoking, substance abuse, radiation treatment and chronic illnesses such as diabetes and raised blood pressure. (Go to

tinyurl.com/DIYFertilityTips for some healthy habits and alternative options that may help to boost fertility.)

- **Low sperm count** The most common causes of male infertility are *oligospermia* (low sperm count), *azoospermia* (no sperm count) and erectile dysfunction. It makes sense, since the greater the number of healthy sperm, the better your chances of getting pregnant.

- **Irregular cycle and other factors** Fertility Massage Specialist Angelia Ng lists out some of these: irregular menstrual cycle, tubal factor infertility (damaged or blocked fallopian tubes), endometriosis (growth of endometrial tissues beyond or outside of the uterus), endometrial polyps and uterine fibroids (often benign growths in the uterus).

- **An imbalance of qi** In traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) theory, there are 12 main meridians in the body where *qi*, or energy, constantly flows through. Any imbalances in *qi* (pronounced "chee") can result in discomfort or illness *and* contribute to infertility, explains TCM physician Dr. Stefanie Liao.



Treatments Available Here

Discuss these options with your doctor to see if any may be suited for you and your partner.

Laparoscopic Surgery + Hormone Treatment

Recommended for: women with endometriosis. **Average cost of treatment:** Price varies depending on each individual, per Mount Elizabeth Hospital Fertility Centre (or Mount E).

IUI (Intrauterine Insemination)

Recommended for: couples where the fallopian tubes are patent, and there are at least 1 million motile sperm. **Average cost of treatment:** One cycle ranges from \$2,000 to \$3,000 at Mount E.

Fertility Drug Treatment or IVF (In-vitro Fertilization)

Recommended for: women with Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS). If a male's sperm count and quality are poor, or if the female has blocked fallopian tubes, the couple may be advised to move directly to IVF. **Average cost of treatment:** One IVF cycle ranges from \$20,000 to \$25,000 at Mount E.

Embryo Freezing

Recommended for: couples who wish to preserve their future chances for fertility. **Average cost of treatment:** generally the cost of embryo freezing, storage and subsequent transfer is around \$4,000 to \$5,000 at Mount E.

Acupuncture and Other TCM Treatments

Recommended for: women trying to get pregnant, in order to prep the body for conception. **Average cost of treatment:** first consultation, \$60; subsequent consultations, \$50; acupuncture, \$85 per session; herbal medicine, \$12 a day at Thomson Chinese Medicine. House calls may be more expensive, but a visit to Dr. Liao's home office is less so.

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Body vs. Mind

Even if a woman has given birth to healthy children before – or maybe *especially* if she has, in the case of D., who shared how she tried unsuccessfully for months to get pregnant again – she can experience difficulty in conceiving a second or third time after that.

Another such woman is Michelle Seng, who says her body “took a beating” from having her first baby. “After the birth of my boy, I found myself falling sick easily due to the stress of holding a full-time job and constantly waking up in the middle of the night for feeding,” recalls Michelle, who shares that she is now Mummy to a “very active” 3-year-old boy and a “sweet” 16-month-old daughter. “I wanted my body to get back to a healthy balance to prepare for my second pregnancy.”

Michelle and D., who is also now a mum to two little ones, eventually sought out TCM help from Dr. Liau to prime their bodies for pregnancy again through acupuncture and herbal medicines. Meanwhile, Western treatments made the difference for Tiffany, and Vernessa conceived naturally. (Flip back to page 46 to read about available options in SG.) But none of these methods really minimise the emotional toll.

For couple Tiffany and Eric – who are now parents to sons Raphael, 3, and Remy, 1 – one of the most upsetting aspects of struggling with infertility was the sheer uncertainty. Tiffany says there was a time that she was convinced she and Eric would *never* be able to conceive one, yet alone two, children. “It was a mental hell,” she remembers. “I was angry at my body because I believed the lies my mind was telling me.”

Vernessa also notes social

pressure can make people feel worse. In many Chinese households, she explains, the female is often expected to “pass on” the family name of her spouse through means of childbirth. Plus, she adds, confiding in friends or family may prove futile if they don’t know what pregnancy loss is truly like.

“I personally do not like to call it a ‘miscarriage’ because it carries an intentional tone by the mother to miscarry it when it was beyond my control,” says Vernessa, who now has a toddler daughter, Elvanna, 2.

Finding Support

Despite riding this rollercoaster of emotions, some women and men are reluctant to turn to mental wellness professionals. “The public often assumes the people who seek out these facilities are ‘sick’, but these

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FAMILY WELLNESS

women are not sick, they want to heal,” says Vernessa, who adds, “Knowing who to go to for support is equally as important as knowing that support is available.”

Having seen this gap and others in SG regarding parenting support, she launched parent-child platform Mindful Space in February 2019. With her team of professionals, Vernessa has created several shared communities – Mother’s Circle, Women’s Circle and the Pregnancy Loss Circle – to empower women and couples experiencing fertility challenges. (See more support groups, at right.)

Tanja Faessler, who is the founder of counsellingconnectz, concurs that finding support is crucial, particularly for couples. “They are afraid of being judged, afraid of friends giving them well-meant advice, afraid of admitting that something is ‘wrong’ with them – even if it’s not!” says Tanja, whose group of certified practitioners specialises in fertility counselling, couple counselling and trauma and grief therapy. “As a consequence, these couples start isolating themselves, withdrawing from parties or dinners with friends and potentially become ‘lonely’ on their journey.”

As a fertility counsellor, she explains, “It’s important for me to help couples navigate their journey, to let them know

that what they feel is ‘normal’ and that they are not alone.” In addition to these services, counsellingconnectz has an IVF & Donor Programme, which provides couples with the complementary support needed while they undergo such treatments.

Likewise, self-care is key during this journey. Angelia Ng of Babies Bliss recommends fertility massages to help create an environment conducive for conception, for example. “This is also ideal for stress relief, pain reduction, blood circulation and maintaining hormonal balance,” claims Angelia. (The cost of these sessions? \$5,280 for a programme of 24.)

Likewise, Leaf to Life’s

Dr. Sebastian Liew suggests that medical herbs can be beneficial for balancing the hormonal profile of the couple and modulate factors that may contribute to infertility, such as nutrient deficiency, stress profile, irregular cycles (for women), etc. “The objective is to shift the ecology of the body towards a healthy state that is conducive for fertility,” he explains. (Dr. Liew’s consultation fees range from \$30 to \$200, not including medication and treatment.)

For all of these practitioners – and the people they help – having a healthy baby can go a long way towards healing the pain involved in conceiving. “Whenever my patients get pregnant, I am filled with excitement, as I understand how important this is to them,” says TCM physician Dr. Liau. “It powers my life and I feel that I am doing the most meaningful job in the world.”

And what about those who are still struggling? Angelia encourages, “For couples who are facing challenges trying to conceive, hang in there. Always believe there will be more solutions than problems.”

Support Groups in SG

In-Person

- **Women’s Mental Wellness Service** at KK Women & Children’s Hospital (6293 4044, tinyurl.com/KKHWMWS)
- **Women’s Emotional Health Service** at National University Hospital (6772 2037, tinyurl.com/WEHSNUH)
- **Mother’s Circle, Women’s Circle and the Pregnancy Loss Circle** (Mindful Space, 9783 7313, mindfulspace.com.sg)

Online or Over the Phone

- **Perinatal Depression Support Group** from KK Women & Children’s Hospital (6394 2205)
- **Miscarriage, Stillbirth and Child Loss Facebook Support Group** (tinyurl.com/PregnancyLossFBSupportGroup)
- **Art Of Life Online Resource** (artoflife22.com)
- **PALS: Pregnancy After Loss Support** (pregnancyafterlossupport.org)
- **Child Bereavement Support Singapore** (cbss.sg)

