

An Excerpt from

“Making Babies The Hard Way”

by Caroline Gallup

Things not to say to an infertile couple

It was good to speak with someone who was sensitive and understanding. The most difficult part of this process of trying to conceive has been, and continues to be, dealing with insensitive comments and enquiries. Even when trying to support me by asking how I am, people tend to impose something of their own life story upon mine. I can spot the moment when they stop listening, searching their memory banks for something they see as comparable in their own life story. A triumphant expression crosses their face just before they jump in and offer some piece of advice, making them feel better instead of me.

I've made a note of some of the more unhelpful things people have said to us over the past months, and have analysed why they are, at worst, hurtful and, at best, well-intentioned but insensitive.

1. 'A friend of mine has had IVF treatment, so I do understand.'

If you've said this, then I'm afraid that you probably don't understand. You have only understood as much as your friend has wanted you to know of her experience. The desire to have children is complex and so deeply ingrained in our biology that no one fully understands it until they meet a barrier to that desire. Moreover, there is an extra layer when speaking to a couple going through donor insemination, a layer of grief and anger that not only do they have to go through all of this clinical procedure, but that in the end the child they conceive will not be genetically connected to their loved one.

2. 'A friend of mine has been trying for years, and she has a baby now, so it's all been worth it.'

Lucky friend. This doesn't help, and in fact merely serves to remind the unsuccessful couple of just how much of a failure they are. This also discourages the free choice to stop treatment, and makes us feel that we're under pressure to keep going and have 'just one more try'.

3. 'A friend of mine had IVF; as soon as she stopped she got pregnant.'

This is an utterly pointless and thoughtless thing to say, especially if you have bothered to find out whether they are using donor gametes. If no sperm are present, no amount of making love will result in a pregnancy. Furthermore, don't assume that it's the woman who has the problem. Male factor issues are as common as female factors, and in some countries male factor problems are rising more rapidly. We are very tired of hearing about this 'friend' everyone seems to know who got pregnant naturally following the cessation of treatment, and we're beginning to wonder if everyone knows the same woman!

4. 'You just need to relax. It'll probably happen naturally.'

You try relaxing when you are having to remember to take hormone tablets or have daily injections, visit a clinic every other day, keep count of the days of your cycle, pee on sticks for half the month, and watch out for dark-blue lines whilst you are still half asleep first thing in the morning! If I see my

hormone surge, I have to drop everything the next day to have the insemination. Once you are ‘going through’ a cycle, the priority for that month has to be the treatment, but you cannot predict which days you will need the appointments, or indeed whether you will be able to have the treatment (unless you are having IVF, which has its own drawbacks), so you may well have cleared the month of appointments for nothing. This comment totally ignores the daily struggle of a cycle of fertility treatment. From Bruce’s perspective, it is even worse. He deals with it by being very forthright in his response: ‘Well, it’s not going to happen naturally, because I’m infertile. So if we don’t use donor sperm, perhaps you’re suggesting that Caroline has an affair?’

5. ‘Have you thought about adoption?’

You mean you can *adopt*? I’d never thought of that. Gee, thanks for your insight.

Adoption and fertility treatment require two different mindsets. Fertility treatment is a medical procedure leading to a pregnancy with a baby genetically connected to one or both of the parents. Adoption is the willingness to take on and raise someone else’s child without having experienced a pregnancy. Examine your own reasons for having children, or adopting. Which would you prefer? It is important to allow a couple to say that they do not want to adopt without judging them or commenting on the children in the world who need homes – they already probably experience a measure of guilt about not feeling this way inclined. Adoption, by its nature, means that there are always other parents, council departments and agencies involved. Some couples just do not want to get involved in having children in this way, particularly since it is another lengthy and intrusive process.

7. ‘You should join a mothers’ group.’

I didn’t understand this one at the time – and still don’t. How would this help exactly? Bearing in mind the grief and sense of bereavement I’ve experienced, it feels cruel, like telling me to join a speed-dating club very shortly after being widowed.

8. ‘I’ll give you my kids for a day: you’ll soon change your mind.’

We don’t want *your* kids; we want our own. By saying this you are just rubbing salt into the wound. You are emphasizing your own proven fertility,

while indicating that you are not grateful for this ability. Furthermore, this is usually said in front of the children, which can't do their self-esteem much good. This attempt at a light-hearted comment is never funny.

9. 'Have you tried...[assorted lists of vitamins/food supplements]?'

Tricky one this one, because it does come from a caring place, and from an appreciation of me wanting to achieve a pregnancy, and complementary therapies have shown good results in improving the success rates of pregnancy. But we can't afford them and I don't want to feel that I'm not doing something I should be. I have enough pressure already, both financial and social. Better perhaps to ask, 'I expect you've investigated all the foody things/complementary therapies available?' [Wait for response] 'Would you like me to let you know if I see anything interesting?' Or, 'I expect you've tried X Y Z? Any good?'

10. 'Gosh! I got pregnant without even wanting to!'

Mmm, not sure I need to explain why this is unhelpful.

11. 'Having children is not the "be all and end all" – it's bloody hard work you know.'

As if I didn't know this already. At our age, friends and relatives surround us with children. We shouldn't be judged for wanting what everyone else seems to have, and desiring what society seems to tell us is the ultimate achievement, and the source of true happiness. The people who say this normally already have kids of their own, so it just sounds patronizing. By opting for fertility treatment, we have been through a mandatory counselling programme and have considered the impact raising children will have on our lives, possibly more than a couple who can conceive naturally.

12. 'Isn't it funny how people who really want children can't have them, and others pop 'em out like shelling peas?'

This is not 'funny' at all – just a reminder of how unfair life can seem at times. You can change this to a helpful comment by emphasizing the apparent injustice and by appreciating our struggle by showing that you have noticed the irony of us being surrounded by people who are able to get pregnant with relative ease – including those who do so unexpectedly.

13. ‘Maybe it’s not meant to be.’

This has to be one of the most overused, supposedly compensatory phrases around. It is applied to anything that you want, have strived for, but are not achieving. To a person in pain, this is too big a leap to make. If we must, we will come to terms with our situation in time and perhaps even be happy being childless, but that is not for you to say. It is for us to decide.

14. ‘The important thing is to keep focused on the aim of what you’re doing.’

This is helpful in the early days, but as time and failed attempts pass, it is less helpful as it is inconceivable (‘scuse the pun) that the couple are not focused on the aim of what they are doing – it is the only focus that is possible.

15. ‘So has it worked yet?’

If we’re not saying anything, it probably hasn’t worked. A more general, gentle enquiry is likely to be more helpful.

16. ‘I thought I might have received a phone call from you this year with good news.’ [Said to us one year after our marriage by someone who knew we were having fertility treatment.]

Don’t you think we’d be shouting it from the rooftops if a baby were on the way? Another friend said, ‘We take it that no news is bad news,’ which was much more helpful.

17. ‘Never give up, Caroline.’

Unfortunately, whilst intended to be encouraging, this leaves me feeling as if I should struggle on trying and trying instead of being given the freedom to stop without fear of judgement. It increases the already huge pressure of the only successful outcome being one of achieving conception and pregnancy, rather than being free to come up with another solution – perhaps childlessness. Additionally, it implies that the person giving this advice has no idea about the financial, emotional and physical hardships imposed by fertility treatment. Why should the couple continue to put themselves through this?

I realize that before going through this experience, I too have been guilty of offering inappropriate advice, or of not listening properly. Now that I know how it feels to be on the receiving end, I will try to listen more carefully to

others in the future. But for now, I just want to pull away from people who don't really understand.

I do have friends who have said good things as well. Here are the things that have helped.

1. 'I can't imagine how difficult this must be.'

This is the best. It doesn't insult, or assume that you know how we feel, whilst showing that you care because you have given our situation some thought. It also allows us not to talk about it if we don't want to. A simple response can be, 'Thank you. It is awful/not so bad...'

2. 'How are you doing with the "baby stuff"/"baby project"? Or would you rather not talk about it?'

If you are genuinely prepared for the couple not to want to discuss the current state of play, then this is also a very supportive question, as it lets them know that you are thinking of them and have not forgotten the ongoing situation, but want to take your cue from them. You are there if they need you, but won't pry.

3. 'How long have you been trying?'

Again, this avoids insulting or undermining the perhaps already exhaustive efforts of the couple. I doubt whether someone who may have been trying for years and years has left many stones unturned. Let them talk. You may learn something!

4. 'Whatever the outcome, or whatever your decision, you have each other, and a loving relationship, and that's something special in itself. We know that you will be happy together, with or without children.'

This, from our parents, removed one of the major longings of this experience – to give them grandchildren. We no longer felt as though we were letting them down, or that they were disappointed in any way, and it really helped.

5. 'Try to make each decision 100 per cent for yourself, and 100 per cent for each other.'

This became the single most important and helpful method of reaching decisions. We were able to apply it to everything. It is easy in this process to

feel that you should or ought to take particular action based on what you feel is expected of you, or is the 'right' thing to do, or what your partner really wants. *Don't do it if you are not happy to.* Check with yourself and with each other at every stage of the process. If it's the right decision, then you'll both be happy and resentment will not build up, nor will blame be apportioned unfairly.

6. 'Do what you can, while you can. That way, when you decide to stop, you will know that you did as much as you could, and you will have no regrets.'

This has become so much a part of our decision-making process that I nearly forgot that once upon a time it was the advice of a friend. It is wonderful advice. It is not possible to know the future or predict outcomes, but if you are certain that you have done as much as you are able, or prepared, to do, then you are less likely to have regrets as time goes on – sadness of course (if things don't work out), but no regrets.

7. 'I have complete faith in you.'

This was something said to me, by the counsellor at the clinic, at a point when I had completely lost faith in myself. The strength of a statement like this is immense. It made me dare to continue to believe in my own ability to make the right decisions and to see that I would, one day, feel strong again.

The bottom line is this: we would prefer people to ask us questions. Neither Bruce nor I mind talking about our experiences. We're trying to be open and honest; if we weren't, we'd have taken the decision to keep this a secret in the first place. Please engage brain before speaking and think about what you are going to say. Don't assume that you know how we feel.

If the basis for what you are about to say is 'I know what you're going through', then you're probably going to say the wrong thing. However, if the basis is 'You know your situation best' or 'No doubt you have thought about this more than I can begin to imagine', then your comment will probably be helpful and supportive.

Now, if only I can get pregnant...