

HOW TO SUPPORT EMPLOYEES WITH INFERTILITY: A GUIDE FOR HR & PEOPLE LEADERS

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Since infertility was officially recognized as a disease by both the World Health Organization and the American Medical Association, significant strides have been made to bring increased awareness to this condition that affects one in eight women¹. Companies have also made improvements in recognizing infertility as a disease that should be covered under their benefits plan. According to a recent study by Willis Towers Watson, 55% of employers offer some level of fertility coverage, with that percentage increasing to 66% by 2019². Leading employers recognize that infertility should be covered like any other disease, and that providing a fertility benefit contributes to employee retention, talent attraction, and sends a strong message about the company's workplace culture.

As fertility coverage by employers continues to progress, the emotional support for individuals with this disease is still often deficient. This is even more unfortunate due to the significant toll infertility can have on the emotional wellbeing of those who suffer from it. Stress, anxiety, and depression are all common psychological side effects of infertility. These effects, coupled with the physical strain that accompanies standard fertility treatment, can have a substantial impact on an employee's productivity, energy, and overall mental health. Unfortunately, resources are slim for Human Resources professionals, supervisors and people leaders in understanding how infertility may affect their employees.

We created this guide to help HR and people leaders within an organization better understand how infertility affects their workforce, and how they can effectively support employees who may be impacted.

The Emotional Toll of Infertility

An employee dealing with infertility, either themselves or their partner, will endure some level of impact to their

emotional health and well-being. The three most common emotions that affect those impacted by infertility are:

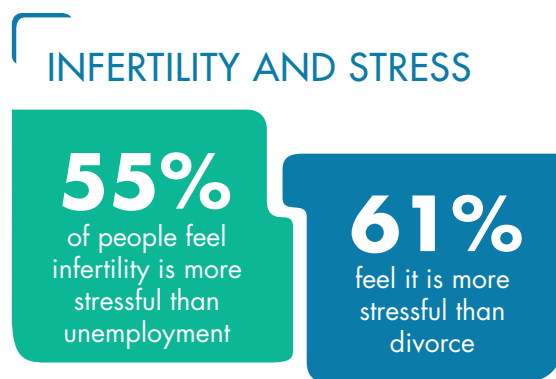
Stress – While a common emotion to some degree for most employees, stress resulting from infertility can be even more profound. According to a study done by Reproductive Medical Associates of New Jersey, 55%

of those surveyed said that infertility was more stressful than unemployment, and 61% said that it was more stressful than divorce³. It's easy to see why. Since stress increases whenever predictability decreases in our life, the worrying, watching and waiting that occurs during fertility treatment means that stress is inevitable. Furthermore, the stress is often pro-

longed since couples may have already spent a year or longer trying to conceive on their own. Once they decide to proceed with fertility treatment, the process may continue for months, even years. Additionally, if the employee is paying for fertility treatments out-of-pocket due to a lack of coverage from their employer, the financial stress adds another layer of strain to an already challenging situation.

Anxiety – Along with stress, anxiety is a common reaction felt by patients and their partners undergoing fertility treatment. *Will I have a successful egg retrieval? How many eggs will be retrieved? Are the embryos viable? What will the pregnancy test show?* Each question at each stage can mean more and more anxiety and worry for each day that passes. In addition, increased anxiety can be a typical side effect of some fertility medications.

Depression/mood swings – As you can imagine, the inability to have a child for someone who desperately wants to build their family can cause depression equal to that of other disorders and diseases. One study of those suffering from infertility showed that some felt as depressed as those diagnosed with cancer, hypertension, or those recovering from a heart attack⁴. Like anxiety, fertility



medications may also have an impact on the mood of the patient, which in turn can affect their partner as well.

Infertility's Effect on Employee Productivity

Due to the highly emotional nature of infertility and the associated treatments, it's natural that certain areas of an employee's work performance may be impacted. While

not every individual will have their work affected by their infertility, it's important to understand the potential challenges that may arise in these areas:

Energy – Fertility treatments are physically and mentally exhausting for both the person undergoing treatment and their supporting partner. This fatigue is especially evident with IVF, where a full treatment cycle can take nearly two months, and requires frequent visits to the fertility clinic,

Fertility Treatment: A Brief Overview

Understanding how infertility may affect your employees in the workplace starts with a general understanding of what your employee is going through before, during and after their treatment. Individuals and their partners who decide to proceed with fertility treatment have often been trying to conceive naturally for a year or longer, which means that they are likely already experiencing stress and anxiety due to the lack of a successful pregnancy to date. The two most common types of fertility treatment are Intrauterine Insemination (IUI) and In Vitro Fertilization (IVF).



Intrauterine Insemination

IUI, also known as Artificial Insemination, is a treatment where the sperm is inserted into the uterus to facilitate conception. The timing of treatment is tied to the woman's ovulation cycle. Once initial consultation and diagnostic tests are complete, oral fertility medication is taken for five days to induce ovulation. The number of required visits to the clinic will depend on the individual and the type of fertility medication used, and varies from 2 to 6 visits for one treatment cycle. Once a positive ovulation has been confirmed, the patient returns to the office for insemination, with their partner (or the donor) visiting the clinic for the required sperm retrieval. Roughly two weeks later, the patient returns to the office for a blood pregnancy test. Costs for a single IUI treatment are approximately \$2,000, with medications costing an additional \$3,000⁵, and an average pregnancy success rate between 5% and 15%⁶.

In Vitro Fertilization

IVF is a lengthy and complex process involving several stages: egg stimulation, egg retrieval, fertilization, embryo transfer, and pregnancy testing/monitoring. The average IVF treatment cycle takes 6 to 8 weeks, and includes a substantial number of oral and injectable medications. Multiple injectable medications must be self-administered at home; 20 or more injections over the course of a single IVF treatment is not uncommon. During this time, frequent visits to the fertility clinic are required, often first thing in the morning. During any stage of the process, the treatment may end due to a lack of successful progress. Should all stages be successful, a pregnancy test is conducted 9 to 12 days after embryo transfer. Costs for a single IVF treatment are approximately \$17,000, plus an additional \$8,000 for medications⁵, with a success rate of approximately 50%⁵.

very often first thing in the morning. This treatment regimen will naturally sap an individual's energy level and drive.

Concentration/focus – An individual or couple undergoing fertility treatment is often in a constant state of anxiety, waiting on the status of their latest test from their doctor and worrying that, at any moment, their treatment may not proceed due to lack of progress. It is not surprising that the employee may be preoccupied. As much as individuals try to compartmentalize and not allow it to distract from their work, the potential effect on their concentration, at least temporarily, should be acknowledged.

Team engagement – While not a performance issue, an employee's ability to participate and engage in team events, whether they be during the workday, after working hours, or at an offsite location, may be limited due to several factors: required clinic visits during treatment, the need to stay in close proximity to home during treatment, and the individual's overall energy level.

It's important to emphasize that the effect on employee productivity is not only limited to the person undergoing fertility treatment. In fact, a partner's feelings of helplessness, concern, and fear of losing their own dreams of having a child can mean both partners are equally affected and may experience the same workplace challenges.

What Human Resources and People Leaders Can Do to Help

What can you, as a people leader or Human Resources professional, do to help and support your employees and

team members as they undergo a struggle with infertility? The following recommendations may help you and your organization:

Understand the stigma – While infertility itself is very common, discussing infertility is not. It is common for an employee dealing with infertility to not share it openly with either coworkers or their supervisor because they fear for their job security, don't want unsolicited advice or sympathy, or feel there is a stigma associated with it. This lack of open dialogue is not limited to the workplace; a

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recent study from Celmatix showed that 39% of women don't talk to their partners about their fertility, and 75% of women who are interested in fertility treatments or have undergone fertility treatments have not even spoken to their friends about it⁷. As a result, there's a chance that if your employee is suffering from infertility, they may be suffering alone. Here are ways to approach employees about infertility:

- **Vocalize your awareness** - At a team meeting, mention you are aware of medical conditions that require special flexibility or accommodation on the part of employers. Without singling out infertility, invite employees to discuss their needs with you privately.
- **Organize a support group** - Patients going through fertility treatment generally agree that only others going through the same journey *really understand*. Privately offer to organize a group for discussion and support. The group can be open to all employees, anyone with a medical challenge, anyone going through a loss, or just for infertility. Organizing the group restores a sense of control. The group can help fight feelings of isolation and restore perspective, even for those who choose to not identify their specific challenge.

Provide outbound education/support – Because the stigma of infertility often prevents people from disclosing their illness, it's important for companies to proactively offer educational resources, support, and communication to their workforce. As part of this communications strategy, be sure to provide the option to access information and resources in a private, anonymous manner.

Some suggestions for outbound education and support:

- **Employee communications** during certain times of the year (National Infertility Awareness Week, Women's Health Week, Pride Month)
- **Awareness campaigns** on company intranet/benefit sites
- **Infertility support groups**

Offer flexibility – Although employees may not share their infertility diagnosis directly, they may share their need to have a more flexible schedule or temporary arrangements due to treatment. Here are ways you can help your employees:

- **Allow scheduling changes** – Enable employees to adjust their hours temporarily due to the requirements of a treatment cycle and the frequent, required visits to the fertility clinic
- **Adjust team projects** - Depending on the situation, you may consider adjusting projects to other team members to accommodate their needs

Communicate company resources – If you have an employee that is struggling emotionally with infertility, it's important to be aware of existing company resources to assist them with their condition and direct them appropriately. Resources your company may already have:

- **Employee assistance programs** with counseling services
- **Mental health resources**
- **Support resources or patient advocates** from your fertility benefit provider (if your company provides a fertility benefit)

Fertility Benefit Provider Support

If your company provides fertility coverage, your benefit provider should be your partner in providing additional support to your employees. As the fertility expert, the benefit provider should not only be well equipped to assist you in communications to your employees, but also provide a variety of educational resources to engage your employees.

The reality is that the emotional component of infertility can be as challenging as the physical one, and the stress, anxiety, and depression that can accompany fertility treatment may affect an individual's productivity, engagement, and well-being. HR professionals and people leaders have the opportunity to make a significant difference in an employee's fertility journey.

Over the years, many patients have shared that they will never forget the kindness and flexibility of their employers while they pursued treatment, the emotional support they received from their supervisors, the difference their company's coverage made in their treatment options, and the much-needed distraction from their treatment and sense of accomplishment their job provided during this time. Understanding how infertility impacts your workforce and offering your employees both empathy and flexibility as they pursue their family-building goals will mean they, too, will always remember and appreciate your support.

Progyny provides its clients and their employees the following resources:

- **Unlimited access to Patient Care Advocate fertility experts**
- **Fertility education**
- **Seminars with fertility experts**
- **Digital emotional support tools**
- **Fertility benefit educational materials**

About Progyny

Progyny is a leading fertility benefits management company that combines clinical and emotional guidance, science, technology and data to provide comprehensive value-based fertility solutions for self-insured employers. Progyny's benefit plans are designed to improve outcomes, shorten time to pregnancy and reduce total fertility-related costs.

Progyny believes that emotional support during a member's fertility journey is as important as their treatment. We provide a full suite of emotional support resources

as a standard part of our benefits solution. From unlimited access to Patient Care Advocates, to ongoing educational opportunities, a member portal, and a custom digital emotional support program, Progyny provides a wealth of tools to support our members throughout their family building journey.

To learn more about how we improve the fertility outcomes and reduce healthcare costs for our clients, and help build families for our members and provide emotional support during their fertility journey, contact us at info@progyny.com.



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Georgia is the author of 12 acclaimed books, including The Female Stress Survival Guide, The Male Stress Survival Guide, and Stress Relief for Disasters Great and Small, and is a prolific writer of research articles about women, stress, and reproductive medicine. She has been honored by the AIA, AFA, Resolve, and City of Hope. She has also served as a health reporter/host for CNBC, WNBC, and the Fox News Channel, and has been featured as a guest expert on 20/20, The Today Show, Good Morning America, CBS Evening News, The Oprah Winfrey Show, and CNN.

Lissa Kline, LCSW, Director of Member Services at Progyny, oversees the Patient Care Advocates. She worked at Columbia University Medical Center for several years in the division of Reproductive Endocrinology and Infertility. Involved in Patient Services and the Donor Egg Program, she loved working with patients while they underwent fertility treatment. Lissa graduated with a Master of Science in Social Work from Columbia University.



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¹ CDC: National Center for Health Statistics: Infertility: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/infertility.htm>

² Willis Towers Watson 2017 Maternity, Family and Fertility Survey: <https://www.willistowerswatson.com/en/insights/2018/01/infographic-growing-number-of-employers-are-offering-fertility-benefits-to-support-retain-talent>

³ Infertility In America, 2015: http://www.rmanj.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/RMANJ_InfertilityInAmericaSurveyReport_04152015.pdf

⁴ The Psychological Impact of Infertility and Its Treatment: https://www.health.harvard.edu/newsletter_article/The-psychological-impact-of-infertility-and-its-treatment

⁵ "The State of the "F Word": Women and Fertility Taboos": <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a283aafc027d802356e2c35/1/5a4e3f450852294d69f4862a/1515077445440/Conversation+Survey+%281%29.pdf>

