

Psychosocial Effects of Infertility

And What Counselors and Others Can Do About It

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Facts about infertility:

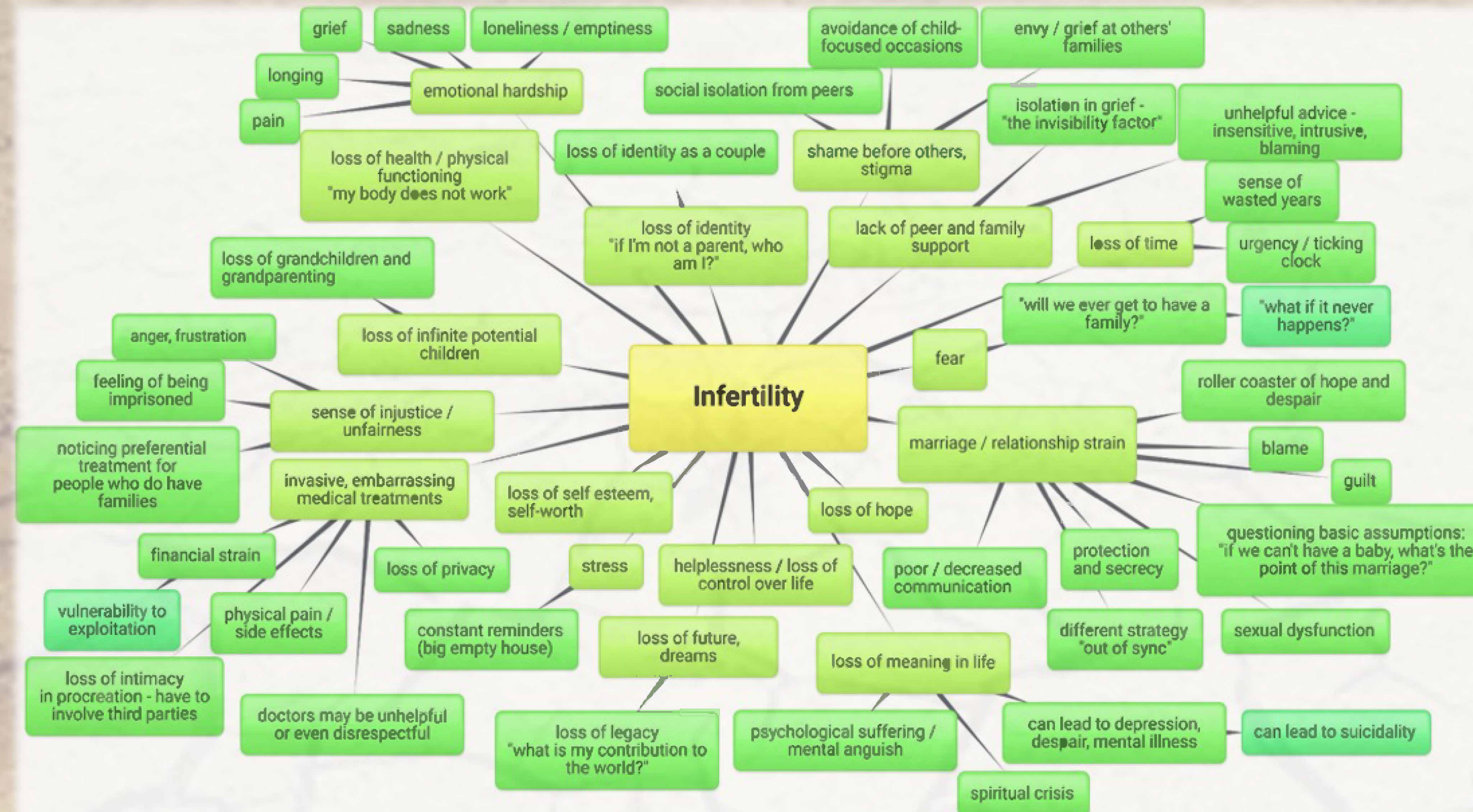
- Defined as the inability to conceive for 1 year, 6 mo. if the woman is 35 or older
- Affects 15% - 20% of US couples
- Could be male factor, female factor, both, or idiopathic

Psychosocial effects of infertility:

- Infertility is a major life crisis affecting the whole person, emotionally, physically, spiritually, psychologically, relationally, financially, and socially
- Main themes from the literature:
 - Intense emotional pain and longing, grief
 - Alternating hope and despair
 - Loss of potential children, grandchildren, family life, and future generations
 - Relationship problems
 - Financial problems
 - Social isolation / invisibility
 - Anxiety and depression
 - Helplessness and hopelessness
 - Crisis of meaning
 - Crisis of identity

Evidence-based practices found in the clinical literature:

- Meaning-based coping mechanisms
- Emotion Focused Couples Therapy
- Effective dyadic communication
- Family systems approach



Counseling clients facing infertility:

- Create a safe, structured environment for exploring experiences and let the couple tell their story
- Grow your own knowledge of and comfort with addressing infertility
- Focus on coping and management rather than resolution or closure
- Help the couple generate shared meaning around their life experiences and use one another as a coping strategy
- Validate emotions and facilitate each partner validating the other's emotions
- Encourage both clients to express that which they had kept silent or secret
- Increase communication skills within the couple by assisting them in listen empathically to each other
- Leverage spiritual and faith-based strengths, if applicable
- Use metaphors and create rituals to express their grief
- Help the couple get "back in sync" with one another in terms of expressing the experience of infertility, as well as their wishes, fears, values, and how to proceed
- Evaluate for co-occurring mental illnesses such as Generalized Anxiety Disorder or Major Depressive Disorder
- Connect the client with available resources

Culturally sensitive strategies for mitigating negative effects of infertility:

- Consider counseling individually and as a couple
- Create a unique, tailored treatment plan
- Consider each client's unique factors:
 - Gender
 - Trauma
 - Culture
 - Spiritual and religious background
 - Attachment style and history

Possible challenges when counseling clients with infertility:

- Ethical dilemmas: Protecting client confidentiality in couples counseling
- Professional dilemmas: Lack of knowledge and/or framework for clinical practice
- Personal dilemmas: lack of comfort

Resources available for people facing infertility:

National websites:

- <https://www.cdc.gov>
- <https://www.marchofdimes.org>
- <https://www.womenshealth.gov>

Community resources:

- local support groups
- local psychoeducational groups
- local faith-based resources