

Showing Support - Learning from Job's comforters.

In the biblical story of Job we encounter the three friends who came to sympathise with and comfort Job in his predicament (Job Chapter 3 verses 11-13). His scenario and the friends' approach can be useful in exploring how to support others.

Firstly, there is something to learn from where they got it right.

They heard and saw, wept, tore their clothes (perhaps not so appropriate today!), and sat down for a whole seven days in silence.

This suggests the starting points for supporters should be to:

- Go to rather than turn away from the person facing the pain of infertility.
- Acknowledge pain and as far as is appropriate enter into it.
- Sit alongside in silence for as long as it takes.
- Listen as they pour out their hearts if they choose to speak. The supporter may be on the receiving end of strong expressions of emotion in terms of tears, anger and questioning.
- Be prepared to be in for the long haul, in both silence and listening.
- Refrain from looking to provide solutions to the problems and trying to make things better.

There are of course differences to Job's situation.

- Infertility is not so obviously public as Job's scenario. It has potential to be a private hell, of which a person's daily and outward demeanour reveals little. The personal nature and intensity of emotions surrounding infertility are such that many people find it hard to admit to and then talk about their situation, and may publicly keep it well hidden. Therefore the supporter might not notice the situation until it is revealed to them by an individual or couple themselves. People facing infertility may only speak to someone about it in the first place because they sense they can trust that person. Very often the people to be approached by an individual or couple are those known to have had personal experience of infertility. The person may, therefore, come to the supporter rather than the other way round.

Secondly, we can learn something about how their getting it right in Job's situation might actually have been wrong in the specific situation of infertility!

Job's friends noticed his situation and as was appropriate approached him in his distress. It should not be assumed this is automatically appropriate when a supporter discovers or suspects a person may be facing infertility. The sensitive nature and experience of infertility suggests the supporter should be very cautious about directly asking a couple or individual if there is a 'problem', or even if they would like to have children. It can feel painfully invasive to be asked this, and aggressively exposing when an individual or couple feel unable to address it at that moment. Yet at the same time supporters, like Job's comforters, want to indicate that they care and are available if called upon. The supporter needs to find a delicate balance, 'treading on egg shells' to find a way to show their care and concern for the person generally and suggesting their availability to listen and talk if needed , but indicating that they are not going to pressure the person into it.

Thirdly, there is something to learn from where Job's friends definitely got it wrong:

The problems for Job's comforters started when they opened their mouths! (see Job chapter 4.) Later God chastises them for not speaking what is right of Him (Job 42:7). To avoid the same fate avoid uttering the following Ten Things Not To Say.

- 1. *'Just relax'*

Infertility causes stress, not stress infertility! This comment implies the individual or couple are themselves to blame for doing something wrong or not doing something right. Contemporary medical understanding reveals the idea that infertility is somehow a psychological problem is almost invariably false.

- 2. *'Don't give up hope: We know someone who waited years and then...'*

Not as common as people think from their personal anecdotes. Most infertile couples don't find their infertility miraculously resolved. It can also condemn couples and individuals to more years of uncertainty as they 'wait'. Do they really want to be still hoping and waiting when they are fifty?

- 3. *'Perhaps God has a purpose for you in this..'*

Whilst this comment may be intended to comfort people by encouraging them to see meaning in their lives and assure them that God is in control, asking people to discern purpose at a time when pain is to the forefront is

insensitive. Supporters should acknowledge peoples' pain, and if appropriate encourage them to talk about how they feel, before going anywhere near talking about purpose.

- 4. *'Think how free you will be...'*

Being free of the responsibilities, restrictions and costs that come with having children probably does not feel like satisfactory recompense to a person who can't have any.

- 5. *'I know how you feel. It took us six months to conceive our first child...'*

There is nothing abnormal about conceiving in anything up to a year. The person making the comment may have felt some disappointment at not falling pregnant first, second or fifth time, but try it sixty times or never!?

- 6. *'How's Florence'* (or whatever the woman's name happens to be).

This comment presumes that it is the woman who feels all the pain. The man may also have deep feelings and longings.

- 7. *'You can always have ours...'*

A sort of joke to try to lighten the mood. Another way of trying to say to the infertile couple that they are themselves relieved of the cost which the person making the comment has to bear as a parent. But would they really want to give their children away, along with all the joys and sorrows and other experiences?

- 8. *'You can always adopt.'*

This comment suggests the real problem is not infertility itself, but the desire to have a child, and adoption provides a solution to this problem. Yet fertility *is* the real problem. There is need to address pain first, and grieve the end of the dream for your own birth family, before starting to explore the possibility of adoption. In any case adoption is not straightforward but potentially another lengthy, invasive and emotionally traumatic process.

- 9. *'Having kids is not all it's cracked up to be...'*

Infertile couples know like everybody else that having children is not a path to complete fulfilment, but nevertheless human beings and family do have potential for contributing significantly to contentment.

- 10. *'God must be punishing you for some sin'* or *'It's your own fault.'*

Surely a poor view of God, drawing selectively on some Old Testament texts, and ignoring the underlying emphasis on a God of love and compassion. Sometimes people may have contributed to their condition by their lifestyle but medics tend to know the truth about this, not the general population. Even if people are themselves at some fault the answer is not to accuse but to offer compassion, grace, healing, forgiveness....

So what can be said and done?

The comments above might be summed up as saying the way to support generally include:

- Don't dive in and directly address people about their infertility, or the possibility of it, unless invited.
- If so, treat it as a situation of grief.
- Focus on listening, accepting, and seeking to understand pain.
- Try not to say too much, especially that intended to be 'helpful', as it is often counterproductive.

Besides these, some specific suggestions:

- Risk showing care! Especially once you have been made aware by an individual or couple of their infertility and the pain it causes them, consider sending a card or making a call, especially on occasions when children are to the fore. Simply showing you are aware can be greatly appreciated. But be aware at times couples don't want to be reminded so you might not get the thankful response you might have hoped for. If this happens, don't give up.
- Point them to appropriate sources. Reading material can be helpful. See the end of this leaflet for suggestions.