

ADOPTION ADVOCATE

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How Adoption Professionals Can Support Prospective Parents Moving from Infertility Treatment to Adoption

BY RESOLVE: THE NATIONAL INFERTILITY ASSOCIATION

Why don't you just adopt? is a go-to question frequently asked by friends and family of people who struggle with infertility. But infertility is a disease that does not have a one-size-fits-all resolution. Many times, people facing infertility start with medical intervention. It's not that they think of adoption as a lesser choice, but because medical intervention is presented as and often is a good option to treat the problem.

When medical treatment fails or simply becomes too much based on their personal ethical, financial, and emotional considerations, it is only then that people experiencing infertility are ready to embark on exploring other options—including adoption. Moving from pursuing infertility treatment to considering adoption is rarely an easy transition. When an individual or couple decides to adopt, there is no “off switch” that suddenly shuts down the pain of infertility, which they may have borne for years.

For this article, RESOLVE collected responses from some adoptive parents who did transition to an adoption plan after pursuing medical treatment to overcome their infertility. Here is what they wished their adoption professionals understood about that journey:



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We needed time to consider all our options.

Prospective parents facing infertility need to be given time to consider all the options available to them. Before deciding to move from infertility medical treatments to adoption, it is important for each person involved to do the hard work of researching and understanding their options and discuss what is most important to the prospective parents and their future family-building goals.

When asked how adoptive parents worked through ultimately deciding to stop fertility treatment and pursue adoption, Heather Marsden, an adoptive mother, said:

The pull for motherhood was so strong. I knew at the end of all of this, I would have a child if I adopted. I stopped getting hung up in the logistics of “how I am going to get a baby?” and just started to embrace the end result I’m not going through all of this struggle to have a pregnancy; that part is short-lived. I am going through all of this to be a mother and have a family. That’s the rub . . . getting yourself there and being okay with that.

The road is different for everyone, as are the reasons that lead them to adopt. A few of the factors carefully considered by individuals and couples deciding on the best path of resolution for them were:

- Age and time spent
- Financial circumstances
- Importance of the pregnancy experience
- Knowledge of available options

Age and time can play a huge role in the decision-making process. Some individuals and couples feel they have time to continue trying medical interventions, while others might be ready to move on after investing significant time in medical treatment that did not resolve their infertility. For every prospective parent there is a different amount of time they are willing to pursue treatment and different considerations based on their age that play significant roles in their decision. They must consider if there is an age that they strongly prefer to start parenting by, if it is likely that medical intervention will not be successful after a particular age, and how long they are open to pursuing treatment before considering adoption (which can also include significant investments of time). It’s important to recognize that when prospective parents facing infertility arrive at a decision to adopt, age and time have likely played a significant role.

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Their **financial circumstances** also factor into the decision to move from infertility treatment to adoption. Infertility treatments can leave a bank account empty. Cost is a primary barrier to continuing infertility treatment. Adoption professionals should know that cost may have been a factor in choosing to cease medical treatment. Accordingly, cost of adoption may also be a more significant challenge than for some other adopting parents. Prospective parents who have faced infertility may have already invested significant funds into unsuccessful treatments and have limited funds remaining. They may need understanding and support when managing costs related to adoption.

The **importance of the pregnancy experience** needs to be considered as well. For some women, the inability to become pregnant leads to feelings of inadequacy. They might feel “broken” or very much alone. This is something that may never be emotionally resolved. Although adoption can make parents, it cannot resolve the grief of the missed pregnancy experience. While prospective parents who have faced infertility may have chosen, be ready for, and even excited about the prospects of adoption, it’s important to be understanding of the fact that they have still faced the loss of pregnancy hopes, and there may be moments in the adoption process when grief arises and they need acknowledgement and support.

Having access and **knowledge of available options** is often key in the decision-making process. Knowledge is power. Often, people with infertility are exhausted from the struggle. Having clear, digestible information is always important, but can be especially important to support prospective parents who have already faced the stress of infertility.

For example, many adoptive parents wished they did more research on their adoption agency or attorney. Molly Tanner, an adoptive parent, offers the following sound advice for someone who is considering adoption.

It’s really important to research as many agencies as you can. Make calls, ask questions, interview them and get to know their values as an organization. You need to have the right fit, but most of all, have a social worker and agency that has your best interests in mind. At the end of the day, it just needs to feel right.

The path to adoption can seem particularly daunting. It is a place where biology, belief, law, and a myriad of socio-economic issues meld into one process. All of this can be a lot to take in for any prospective family. Knowing that understanding can need a little more support for those who are dealing with grief, loss, and remaining infertility stress is important.

We needed emotional empathy.

Most people who have endured years of infertility do not just wake up one day ready to adopt. It takes time to process that decision. Moving forward can take time. Empathy is needed from adoption professionals who meet with infertile individuals and couples seeking information. Many have a history of emotional turmoil due to setbacks from numerous failed treatments, unexpected challenges, and miscarriage.

Adoption can give some people new hope and a change in mindset from, not *if* they will become a parent, but *when* they will become parents. But it's wise to remember that if a placement fails, it can bring up previous failures that the individual or couple experienced. Camille Hawkins, an adoptive parent and previous social worker, says:

Many people move to adopt when traditional methods do not work out. What I would tell adoptive professionals [is that] with infertility there are many forms of loss, and adoption cures only one of those—which is childlessness. Adoption professionals should never expect a couple to completely be over their infertility. It is a lifelong process.

Adoption professionals know the value of counseling as it is often provided to the birth parent(s), but there are times when prospective parents could benefit from a counseling referral as well. Providing the counsel and emotional support they need will better prepare them to leave their dreams of biological parenthood behind and move forward with adoption if that is their decision.

Consider suggesting free resources such as www.resolve.org, which offers an immense amount of diverse support options such as toll free hotlines, local support groups, and online communities for people with infertility including adoptive parents.

We have already waited a long time.

Adoption agencies need to understand that people with infertility already have a great deal of experience with waiting. That's all they have done every month, every cycle, and every waking moment since they decided to start a family. Checking on the prospective adoptive parent(s) and providing updates even when there is not much to share will go a long way during their wait for referral or placement. The time and anxiety previously spent staring down negative pregnancy tests transforms into staring at the phone waiting for *that* call, a call. The feelings and emotions involved with waiting to be matched versus waiting to see if that last treatment worked are almost parallel.

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As Cristal Lake-Sanders, LPC, M.Ed., wrote in her article for RESOLVE in Fall 2009:

However, adopters, particularly those who have experienced infertility, “are [often] reluctant to allow themselves to fully experience the joyful anticipation of a psychological pregnancy” (Johnston, p.207). It is understandable that prospective adoptive parents want to protect themselves and will take only a ‘cautiously optimistic’ stance. But it is important to allow yourself to believe that you are going to be parents and act accordingly. “[Giving] yourselves permission to experience this psychological pregnancy begins the process of claiming, bonding, and attaching between parents and child earlier and tends to result in a less anxious transition upon arrival” (Johnston, p. 208).

When you are becoming a parent through adoption, and you find yourself in that general parenthood mindset, there are some specific considerations to take into account. These may include the importance of reading adoption-related literature; the benefits of creating a support system; finding an adoption-friendly pediatrician; dealing with comments from others; and the importance of setting realistic expectations during your adjustment to parenthood.

Conclusion

People with infertility have often encountered immense heartbreak, yet they persist with strength, mental fortitude, and emotional stamina in the hopes of becoming parents. Finding adoption professionals who can provide important information, empathy, communication, and support throughout the adoption process will make a world of difference for them. If you have questions about the impact of infertility on prospective parents, we encourage you to learn more at www.resolve.org.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

RESOLVE: The National Infertility Association is a non-profit, charitable organization, who works to improve the lives of women and men living with infertility. One in eight U.S. couples of childbearing age has trouble conceiving or sustaining a pregnancy. RESOLVE addresses this public health issue by providing community to these women and men, connecting them with others who can help, empowering them to find resolution. RESOLVE provides free support programs in communities nationwide, leads efforts to increase public education and reduce the stigma around infertility, and promises to protect legal access to all family building options. Learn more at www.RESOLVE.org.



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