

The Mental Health Provider and Infertility: An Option for Support



By Kim Crone, Ph.D.

Mental Health Awareness Month (also referred to as “Mental Health Month”) has been observed in May in the United States since 1949, reaching millions of people in the United States through the media, local events, and screenings. Mental illness awareness means bringing down the walls of stigma by sharing our experiences, stories, and truths. It means educating others on what mental illness REALLY is, and helping those with illnesses, like infertility, know they are not alone.

Dr. Crone is a psychologist who has been specializing in the counseling and education of patients experiencing infertility for over 15 years.

Infertility treatment, which typically involves a multi-faceted physical, emotional and financial investment,

can be psychologically debilitating for some. For many patients, infertility is perceived as the most distressing experience they’ve ever gone through. Exacerbating this distress is that so many patients try to power through without sharing their struggle with anyone besides their partner. This results in the patient often feeling isolated and alone which can contribute to anxiety and depression, ultimately putting undue stress on their relationship.

This interpersonal stress can generalize to other relationships as well. Regardless of whether or not they have shared their experience with others, many couples avoid interacting with their support system while going through treatment. Patients might fear that those who don’t know the circumstances might ask about their future family-building plans, make a well-meaning but upsetting comment, or announce yet another pregnancy in the family, all of which are painful for the patient. Those family and friends who do know the specific circumstances will try their best to be supportive, but inevitably say the wrong thing. Spending time with their closest family and friends, which had previously been a comfort zone for them, eventually becomes an emotional minefield. Avoiding these uncomfortable interactions can be self-protective but can result in yet another aspect of their lives being controlled by infertility.

One role the mental health provider plays in the world of infertility treatment is to soften the psychological impact of treatment by becoming a new part of the patient’s comfort zone. We do this by providing objective, informed, and unconditional support. This might come in the form of individual and/or couples counseling, coping skills training, guidance in decision-making and psychoeducation. The goal is to help patients feel as strong and resilient as they can throughout the challenges of treatment, so that they have the energy and emotional resources to persevere for as long as they choose and can make the best possible choices for themselves along the way.