

Fact sheet #3: Putting on a brave face in a child-focussed world

"We just want to feel that we're perceived as normal. We don't have kids and we just want to know that it's not entering into people's consideration of who we are. We're okay people – does the fact that we're struggling to have a child make us different?" Alastair, 38

One of the hardest parts of struggling to get pregnant in a child-driven world is that you put on a brave face. You're surrounded by families. You're in a time of your life when all your friends are having kids. People are asking you when you'll have yours and pretending that everything's fine can consume a lot of energy.

Over time, people who have been in your situation learn to avoid talking about things and if people raise issues of family planning, they learn tactics and shortcuts on how the questions can be deflected. Some people find that they become very good at not expressing how they feel, but they adopt an armoury of fob-off replies to that inevitable question – 'when are you going two to have children?' They reach into their arsenal and pull out 'we're letting nature take its course' or 'all in good time'. Sometimes it's better to not just swallow your pride and fob people off – telling them that one of you is having serious medical problems can be a great way to stop a conversation dead in its tracks. There are times when saying something different can be helpful to you.

Swimming Upstream was written to try and outline what is normal for people struggling to conceive. It's normal to be confused, angry or ripped off. And trying to be normal and fitting in with everyone else is a defence mechanism that protects you both – and there are several reasons why we all do it:

- * **You may not want to invite people into an intimate part of your life.** If you're feeling down and someone asks you, you may be caught off-guard and feel pressured to tell them about something intimate. Even saying 'we're having trouble' invites them into this part of your life because they now know you're having problems. Plus, you run the risk of a host of other problems, from them trying to fix your problems for you to what they'll think of you. With the lack of understanding some people have, it can be good to be cautious.
- * **You don't want to be seen as a 'whinger'.** Unless you've got very open and honest relationships with all your friends, you may feel that you're burdening your friends (or family) with stories of unsuccessful attempts to have a child and that they're actually getting tired of hearing about it.
- * **Controlling our emotions.** Unfortunately, many of the emotions that you'll feel when going through a hard time in conceiving – confusion, anger, pain, numbness, and a lack of patience with people – are not the happy ones we all want to feel. So one of the reasons to try to hide how you're feeling could be that you're experiencing emotions that we are taught to suppress, hide or not acknowledge. Regardless of the reasons for the course of action you take, it can actually add to the confusion that you may already be feeling.
- * **Internal conflict.** Trying to be normal also can create an internal conflict as you put on a brave face that isn't actually how you feel. On the outside, you're happy. On the inside, you may be hurting. Believe it or not, it takes energy out of you to keep your chin up and deny how you're actually feeling.

So what can you do about it?

Most people find themselves dealing with problems getting pregnant without any prior warning and so it's a process of learning to live on the outside of the fertile predictable world. You find yourself having to survive in a very child-focussed world where for many people, being 'grown up' will have to mean producing some offspring at some stage along the way.

There are many ways to deal with unpredictable fertility. One technique that has worked for many couples is the 'Four Step Survival Guide' - best used for short periods of time, when feeling very low, going through a particular challenge, or when you have just had a setback. (You'll find more about the 'Four Step Survival Guide' in Swimming Upstream.)

That's as much as we could cram into one page. We've got a whole chapter on this issue, (along with almost everything else you'll face) in Swimming Upstream, a new book that looks at this experience with humour, honesty and gives professional advice. Visit www.swimmingupstream.com.au to read excerpts, order your copy or find out how the book has helped other couples.

