

# Goals, Grief & Gratitude: The Fertility Journey

DR. WHITNEY YOUNG, ND

This is the story of Sandra, a 39-year-old with endometriosis who had been trying to conceive for five years. When she first came to the clinic she was prepping for her first in vitro fertilization (IVF) retrieval and wanted to improve her chances. Working together with the utilization of acupuncture, dietary recommendations, exercise strategies, stress management techniques, supplements and her positive attitude, Sandra successfully became pregnant with her first embryo transfer.

However, I'm not going to write about the nuts and bolts of treatment options like botanicals, acupuncture points and supplements. You can learn this in many other places. What I am going to write about is helping your patient through their goals, grief and possibly bringing them to a place of gratitude. What I say to my patients is that no one can tell them how long this journey will take and how it will work out. But I want to give them the tools to know that they will be ok, no matter what. Grief is closely tied in with any fertility journey. Every month a woman isn't pregnant, she grieves the life she had imagined for herself. If she does get pregnant, miscarriages are common, occurring in 10-25% of pregnancies. They often leave women with post-traumatic stress, anxiety and depression. I validate women's feelings by sharing this fact: studies show that depression levels in women struggling with infertility are comparable to depression with the diagnosis of cancer. Screening tools that can be used to assess your patient and their progress are the PHQ-9 for depression, The Fertility Quality of Life (FertiQoL) and The Ways of Coping Questionnaire (WCQ).

## GOALS

Every patient that walks into my office wants to be pregnant yesterday. I like to explore their goals, then give them a few more we will work on together. The number one goal is to get pregnant. The in-between goals are to improve their cy-



cles, PMS, and overall mood and health so that they can become more fertile. Then I describe my four goals:

1. *Get you pregnant*
2. *Keep you pregnant*
3. *Have a healthy baby*
4. *Be a healthy & happy mom*

## A MISCARRIAGE

Sandra was beaming. She was so incredibly happy to finally be pregnant. I got to meet her husband in those first few months when he attended a couple appointments and he was the picture of a doting, patient and loving dad-to-be. Unfortunately, at 22 weeks their pregnancy had to be terminated due to a malformation of the brain. It was devastating. About a month later Sandra booked a follow-up appointment and she and her husband came to my office and told me every detail of them finding out about their son's condition, the decision to induce labour, the drive to Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto, the family that gathered to meet Matthew for the first and last time when he was born

and the pictures they took. Allowing the space for them to tell their story was important. It wasn't glazed over. Their grief mattered. Matthew mattered. Their story mattered. Sandra is Matthew's mother and always will be.

## GRIEF

I worked with her and her husband through this time of grief. Sandra resumed my IVF treatment recommendations with some new adjustments. She started to see one of my recommended counsellors. She took a few months off of work before gaining the energy, strength and the courage to go back to work. When she was stronger, I asked her if she would like to put Matthew's picture on our wall of babies we have at the office

Their grief mattered.  
Matthew mattered.  
Their story mattered.

of all the babies we've helped come into this world. She was honoured and said she would when she was emotionally ready.

Grief is like a fog. You can't eat, you can't think, you can't function like you did before. It's exhausting. Our patients need to take the time they need to recover at their own pace. For those of us who haven't experienced profound grief like losing a child, a spouse or someone close to us, it can be hard to understand the experience. Miscarriages are still not talked about very often. If I discover a woman has a history of a miscarriage, then I pause there during her intake appointment to acknowledge it, and talk about it. From my experience, most women sweep it under the rug and soldier on without really dealing with their feelings. Offering options to your patients for grieving can give them permission to feel the feelings and do something with them.

Miscarriage Grief Rituals for Patients
Have a memorial service with close friends and family, or a solo walk in the woods
Create art: draw, paint, play with clay, or make music
Light a candle in remembrance
Say a prayer or poem
Buy a piece of art, sculpture, or memento to represent the baby and your never-ending connection to them. Hang it in your home as a symbol of remembrance.
Plant flowers or a tree, indoors or outdoors
Pregnancy loss jewelry is a beautiful way to honour the loss of your baby
Write a poem or letter to your baby

#### GRATITUDE

Finding gratitude after grief can be impossible for many. Gently guiding your patient through stress-reduction techniques can help to lessen their emotional burden. Mindfulness is like a buffet. Your patient should try a bit of everything before settling on the dish they like most. You can teach them some of these techniques in-office during their fertility acupuncture treatments.

Relaxation techniques have been shown to significantly reduce anxiety scores in women undergoing infertility treatment. Mindfulness is commonly used and is a great tool to teach your patients. A study of first-time IVF patients found that women who used this intervention had a significant increase in mindfulness, compassion, meaning-based coping strategies and had

higher pregnancy rates! Women are desperate to know what will improve their chances of taking home a baby. Sharing these facts with them may help motivate them to try mindfulness practices. Sandra came weekly for acupuncture and brought her own guided imagery meditations to listen to during her treatments. She also used it during her IVF treatments.

Expressive writing or journaling by both male and female infertility patients has been shown to decrease depressive symptoms. Giving your patients cues or guidance on what to write can be helpful for them. We provide a couple exercises such as the "Choose Your Own Adventure" one where we have couples write out their fertility journey so far and then write out different endings to it. Other endings may include having a healthy baby naturally, IVF baby, adoption, being an amazing aunt, travelling the world, using an egg donor, foster parenting, etc.

PRCI (The Positive Reappraisal Coping Intervention) was designed to meet the unmet needs of patients during waiting periods. The two-week wait every month can be a very stressful time. PRCI did not significantly reduce anxiety or depression, but women had significantly more positive emotions during the waiting period. This is a cost-effective and simple tool we can give our patients to read at home twice a day and reflect on how it applies to them.

Stress Reduction Resources for Patients
Conquering Infertility by Dr. Lisa Doran, ND, R.Ac
Local peer support groups
Guided imagery for fertility such as the Circle & Bloom series or Belleruth Naparstek's Guided Meditations to Help with Fertility
Online support groups can be very helpful at every stage
Local ND-recommended counsellors
Progressive Muscle Relaxation
Expressive writing or journaling
Hatha Yoga
Meditation
Group programs offering CBT and a variety of relaxation techniques
Positive Reappraisal Coping Intervention (PRCI)

The Positive Reappraisal Coping Intervention – which can be printed on a little card or paper and given to your patient to read twice a day during the two week wait.

***During this experience I will:***

- Try to do something that makes me feel good
- See things positively
- Look on the bright side of things
- Make the best of the situation
- Focus on what is important in life
- Focus on the positive aspects of the situation
- Find something good in what is happening
- Try to do something meaningful
- Focus on the benefits and not just the difficulties
- Learn from the experience

Helping our patients heal through miscarriages as well as the loss of control that infertility gives them will help them on their journeys to parenthood. At the time of printing Sandra is happily in her 2nd trimester after another successful IVF transfer. We, as naturopaths, have a variety of treatment options to support women suffering with anxiety and depression during the ups and downs of infertility. We are there to bear witness to their grief, and support them through it. 🌱

**REFERENCES**

OAND Members can access the reference list and clinic resources by logging into [oand.org](http://oand.org) and going to OAND Community/Pulse

## SUPPORTING WOMEN'S FERTILITY WITH GOLDEN FLOWER CHINESE HERBS



Golden Flower's optimally-extracted formulas offer practitioners potent, high-quality remedies made from premium raw materials.

A number of Golden Flower formulas support women's fertility during the four phases of the menstrual cycle.

Visit [www.easterncurrents.ca/GFCH-fertility](http://www.easterncurrents.ca/GFCH-fertility) for an overview of the formulas specific to each phase, as well as an online copy of the latest Golden Flower Product Guide.



All Golden Flower Chinese Herbal Products are backed by Eastern Currents' Four Tiers of Protection, so you can rest easy knowing that your TCM toolkit is full of top-quality products your patients can count on.