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Fa-La-La-La-La and Blah-Blah-Blah
by
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Oh no, it's that awful time of year again. Everyone else has a baby but you. You are forced to endure excruciating family scenes with pregnant or nursing members complaining about big feet and no sleep, who are so self absorbed they don't realize that with every word they are stabbing you in the heart! The ungrateful, whining, undeserving lot ought to have their children repossessed and placed with worthy parents like you who would shower them with unconditional love, infinite patience and boundless opportunity. Have I struck a chord?

Anxiety and depression levels for infertile women are the highest between the second and third year of infertility, according to Alice Domar, Ph. D, of Harvard Medical School's Mind/Body Medical Institute. These levels tend to skyrocket during the holidays. My daughter is 11 and I can still remember the pain. I longed for a baby under the tree for three interminable years. The holidays always brought me miserable tidings. One year I was hospitalized with golf-ball-sized ovarian cysts from Chlomid. The next Christmas featured a (benign) breast lumpectomy. But these were both surpassed by the third year when I was rear-ended by a truck and diagnosed with lupus. It was hard to keep my sense of humor and festive spirit when I felt I was being besieged.

Unfortunately, December is filled with reasons for corralling the gang. Overbearing, "expert", inquisitive, meddling and otherwise clueless family members and coworkers need to be given strict limits and boundaries. Otherwise they will pound you with prophecies and pump you for information. My heavily Catholic mother was fond of saying how "funny" it was that she never wanted any children and had six, and I wanted them but couldn't seem to have any. She often repeated that my childlessness was probably God's way of telling me I wouldn't be a good mother.

I had a great aunt who was going deaf who would pat my stomach and holler, "Is anyone in there yet?" And then there are the idiotic bosses who, after a few drinks, tell you to lighten up and offer to pinch hit for your husband, ha, ha, ha.

Now is the time to support one another as a couple and present a united front. Let your husband buffer for you. Relatives and colleagues will respect his space. If he seems less than forthcoming, he'll be allowed because no one expects him to be chatty about these matters. (Another tip: Have him deal with the doctor by phone – *his* calls will be returned faster than yours.) Remember *your* feelings, not everyone else's, are the most important. My cousin sent out holiday cards with a brief accounting of where they were in their process and a request to refrain from any questioning. It began, "An open letter to our family..."

Either stick to brief appearances or decline invitations that will push your buttons. This is one time you should be self-indulgent. If your hosts don't get it, too bad. *People who really love you will understand.* Don't bear more than you can. Don't be brave for others. Don't feel guilty. What's the worst that can happen if you don't show up somewhere? What can they do to you? Give yourself permission not to go.

If you absolutely have to attend an event, get there late, eat, and leave early. Use the friend-in-the-hospital or sick pet excuse. Plan standard responses so you're not caught awkwardly. "We'll let you know when we have news," works. When advice is offered, give an innocuous answer like, "I hear that you think that." Pretend to spot someone across the room and excuse yourself.

My dear friend Susan had never missed the Jewish holidays in New York with her family. But during her second year of infertility, when her younger sister Rose was five months pregnant (accidentally), Susan and her husband stayed home in Los Angeles. She got pregnant that week! I can't believe she would have conceived if she had been stressed out in New York. "We probably wouldn't have even had sex," she admits. (She now has two kids.)

You can leave town. During past winter holidays, many of my formerly infertile friends fled to warmer climates where they could escape and enjoy themselves anonymously. If you are too broke from all of your procedures to go anywhere, you can always *tell* people you'll be out of town. Then keep the shades down and screen your calls. Rent movies to avoid all the TV advertising plastered with cherubic children's faces. Create your own hideaway, like an adult version of a kid's fort. Stay in your pjs. Eat in bed.

Do things most people don't have time for during holidays. Take day trips to tranquil places that are deserted this time of year. Get his and her massages at home, in front of the fire. Go to the library and check out the bestsellers that most folks are too busy to read. Do all your holiday shopping online or from catalogues and buy books for the nieces and nephews or the kids down the street. Go to midnight services instead of morning ones with lots of families. Helping others in need, like visiting the

elderly or a soup kitchen, can give you perspective. Cheering others will have the same effect on you.

You also need to grieve. This can be a very sad time and it's normal to feel disheartened. Loved ones should not exhaust themselves trying to cheerlead you out of your feelings. My heroic friend Lorna used to light candles for the four babies she had lost as a way to commemorate and not forget them. She often told me through her five years of infertility that I was the only one who remembered her lost children during the holidays. She said they became more real and their losses even sadder when she would envision the little stockings hung on the hearth and contemplate what might have been. It's impossible *not* to do this. Lorna felt it was healthy to mourn. "It's the only way to move through the sorrow" she explains. (She now has two kids.)

You may need to set aside wallowing and wailing time. Seek out a friend you can dump on--not your husband--so you aren't storing up bad feelings. Find others with whom you can let down your hair and commiserate. Harvard research shows that bottling up those negative feelings is not only toxic to your body, but can further impede your fertility. And recent studies show that having a safe place to talk and share can actually increase your chances of conceiving dramatically.

At an infertility retreat I attended sponsored by Harvard's Mind/Body Medical Institute, many participants confessed to having kept their infertility a secret. I have always been a blabber. I was amazed that these tormented people could even *keep* a secret. With me, my lupus/infertility updates seeped into every conversation I had with anybody, much to my more private (then) husband's horror.

At the New Year, set goals for the upcoming year. When I have a plan, I always feel more in control: If (a) doesn't happen, I always have (b), etc. That way, I know what's next. Knowing where you'll end up no matter what, and if all else fails, is calming and comforting. This annual time off from the daily grind can provide intimate, unhurried couple time that can strengthen you for the treatment cycles that lay ahead. Many couples report deepening their bond and finding new ground together.

A little romance can actually help. We now know that good sex can increase your chances of conception. A man's sperm count elevates when he is extra excited. Cervical and uterine movements during a woman's orgasm help the sperm to move along.

Believe it or not, wonderful benefits will come from your infertility that you cannot possibly imagine right now. Deeper wisdom and enlightenment, more compassion for those who suffer, and a heightened intimacy with your

spouse are just a few. You will be better parents. In the meantime, instead of decorating the nursery in your head a hundred times, remember that the baby's first home is your body and prepare it lovingly.

Pregnancy is not an outcome you can manufacture. Babies come when they want, not when you want. The only thing you can do, is make sure you're ready and trust that the baby will come when it's suppose to. Becoming pregnant is not only about cells subdividing in your womb, but about a little soul coming too, a fact that makes infertility an inexact science. Unexplained things can and do happen all the time.

When frantic women approach me, I tell them they are not going to get pregnant when they are insane. There may be some lessons you (one or both or you) need to learn before the baby gets here. Stay open to all possibilities. Things don't always work out the way you want, but they always work out for the best.

I spent last Christmas Eve all by myself. My daughter was in New York with her Dad. All my friends felt sorry for me. They were uncomfortable that I was alone. They couldn't imagine being without their partners and families for a holiday. I got numerous invites to their familial gatherings but actually preferred my own company to that of their relatives and assorted strays.

I had a perfect day. I slept late. I stopped by church to light candles and spend a few quiet moments. I got a manicure. I made a luscious dinner of all of my favorite things: lobster tail, hearts of palm, potato salad, chocolate turtles and a good bottle of champagne. I put on a Pavarotti CD, took a gardenia bubble bath, slipped into a cozy new nightgown and read Dominick Dunne's latest book. The point is, there are still things in life you can enjoy.

I know the time between cycles is endless. Hang in there and trust that your baby will find a way to get to you. Above all, be good to yourself. You deserve it. Keep in mind that infertility is a temporary condition. One way or another it will be resolved. And remember you will get through this next month. Then the hoopla will be over and everything will go on sale.

Katie Boland is the Director and Founder of the Mind/Body Institute, a Los Angeles- based Infertility Program modeled after Harvard's, and the author of *"I GOT PREGNANT, YOU CAN TOO! How Healing Yourself Physically, Mentally and Spiritually Leads to Fertility,"* available on Amazon.com and in bookstores.

