

WELCOME NOTE

FROM THE IVF DAD

If you're reading this, I assume you're where I was several years ago—having tried to make a baby without success. I'm sorry. There's no elegant way to put it: infertility sucks.

I'll tell you all about me and my wife's difficult experience in the pages ahead. One thing that kept me going throughout is my resolve to connect with other people who are experiencing the same thing. Infertility can be lonely, and society discourages people—men in particular—from talking about our struggles. I want to help change that, at least for those of us going through infertility. My dream is to build a community of men experiencing infertility who feel knowledgeable and well-equipped to tread the path ahead with strength and a burly, strapping, manly dose of sensitivity. And for the women who are also reading this, my hope is that this book provides a jumping off point to help your partner be engaged and supportive.

I hope this book helps you understand the path ahead and options for treatment. Moreover, I hope it helps you make sense of how you and your partner are feeling during this difficult time, and gives you plenty of simple ideas and strategies to get through it. You might even come out on the other side stronger than you are now.

Please keep in touch—seriously. You can connect with me on Instagram @TheIVFDad, on TheIVFDad.com, or via email at TheIVFDad@gmail.com. Reach out! I'd love to hear from you.

Now let's get started.

—Keegan, The IVF Dad

INTRODUCTION

A swarm of spidermen, ninjas, and princesses scurried up and down the block. Dusk settled in, golden hues giving way to deep blue as jack-o-lanterns lit the way toward the night's candy haul. And on our porch, in our white house with green shutters on the end of the street, my wife Olivia and I awaited the onslaught, hundreds of pieces of candy at the ready.

In our small Victorian village in upstate New York, Halloween is a big deal. Hundreds of kids criss-cross the streets seeking to load their baskets and bags with treats. Families travel into the village and park from miles away, knowing the tree-lined streets are safe and easy to traverse, while kids relish the sheer volume of houses they can attack one by one.

It's a special time for the whole town; a festive night in which the best characteristics of the close-knit village community are on display. But this Halloween night was a uniquely special one for me and Olivia.

Earlier that afternoon, we received news we had anticipated for a very long time. We had completed our first IVF embryo transfer about two weeks prior. Earlier that morning, Olivia had left just as the sun rose to have her blood drawn and find out if the transfer had worked and resulted in a pregnancy. Our fertility clinic nurse Jennifer—who supported us through the entire process, and is a candidate for sainthood in our book—called around noon and left a

voicemail with the results. We left work early and came home so we could listen to the voicemail together. Hearts pounding, we pressed play.

Jennifer was upbeat, getting right to the punchline: “Congratulations: you’re pregnant! We’ll do another blood check in two days.”

It had been a long road; nearly two years had passed since we first started trying to start a family. Olivia and I embraced, feeling thrilled and overwhelmed and relieved. The news that we would be parents made an already exciting day even sweeter. We lined up spooky orange luminarias to light the path to our porch and filled candy bowls to the brim.

As the rush of costumed children slowed to a trickle, I placed my hand on her stomach. I knew the embryo was still microscopic and a baby bump was months away, but after such a long wait I couldn’t resist. We talked of potential baby costumes and critiqued each one as they walked away; a little boy dressed as Bob Ross carrying an enormous palette dappled with happy greens was undoubtedly the best of the night.

“Next year, we’ll have our own little one to dress up,” I beamed.



Five weeks later, I looked out on another fading sunset. This early winter dusk was far removed from that golden October evening. The dank gray sky seemed stained; the sun slouched across the horizon.

I was in a small patient room in the labor and delivery ward of our local hospital. Olivia was just down the hall, under anesthesia, having the remains of the embryo we had celebrated on Halloween removed from her via an operation called a dilation and curettage, or D&C.

Our initial excitement from Halloween didn’t last long. At the next blood draw check-in, we learned the level of the pregnancy hormone human chorionic gonadotropin, or hCG, in Olivia’s blood was not rising as quickly as it should. The clinic continued to check the level. One day the hCG would shoot up and

offer a glimmer of hope; a few days later it would stagnate, accompanied by Jennifer's sobering words of wisdom: "Keep your fingers crossed, but it doesn't look good."

After a few weeks of this limbo, we reached the point where an ultrasound was possible to get more clarity. The initial results were inconclusive. The embryo showed some growth, but after another couple weeks of waiting and checking, there wasn't enough development. Two days before Thanksgiving, we got the final diagnosis: the pregnancy resulted in a blighted ovum—basically an empty embryo that doesn't develop. Put more simply: it was a miscarriage.

The clinic told Olivia to stop taking all shots and drugs (another twist in the road of IVF: the shots, pills, and blood draws don't necessarily end once you're pregnant). They laid out our options: wait for the miscarriage to start on its own, take a pill that would force her body to start the miscarriage process, or try to get into the hospital for a D&C.

There was no availability at the hospital, so we opted for the pill. Like everything else in the prior six weeks, it didn't go to plan. Olivia took the pill. She endured excruciating cramps while we sat on our couch debating whether we could attend Thanksgiving. We later learned the pill forces your body to have labor contractions, thus expelling (usually) the contents of the uterus. But nothing came out.

Meanwhile, I spent these weeks cycling between disbelief, deep sadness, and attempts to stay strong and be supportive for Olivia. I felt dazed and disinterested completing everyday tasks like commuting, attending work meetings, and folding laundry. I couldn't bear the sight of babies or kids, something that usually gave me a lot of joy. With such an awful thing happening to us, it seemed that the world should grind to a halt in recognition of our pain. But of course it didn't.

And so, at last, unable to succeed at even having a miscarriage that goes normally, we ended up in the hospital on a bleak early December evening. As a

final cruelty, we discovered the D&C procedure is performed in the labor and delivery ward. Walking in, we passed the family waiting area where eager fathers- and grandparents-to-be awaited the news of their baby's arrival. We commiserated with the kind middle-aged check-in lady who agreed it was a special kind of torture to make us come to labor and delivery for the awful operation that was about to take place.

Three hours later, we left the hospital and drove home to our white and green-shuttered house in our little Victorian village. Defeated, and back at square one, I thought back on my premature Halloween night celebration. All I could do was shake my head at how foolish it seemed now.



WELCOME TO THE INFERTILITY YO-YO

If you're reading this book, you're probably already familiar with what I call the *infertility yo-yo*—the endless ups and downs you experience when unfortunate enough to be taking the “long road” to parenthood.

If you're reading this book, you probably started out much like we did at some point, perhaps six months ago, or perhaps two or three or even five years ago: you decide it's time to start trying for a family, you “pull the goalie,” and at first, it's exciting! We're trying to have a kid (you think)! We'll probably be pregnant within a few months (you think)! Maybe you talk about possible kid names, start looking at the endless reel of silly gender reveal videos on the internet, and plot ways to surprise the family with the news in a few months (YOU THINK!).

If you're reading this book, you also probably know how it feels when, after several months of trying, the early excitement starts to wane. As each month's cycle comes and goes, the initial reaction of “*hey, no one gets it right*”

off the bat, it'll happen soon enough” slowly morphs into a less assured “well...maybe next month will be our time.”

And if you're reading this book, you probably know that's when the real descent begins. Then the crazy thoughts creep in. *Maybe we need to make sure we do it in this position. Or, I read something that said that you should put your legs above your head for at least ten and a half minutes after sex. Or, what if that thing I ate/that scented laundry detergent we used/that intense exercise class I did/the time Greg Paulson threw a football at my groin in sixth grade...might be causing a problem?* Which of course all leads to the ultimate question you (and your partner) have probably already thought about: *What if something's really wrong here?*

If you're reading this book, you may already be delving into the vast and initially confusing world of potential causes of infertility, treatments for infertility, statistics about likelihood of success, and of course everyone's favorite topic: the cost of treatments! And then there are the acronyms. Between IVF, IUI, ICSI, PGT, PGS, and hCG, your brain may already be spinning. Don't worry—I'll demystify all of this later.

But before we go on, if you're reading this book, there are two critical things you should know. These two things may help more than anything else as you move ahead.

First: **You and your partner are not alone.** In fact, according to RESOLVE, the National Infertility Association, approximately *one out of every eight* couples in the United States experiences infertility. Struggling to have a baby can feel lonely and isolating, and with good reason. Couples experiencing infertility are often at a point in life where every other couple they know is also trying to have children, and it will feel like every single other couple is having wild and instantaneous success in the endeavor. “We're expecting!” announcements will crop up like an invasive species in your text messages and news feed, just as the wedding invitations arrived in

your mailbox in a regular cadence a few years prior. But that statistic bears repeating: *one in eight couples will experience infertility.*

So remember, you are not walking this path by yourself. Just by starting this book, learning more about your options, discussing this information with your partner, and reaching out to other people who are currently or have been in your shoes, you're taking huge steps toward progress.

The second thing to know: if you only do one thing today to help make your journey easier, **reach out to others and talk about what you're going through.** The old adage that “a problem shared is a problem halved” couldn't be more true. I guarantee you'll find a sympathetic ear at the minimum, and more likely you'll find there are far more people you know who are among the one in eight than you thought.

Unfortunately none of us has a crystal ball to determine exactly when or how our infertility comes to a resolution and we get to banish the *yo-yo* forever, but my hope is this book makes the path there a bit smoother.

WHY DID I WRITE THIS BOOK, AND WHY SHOULD YOU BOTHER TO READ IT?

The short answer? Because infertility sucks, and especially sucks if you feel alone when you're going through it.

But for a slightly longer answer: Most of the resources and books on infertility are centered on a woman's experience, and understandably so. Women generally bear the brunt of surgeries, pokes, prods, blood work, surges of natural and artificial hormones, and other pains and difficulties of fertility treatments.

However, resources designed to support men experiencing infertility were much harder to find. I listened to countless podcasts, browsed social

media accounts, and read dozens (if not hundreds) of blogs and articles about fertility treatments, most of which were hosted and written by women (again, understandably). And to be clear, those podcasts and other resources were incredibly helpful!

On a rare occasion I'd come across a conversation in which both partners from a couple were interviewed, and it was great to hear both perspectives.¹ But those examples were rare. And unfortunately, when I did find resources geared toward men, they generally spoke to and about men as if we're all underdeveloped neanderthals. Everything had to be couched in goofy humor, football references, or comparisons to beer and chicken wings. I love beer and chicken wings, but I wanted a resource that talks to men like we're actually smart.

Here's what I learned in discussions with other men who experienced infertility: *men just want to be empowered, supportive partners*. But men often feel overwhelmed, confused, and poorly equipped to navigate such a difficult experience as infertility.

So I wanted to fix that. Every time I've talked with another dad who experienced infertility, I felt barriers break down. Infertility is something that other people can sympathize with, but unless they've been through it, they'll never quite *get it*. They can't understand why you suddenly aren't excited to talk about kids like you used to be. They don't get what it's like to wonder if you're ever going to be able to play catch or read books with your children. They don't understand how it feels when, instead of getting pregnant the old fashioned way, you have to set an alarm every night to remind you when it's time to fill up a syringe with hormones and give your wife a shot.

¹ A notable and great example of this is the podcast IVFML, which features husband and wife team Simon Ganz and Anna Almendrala. I can't recommend it highly enough. It's honest, hilarious, and informative. Go download it, and see Appendix A for more recommended podcasts and media.

So simply put—this book is for you. If you're a man who wants to better understand how infertility treatment works, this book is for you. If you're a woman who wants to give their partner a great tool to become more informed and supportive along your infertility journey, this book is for you. If you're a couple who's just trying to muddle through the awful infertility muck, it's definitely for you—both of you!

I'll consider this book a success if even one guy or couple out there picks it up, reads it, and feels a little less lonely. And feel free to skip around if it helps. You can jump in anywhere, and come back to other chapters later. Hopefully along the way, you'll feel more confident about navigating this crazy yo-yo, and better equipped to support yourself and your partner.

MANHOOD, FATHERHOOD, AND MESSAGES

My advice above to reach out and share what you're going through might have made you think: "Hold on, I'm not ready to go sharing my business with people." That's a very normal thing to feel. I know this isn't easy, because there are a lot of factors that make it harder for men to talk about things they're struggling with.

Here's a quick list of some of the most common messages we hear as men from media and society. As you read through them, consider the following: Do these sound familiar?; Where might these ideas come from?; and, How much does this idea affect me and my life? If you believe them strongly, don't feel bad or as if you've done something "wrong"—there's no point in getting down on ourselves, and remember, absorbing these messages is normal because we hear them constantly:

- Men address problems by taking action; guys fix things.
- Man up!

- Men shouldn't show too much emotion, it makes them look weak.
- Boys don't cry.
- Men shouldn't ask for help. Real men help themselves.
- Men shouldn't talk about their feelings, especially more challenging things like feeling sad or anxious, and especially shouldn't share them with other men.
- True men are strong and silent.
- A real guy can "get his wife pregnant" without any trouble.
- Fathers provide material goods and money for the family.
- Be a man.
- Real guys don't wear X type of clothes/listen to Y type of music, (or fill in the blank with hundreds of other examples!)
- Being a father is part of what makes somebody a man.

Unless you've been living under a rock, these ideas probably sound familiar. In fact, you might really resonate with these ideas! After all, think about one of the most popular and revered male characters of all time, James Bond—he's constantly taking action, physically strong, and almost never shows emotion. While the media has made some strides in recent years in painting a more complete and diverse representation of everyone, including men who don't fit these stereotypical molds, these ideas still run deep within most of us. Experiencing infertility showed me I had really absorbed a lot of these ideas. Changing my thinking wasn't simple, but it was critical to keeping perspective on things during our journey.

I'm sharing this up front because I think it's a particular challenge for men going through infertility. As I mentioned above, I struggled with a few of the ideas above throughout our journey. I definitely resonated with the idea that men face problems by trying to take action and fix them. For me, this showed up as a habit of obsessively Googling to try to learn everything

possible about infertility, different treatments, and how any small part of my or Olivia's health history might hold a clue to something we could do to "fix" things and get pregnant. I also spent time dealing with the ideas that men shouldn't ask for help or show their feelings. I was hesitant to tell anyone what we were going through, worrying (however irrationally) that people would think this struggle or my sadness about it were something to be pitied, or a sign of weakness.

One of the more challenging of these ideas for many men is the last one on the list, that being a "real man" and being a "father" are deeply connected. While fatherhood is indeed one experience a man may have, this becomes a problem when we connect being a man and being a father too closely. Particularly if we find out there are issues with our sperm, this can lead us to think we're not "manly" and perhaps not cut out to be a father.

These are real and difficult feelings—and ones we can work to challenge. But these ideas don't just go away overnight—I still work to this day to challenge these ideas whenever they crop up in my mind. I'll return to this often throughout the book with suggestions for how to start understanding these messages and our reactions to them. It isn't easy, but remember that it is natural to absorb these messages, and also totally possible to change our thinking.

To start, consider a few of these alternative ideas to those above—they may not sound very natural now, but try them out for size. Write them down or say them out loud to yourself ten times every day for a week. See if you notice even a gradual change.

- Strong people aren't afraid to reach out for help when they need it.
- Sharing problems can be a great way to get support.
- Talking about how I'm feeling allows me to be a better partner.

- Getting more comfortable with discussing things I'm struggling with will prepare me to be a better father, because I know that's a tough job!
- I can prepare myself to be a great father.
- I get to define what it means to me to be a great father.

BRIEF NOTES ON WORD-CHOICE AND PERSPECTIVE

With this stage setting complete, it's about time to start. There are just a couple quick notes and caveats I should share:

First, I use the terms "you" and "your partner" throughout the book. By "you," I mean the person with a penis and sperm, which I'm referring to as the "man". By "your partner," I mean the person with a vagina and uterus, which I'm referring to as the "woman". I understand and respect that people and relationships come in many forms, so I've chosen this wording for simplicity of writing only, and not as any reflection of my personal beliefs on gender or partnership.

Second, this book is based on my perspective, my experience, and the many things I've learned and researched over five years of infertility. It's meant to help you understand what the journey might look like, and how to support yourself and your partner along the way. *I strive to ensure every word in here provides accurate information as of the date of publishing. However, this book is for educational purposes and is in no way intended to substitute for the advice of a licensed medical professional. Always consult with a properly licensed medical professional in any matters related to your health and your partner's health.*

Finally, my perspective is limited and doesn't capture all the different experiences humans have relating to infertility and the quest for parenthood.

I'm a man whose partner is a woman, and we are fortunate to have good health insurance coverage. Writing from this perspective in no way intends to exclude or diminish others who are going through the journey to build a family, whether they're same-sex couples, hopeful single parents, couples and partners with limited financial resources, or any of a million other permutations. There are lots of great blogs, social media profiles, books, podcasts, and other resources which capture a variety of perspectives well, many of which are listed in Appendix A. Check them out, and if you're overwhelmed by the options, I'd recommend starting with the podcast *Infertile AF*. It's a wonderful, informative, real, honest, funny, and relatable show which gives a great overview of the world of infertility through stories of people who've been through it.

With those notes explained, it's time to dive in—and we'll start, of course, at the beginning.