

Infertility and Social Media

How to handle online oversharing

by Tess Hoffman

This Mother's Day, my friend Laura left an affectionate message on my Facebook wall: "Today was probably a rough day for you. My high school friend posted this sappy BS about motherhood completing the circle of womanhood..." Laura thought seeing those kinds of posts online might be hard for me. I learned three years ago that I am unlikely to conceive, even with IVF, and my husband and I are now trying to adopt a baby. I was moved by Laura's sensitivity.

The fact is that social media can make every day feel like Mother's Day. Many women going through infertility read posts from those far-off planets – pregnancy and parenthood – and feel twinges of envy, sadness, frustration, or even anger, grief, and loss.

Lucy*, 31, from London, England, tried to conceive for almost two years before beginning IVF treatments. She is constantly reminded of what she's missing. "I've started crying at work when I get a whole screen full of sonogram pictures the same day I get my period," she says. "It just reinforces the feeling that everybody is pregnant except me."

Of course Lucy – and most of us – feel happy for our friends' good fortune, and we don't want them to censor themselves. But family lives shared online can make our empty spaces more salient. And certain types of news, like casually achieved pregnancies or pregnancy-related complaints, can be especially upsetting. "Pregnancy and parenting are tough," Lucy acknowledges, "but I'd kill to be able to post, 'OMG, morning sickness is kicking my butt!'"

Tara Simpson, PsyD, a psychologist at Shady Grove Fertility Center in Baltimore, Maryland, describes the dilemma her clients face when presented with baby-related content online: "What are you supposed to do with it? Do you 'like' it? Do you ignore it?"

And worrying that we should only react with joy can make us feel worse, according to Marni Rosner, a New York-based psychotherapist who works with women and couples coping with infertility. Negative feelings "may be threatening to how a woman has

viewed herself – as a good friend or a supportive sibling." But Rosner tells her clients: "Don't feel bad about taking care of yourself." Here's how.

Coping Strategies

Go offline. Spending time on Facebook, Twitter, and other social media sites means losing control of when you see upsetting content. Sometimes, the best solution is to swear off social media, or at least take a break regularly.

Manage what you see. If a friend talks nonstop about her pregnancy or her cute kid, hide her Facebook posts or unfollow her on Twitter. (Your connections won't be notified of your action directly, but they might figure it out.)

If a new mom friend is sending out email picture blasts, have a supportive partner or friend read and respond for you. Technology can help. Unbaby.me provides a downloadable extension for certain browsers that replaces baby photos in your newsfeed with pictures of cats, flowers, or any other image-based RSS feed you choose.

Manage what you share. Well-meaning friends who have never faced infertility may say the wrong things, so share details selectively. At the same time, says Rosner, "Tell the people closest to you what you need from them, and be specific." If that baby barrage comes from your best friend, explain how it makes you feel. Those difficult conversations can lead to improved understanding and greater support from the people who matter.

Connect with people who get it. Infertility can be isolating. If online networks are a major support system for you, don't disconnect entirely. Instead, seek out online (or in-person) support groups that discuss infertility and related issues, such as adoption, loss, and childfree living. Excellent resources include the [blogroll](#) at stirrup-queens.com and resolve.org's communities for people [seeking a resolution for infertility](#) or [living after infertility](#).

Two caveats: Open discussion forums sometimes perpetuate misinformation (so get medical information from other sources), and other posters' emotions can be overwhelming. Engage when you need to, and disengage if you need a break.

Take care of yourself. Permit yourself to indulge in classic self-pampering. Lucy explains that when everyone online seems suddenly pregnant, she sometimes responds, "by lying on the sofa for six hours straight watching reruns of Project Runway and eating

chocolate." (No guilt allowed.) Dr. Simpson points out that many women in treatment lose sight of other interests. Take time to enjoy the activities you love.

Take charge. Since infertility robs us of control over our reproductive lives, it helps to focus on what we can control. Belle, 42, an executive assistant and youth program facilitator in Washington State, is childfree after a disrupted foster-adoption placement. When she and her husband decided not to pursue another placement, she applied for a master's degree in communication disorders, her first step toward a new career as a speech therapist.

Dr. Simpson also recommends "claiming mastery over your body – because you've lost mastery in some ways from the infertility. Do yoga. Have acupuncture." Even if you're not doing so to enhance fertility, these activities can help you feel more in control of your body.

Consider the big picture. Lucy manages tough emotions by recalling the advice of columnist Carolyn Hax: "If you're going to be jealous of someone, you have to be jealous of her whole life." Sure, you envy your friend's newfound maternal bliss, but she might have a job you'd hate. Our friends' online presence reflects only what they choose to show. Remember, those photos of smiling cherubs are just one facet of a person's life – just as infertility is only one facet of ours.