

A LINE ON LIFE

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Accepting Infertility *

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Many women view biological motherhood as a major portion of their role in life. However, about one in six women have trouble conceiving – even with medical help. Success in this situation does not need to be defined only in terms of conception and birth of a child. Half of the women who seek medical help to conceive are *never* able to have their own children. For the women, success can be defined in helping them with the difficult task of restructuring their lives and accepting the fact that they cannot become pregnant.

Over 10-month intervals, psychologist Judith Daniluk of the University of British Columbia repeatedly interviewed 37 childless couples, who had made repeated and fruitless attempts to conceive. She found nine themes that were typical of accepting the permanence of their infertility

- **Sense of futility and hopelessness.** Even though these women actively pursued conceiving, each finally reached the conclusion, "*Enough is enough – it's just not going to happen for us.*" If the medical reason for the infertility was clear, this endpoint was reached more quickly. Even if it wasn't, they eventually realized that the fantasy of becoming pregnant with medical help was at "*much too high*" of a cost.
 - **Sense of physical, emotional and spiritual depletion.** With the years of effort and expense to become biological mothers, most of the women felt "*emotionally impoverished and physically exhausted.*" Their failure challenged their "*most profound beliefs regarding fairness, justice and the meaning of life.*"
 - **Profound sense of loss and grief.** With an average of four and a half years of treatment, they had gone through much frustration and pain. When they accept the permanence of their infertility, this is when they fully feel the loss. Typical of any severe loss, they tended to withdraw from outside involvement, and this seemed to increase their feelings of grief.
 - **Sense of emptiness – missed experience.** Each woman reported a gaping void that could not be filled. Even adoption cannot completely fill this emptiness.
 - **Sense of exclusion – being different.** The infertility sets them apart from the majority of women who can become mothers. They are adrift in a world of parents. They were also angry at insensitive remarks from those who had children.
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***"Whom do you invite to this funeral
where there's no body –
there hasn't ever been a body?"***

- **Desire for closure.** It is difficult for these women to end their dream of having a biological child. How do you mourn someone who has never been? They also need to express their anger at the frustrating medical treatments they endured.
 - **Need to redefine one's self and one's future.** The women were ambivalent about *"what life without children might look like."*
 - **Need for acceptance and support from significant others.** The support of the spouse and parents are especially important. For some women, it is difficult to draw out support from others without risking further anguish and rejection.
 - **Sense of relief at taking back their lives.** As with any loss, most people can eventually reach a point of acceptance. At this point, they give up trying to become pregnant. Once this happens, the women believe *"that this dark and painful period of their lives was coming to an end."* Then they can successfully move on to other ways to lead a fulfilling life.
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* Adapted from Kathleen McCarthy's article, "Infertile women need help accepting inability to conceive," [*APA Monitor*](#), July 1994, page 52.