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Relax: Fertility Improves When Stress Is Set Aside, Studies Find

Yoga, Meditation May Help Increase Pregnancy Rates; Clinics Add Special Courses

By ANDREA PETERSEN
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
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Couples struggling to have a baby are often the recipients of this well-meaning but dumb-sounding advice: Just relax. Then you'll get pregnant.

As it turns out, there's some validity to it.

"Mind/body programs," which teach relaxation techniques to women struggling with infertility, are demonstrating measurable success in helping women get pregnant. In one Harvard study published in 2000, 55% of those that completed a mind/body program got pregnant within a year, compared with only 20% in a control group. The study tracked 120 women who had been trying to get pregnant for one to two years.

Such programs have been around since the late 1980s, based on research by Herbert Benson and others at Harvard Medical School on the relationship between stress and health. But it is only in the past few years that research has shown that mind/body programs actually can yield more pregnancies.

Now these efforts are proliferating. Stanford Hospital & Clinics in California, for instance, launched a stress-reduction regimen for infertile couples in September. And alternative practitioners have gotten into the business of offering some relaxation techniques to infertility patients. Acupuncturists are providing sessions that they say target infertility and some yoga instructors are launching "Fertility Enhancing" yoga classes.

Infertility experts warn that relaxation techniques are no magic bullet. "The studies are far from conclusive. They involve a small number of patients," says Frederick Licciardi, associate division director of reproductive endocrinology at the New York University School of Medicine. Even so, the NYU infertility practice is launching its own holistic program early next year. The program will include some relaxation techniques. "If the worst-case scenario is that the pregnancy rate is the same and the patients feel better, that is still a successful program," he says.

Jackie Grapa, a 27-year-old graduate student, says she feels the mind/body program she is attending at Stanford is part of the reason that she is eight weeks pregnant. "I was really stressed and anxious all the time," she says. "With the program, we learned to relax and breathe and just to take care of ourselves." Ms. Grapa and her husband, Arie, had been trying to have a child for three years and had undergone several infertility treatments. Ms. Grapa conceived on her first try using IVF.

For most couples, the mind/body programs aren't a replacement for high-tech medical intervention. Many undergo both at the same time.

The relationship between stress and fertility is not well understood. When a woman's body is under extreme stress, from starvation, excess weight loss or exercise, she may stop ovulating. But it is unclear whether garden-variety anxiety and sadness might affect hormone levels and make someone less fertile. Some research does suggest a link. A few recent studies have shown that women who are depressed when they undergo IVF procedures don't get pregnant as readily as women who are not depressed.

The leading programs teach a number of relaxation techniques, including meditation and yoga. At the Mind/Body Medical Institute in Chestnut Hill, Mass., the center founded by Harvard's Dr. Benson, participants are taught short breathing exercises dubbed "minis" to help them get through infertility treatments or a pregnancy test. In one exercise, patients breathe in and say to themselves "positive power." They breathe out and say to themselves "negative nonsense."

"It is really about learning how to cope and taking each day as it comes," says Leslee Kagan, co-director of the Mind/Body program for infertility.

Ms. Kagan also uses elements of cognitive behavioral therapy, a technique to help people change negative thought patterns ("I'll never have a baby") into something more positive ("I'm doing everything I can to be a parent").

The Stanford program teaches couples how to do partner massage. It also brings in guests to lead the group in Qigong, a Chinese meditation and energy practice, and art therapy. Penny Donnelly, the program's director, also suggests ways for couples to make sure that their fertility struggles don't completely take over their lives.

Both the Stanford and Mind/Body Medical Institute's programs meet weekly for 10 weeks, and enroll about a dozen women. The Mind/Body Medical Institute's program costs about \$700; insurance usually picks up most of the cost as insurance plans in Massachusetts have to cover fertility treatments. Stanford charges \$465 for its program, though the price will rise to \$565 in 2005.

For some women, there's also a benefit in meeting couples in the same situation. "The IVF process is really lonely," says Nini Diana, 35, who did the Mind/Body Medical Institute program in 2002 and is now the mother of a four-month-old daughter. "You realize you are not alone."

MIND, BODY, BABY

There is some evidence that mind/body programs can help women get pregnant. Here are the main techniques:

TECHNIQUE	COMMENT
Meditation	Teaches the body and mind to relax and be in the moment. Can use mantras (repeated words) and breathing exercises. Programs recommend that women mediate for 15 minutes to 20 minutes every day.
Yoga	Gentle poses that stretch and strengthen the muscles and quiet the mind. Partner yoga can help couples develop communication skills and trust.
Cognitive retraining	Exercises to transform negative thoughts (I'm never going to have a baby) to something more positive and productive (I'm doing everything I can to become a parent). Can help ease feelings of helplessness and sadness.
Journaling	Women write in journals for about 20 minutes, expressing their feelings and fears about fertility treatments and their desire to become mothers. Can help women express themselves and purge counterproductive thoughts.

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