

Doing anything to have a child; how do you take care of your relationship?

Tips from a psychologist

There is a lot of talk that having children can pose challenges for relationships. But strangely enough, there is almost no discussion at all about what a challenge it can be to try to have children in the first place, and what that can mean for the relationship. This is despite the fact that there is a lot of research on the high stress levels infertility causes and the pressure it puts on the relationship.

The ability to communicate is put to the test when navigating stress, grief and big decisions. Even more so when the individuals have different ways of reacting and dealing with the challenges. Maybe one of you feels a lot of stress that nothing is happening, while the other doesn't feel any sense of urgency. Maybe one of you wants to invite others into the process, while the other doesn't want to share your journey. A miscarriage can be a great sorrow for one of you, while the other wants to look ahead at what's next. Supporting each other, taking care of yourselves, and at the same time being respectful of each other's feelings can be difficult.

It's also easy for the relationship to fall into a "focus zone" where you become more task-oriented than relationship-oriented. For most people, for example, sex quickly transitions from being about pleasure to becoming a chore. In the long run, this creates a risk of permanent distance in the relationship - both emotionally and physically. It is important to consciously try to create a balance between the task- and relationship-oriented work. Between the timed intercourse and medical procedures, it is important to also try to maintain closeness and some form of gratitude and joy.

We think it's time to talk about it!

Anna at Tilly has, based on her own experiences and dialogues with Tilly's community, identified a number of challenges and difficult feelings that many are faced with. She and Linn Heed, a registered psychologist, registered psychotherapist and sexologist at Coupleness, share concrete tips for how to deal with them.

1. Different ways of dealing with adversity and uncertainty
2. Big decisions
3. Sex on demand
4. Feelings of shame and guilt
5. How do we continue to prioritize the relationship?
6. When it feels like you hold all the responsibility



Linn Heed is a psychologist, psychotherapist and sexologist at Coupleness, and has over 30 years of experience with relationships. Among other things, she has worked with fertility patients at Huddinge University Hospital, and over the years has seen hundreds of couples in therapy. She is also consulted frequently by the media. She experienced a traumatic miscarriage in week 20 which has given her a deeper understanding of how the longing for a child can create stress in a relationship.



Anna has gone through several miscarriages, lost two children after week 20 and done IVF in several different countries. In May 2021, she had a son with the help of donated eggs. She is passionate about reducing the stigma and raising awareness of a problem that is often underestimated, and believes in the power of sharing experiences. She is one of the founders of the Tilly platform, which offers support for fertility patients.

1. "I feel alone..."

Different ways of dealing with adversity and uncertainty

You have different ways of handling challenges. One might need to talk about it, while the other wants to avoid the pain. One might feel better searching for lots of information and being two steps ahead, while the other wants to distract themselves with hobbies.

Of course, there is no right or wrong way, but how do you make sure that the other person in the relationship feels seen even if you don't feel exactly the same way? And how do you let each other be sad without getting caught up in negative thought spirals?

Here's what you can do yourself

1. Dare to communicate what you need. Unfortunately, even the best of partners can't read your mind. Of course you have to talk to each other sometimes, but even texting or writing things down can work and feel easier when you need to explain something.
2. If your partner shares a feeling that scares you or isn't in line with what you previously decided, take a deep breath before reacting. When we feel pressured, we often act defensively and sometimes go on the attack. Remind yourself that your partner is in the same process as you even if it looks different for them, and that it's normal for you to not always feel the same way.
3. Remind yourself that your feelings are okay no matter how your partner feels, and that one person can't meet all your needs. Maybe you can turn to an online community or a friend sometimes as well.

Here's what you can do together

1. Take a "walk and talk" once or twice a week (you decide together what suits you) that is dedicated to talking about fertility. It provides an outlet for those who need to talk, and lets those who want to think about other things have a break from talking about it at other times. Of course, questions can arise between these specific walk and talks as well, but having this routine can help create an awareness of how and how often the issue is discussed.
2. Create a new habit: if one of you is struggling with something, the other can ask: "Do you want support or solutions?" This simple sentence can help you avoid many misunderstandings.
3. To encourage a loving generosity between you, remind each other: "Love me most when I deserve it least." Maybe you want to put up a reminder note on the bathroom mirror?

2. "Do we even want the same thing?" Big decisions

Having children is no small decision. Neither is whether to start IVF, use donated gametes, adopt, or decide to pause or stop trying. These are decisions that affect life in lots of big ways, and you must make them together. That can create pressure-filled situations. Here are some suggestions for how to make the decision-making process easier, and for you both to feel that you've had a voice in the decision.

Here's what you can do yourself

1. In order for communication with your partner to be effective, it's important to also sort out your own thoughts and feelings. Journaling - writing down your thoughts - is a proven tool that can help you gain new perspectives, and is mentioned several times in this guide.
2. Big decisions feel safer if you feel you can make informed choices. Start by figuring out what you need to find out in order to make a decision, and then make sure you get that information. Remember that you and your partner might have different needs.
3. No matter how you spin it, you will have to deal with a lot of uncertainty, and it can be good to find tools to deal with your racing thoughts. Find a short meditation or mindfulness exercise that you can return to.

Here's what you can do together

1. Create a new habit: If you want to talk about a (big) decision, always start with: "Is this a good time to talk about this? I really need to talk, but I want you to be receptive, so we can wait and discuss it later if now isn't a good time for you."
2. Have an open dialogue, not only about what you need to decide, but how you will decide it. Maybe you need different lengths of time or different amounts of information, and this needs to be respected when a joint decision needs to be made. If you understand why your partner feels the way they do, it's easier to accept it and to avoid unnecessary assumptions.
3. Make sure that everything you do and talk about doesn't revolve around the decision. Set aside time and space to relax or do something fun together. It can be difficult to find energy for this and you might need to book "us-time" in the calendar, but it can feel good once you do it.

"It can be both good and bad to be in "bad." Good in the sense that one of you can be there for the other who is feeling down. Bad because you can feel that the other's feelings are incomprehensible. You simply have to try to let each other feel as good as possible."

3. "We have to have sex right now..."

Sex on demand

If you've been trying to get pregnant for a while (and if you're still trying unassisted) then you know that it becomes harder and sadder than you can imagine. Something that is usually associated with desire and pleasure becomes mechanical, boring, on demand and performance-focused. It's easy to feel like a function instead of a person. And it's easy to just say that you should let go of the pressure and have sex as often as you want to instead, but that's difficult to actually do. It can even feel like a relief to not have sex after a period when you "had to" be doing it regularly. So how do you maintain that desire, attraction and connection, which, after all, are important parts of a relationship?

Here's what you can do yourself

1. Maybe sex is a bit mechanical during certain periods, but still take the time to think about what you enjoy when you have sex for fun, and tell your partner. Consider them different types of sex: sex with purpose, and sex for pleasure.
2. Tell your partner how you feel about your sex life. That can create conversations that open new doors.
3. Treat yourself to something extra that makes you feel attractive. It doesn't have to be that often or something big; sometimes it's the little things that make a difference.

Here's what you can do together

1. Each of you write down a fantasy for your sex life and share it with each other. It can be as simple as longer foreplay.
2. Have really good makeout sessions. Maybe every day? Or at least have an extra long hug as often as possible. Closeness and attraction are so much more than sex.
3. Complete the sentence: "I think you are sexy when you..."

4. "It's my fault..."

Feelings of shame and guilt

Most of us take having children for granted, thinking that they'll come when it suits us. So when your period keeps coming every month, or when what is supposed to be simple and obvious turns into a long series of doctor visits and failures, it's easy to blame yourself. The silent guilt and the invisible shame are devastating both for the individual and for the relationship.

Here's what you can do yourself

1. Give yourself some extra love - maybe use affirmations, supportive words you can repeat to yourself. It may feel artificial at first, but it can be helpful in strengthening your relationship with yourself.
2. Write down your feelings to gain perspective and learn what triggers the negative ones. The better you understand your feelings, the easier it will be to talk about them with your partner.
3. Share your thoughts and feelings with people outside your relationship to break the silence around your guilt. If you don't feel that you have a friend who understands, you can always turn to an online forum with others going through the same thing.

Here's what you can do together

1. Listen to each other's feelings and try to respond to them with more than "That's not true, it's not your fault." Instead, try "I understand that it can feel that way, and here's another perspective." This can help the other person to feel more seen.
2. Affirm each other with words and actions as often as possible. It might require setting reminders to give your partner a little pick-me-up.
3. Again, try talking to people outside your relationship to get a better understanding and gain new perspectives. If your partner keeps all their emotions, encourage them to see a psychologist or therapist. Talking to a neutral person can be very helpful for both the individual and the couple, even if you don't go together.

"I think the most important thing we have done for each other is to never question each other's feelings - no matter how big or difficult they are. When the rest of the world has tried to come up with solutions, we have always tried to say something along the lines of: 'Thank you for sharing. I might not feel the same way, but please explain so I can understand.'"

5. "Who are we without children?"

How do we continue to prioritize the relationship?

Suddenly all you see are strollers and pregnant women, and the commercials on TV are only about diapers and baby food. Big questions like "Can we be happy without children?" hide around every corner, and thoughts about ovulation, sperm production, healthy lifestyles, reducing alcohol, and strict meal plans take over completely. As if it wasn't already difficult to find time for each other in everyday life. It can be tough to find the energy, but remember that activities that distract us and help us focus on other things can ultimately provide us with more energy.

Here's what you can do yourself

1. Write in a gratitude journal. There is a lot of research that shows this can bring positive effects like more joy and better sleep.
2. Try to set goals (even little ones) that aren't linked to your fertility journey.
3. Try different tools that help you break out of negative thought patterns. For example, you can reflect on the day by writing down a challenge that you worked through successfully. Pay attention to the micro level, as it's often the small, insidious thoughts that sneak back in over and over again, and the little wins that can give us a boost.

Here's what you can do together

1. Have a standing date in the calendar when you are not allowed to talk about having children.
2. List three areas of your relationship you want to develop (like fun, communication or intimacy), and set reasonable achievable goals within each area. Evaluate your progress once a month and keep track of your fantastic growth.
3. Thank your partner for something they have done during the day, or give them a compliment. It might sound silly, but maybe you can add a reminder to your calendar so you don't miss a day.

6. "You just don't understand..."

When it feels like you hold all the responsibility

Do you keep track of ovulation alone? Are you the one who knows which day you can test? Or are you the one who spends endless hours googling for a new solution? As with many tasks, it's easy for the division of responsibilities to become skewed, and it can feel really lonely. Where did the teamwork go? How do you make your partner understand that you are both on this journey, and that you are tired of being a project manager and alone in the driver's seat?

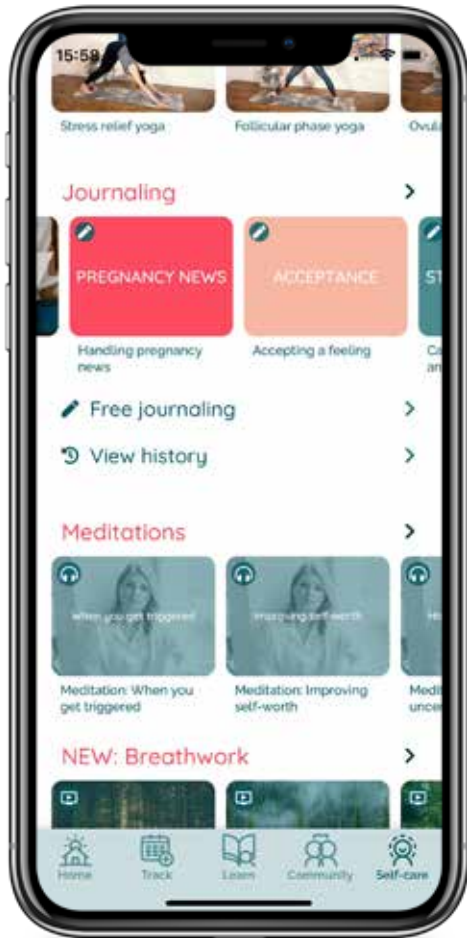
Here's what you can do yourself

1. Remind yourself that you both have different ways of dealing with your life situation, and that your partner's lack of involvement doesn't mean that they don't care.
2. Use journaling (writing down your thoughts) to identify what makes you feel alone and what could change it. Reflect on if you have invited your partner into the process and explained what you're missing, and how you can do so.
3. Tell your partner that you feel lonely and miss feeling like you're in this together. They might not have known that, or they might feel the same way without being able to put it into words. Try to avoid being accusatory, and focus on explaining your feelings and needs.

Here's what you can do together

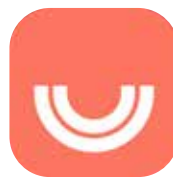
1. Make a plan as if this were another project in your life, like a home renovation. Go through what needs to be done and decide who will do what, and when you will do something together. You might realize that you actually prefer to handle a lot yourself, and what you really want is for your partner to ask about things from time to time. Maybe your partner hasn't known what they can help with, and hasn't dared to ask because they are ashamed that they are less knowledgeable.
2. Create a WhatsApp group (or use a similar communication tool) for the two of you where you can ask each other things, collect questions before a doctor's visit, or share information. It can simplify questions and tasks, and each individual can also process information and respond when they feel receptive, rather than right when the other person has brought it up. Above all, it can create a sense of teamwork - as long as you don't put pressure on both of you to write exactly the same amount.
3. Support each other with words and actions, as often as you can. Share your appreciation for things the other person does or says, small and large. Appreciation strengthens the feeling of working together.

"It's been important for us to be able to share both our negative and positive feelings. Remember to also put words to when you feel joy or hope. Allow each other to be happy in happy moments."



About Tilly

Fertility affects almost everyone during some part of life - yet we rarely talk about it. Anna and Jenny Ann thought that cycle tracking and IVF apps only answered a small part of the questions they had on their own winding roads to having children. So, they created Tilly to offer the support they lacked - for both body and soul. Tilly is available in the App Store and Google Play.



About Coupleness

We at Coupleness are all about making it easy for couples to take care of their relationships. Together with our users, we have created the tool that we needed in our lives. Using Coupleness is a way to be proactive and build positive habits in everyday life, not just every now and then on a fancy date night. Coupleness is available in the App Store and Google Play.

