

INFERTILITY, 'Oftentimes you have to talk to someone who's been through it'



Hope Firsell and her husband Chad went through one miscarriage, four rounds of invitro fertilization, seven doctors and countless disappointments in three years of trying to have a baby.

Now, they're awaiting the birth of their first child, by a surrogate mother.

But going through all they did put Hope Firsell on a new career path: to help others cope with the emotional fallout of infertility. About a year ago, she became a fertility coach, a new type of life coach who counsels couples on everything from dealing with family-oriented holidays to reconsidering what it means to be a parent.

"Friends and family and doctors, they're all wonderful, and they mean well, but oftentimes you have to talk to someone who's been through it," says Firsell, of Roscoe Village. "People who haven't experienced this don't understand the true depth of sadness and depression that can come from it."

Infertility affects about one in five U.S. couples. The frustration of not being able to have a child -- as well as the expense of fertility treatment -- can strain marriages and other relationships. It's especially hard for women who have based their identity on becoming a mother, Firsell says.

One of her clients -- a 36-year-old woman named Heather who asks that her last name not be used, puts it this way: "Our generation works really hard to get what we want when we want it. But, with infertility, it doesn't matter how hard you try, you can't achieve what you want."

Another client, Bryce Fuller, of Northbrook, says Firsell's coaching was a "necessity" while he and his wife Lori were trying to conceive because, "when you're going through it, you feel like nobody understands. Your life kind of shuts down."

Some fertility coaches are nurses or have some other medical background. Firsell's background is in corporate America, where she advised Fortune 500 companies on mergers, acquisitions and other transitions. "They're both about helping people adjust to change," she says of her careers. "Just taking on this identity of having fertility issues -- sometimes that's one of the biggest hurdles of all."

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In addition to her NuFocus Empowerment Coaching, Firsel also is the fertility coach for Pulling Down the Moon, a holistic-care center for women trying to conceive. She charges \$85 to \$120 for each session and likes to meet with clients once a week for at least three months. Regardless of whether the couples and single moms she counsels conceive with donated eggs, decide to adopt or accept being childless, Firsel says they are all "success stories."

"Success is finding peace and joy in loving ourselves and our lives," she says.