

The Power of the Mind/Body Connection to Conception



Niravi B. Payne

A new vision in health care is emerging, challenging the age old separation of mind and body which I believe undergirds the reproductive crisis of today. There is growing evidence that our emotional and physical health and well-being is affected by the complex interplay of psychosocial, psychological and physiological factors, affecting conception.

Contrary to popular belief, fertility is not determined by one's age or the number and quality of one's eggs alone. Fertility is a lifelong relationship with oneself regardless of age or whether or not one has a biological child.

Efforts to portray women between the ages of 35 and 45 as 'too old' for motherhood or to conceive undermines the confidence of millions of women concerning their fertility. It also places undue fear-based pressure on women in their 20's and 30's to have families when they are not ready to do so.

I am concerned that under the weight of these judgments one's natural ability to conceive is sadly being 'lost-in-the-shuffle' of ageist — based statistics, charts and dictums which unnaturally separate one's emotional life from physiological consequences.

Feeling open and receptive to the reproductive process has more to do with how we feel about ourselves as sensual, sexual and fertile beings. And...how we feel about ourselves today

is largely influenced by unexpressed (often unconscious) thoughts, emotions, beliefs and behaviors based on unfinished business from childhood.

As a mind/body psychotherapist for the past 20 years, I have worked with thousands of women and men worldwide who, either naturally or in conjunction with medical fertility treatments, increased their opportunity to conceive when they realized that their difficulties in conception or carrying a pregnancy to term were not necessarily only a medical problem. In broadening your view and allowing yourself to explore some troublesome and even at times painful issues in your personal history and current life, you can reclaim your reproductive rights.

In this exciting era of mind/body research we are discovering how thoughts, feelings and physiological reactions are interrelated and interconnected. Our endocrine, immune and nervous systems are all intimately connected and influenced by every thought we think and every emotion we feel.

If you are going through the often painful and frustrating process of trying to conceive, you may be unaware of how strongly your family's emotional history and early childhood experiences can affect your reproductive system today.

Seeing yourself as part of a family system that influenced your emotions, beliefs, thoughts and attitudes toward sexuality, conception, pregnancy and childbirth will open up new reproductive possibilities as you identify and resolve the ties that bind you to past conditioning.

Willingness to explore how your family history 'talks' to you creates new levels of understanding that can enrich and change many aspects of your daily life. Dr. Christiane Northrup, author of *Women 's Bodies, Women 's Wisdom*, notes: 'Women are almost never told how their family histories, beliefs and emotions can affect their fertility. Knowing this information can be very empowering.' Unresolved family issues, which may block pregnancy, can affect your relationship with yourself, your mate and family members.

No Guilt/No Blame; Understanding is the Key

When I raise these important mind/body issues for consideration, I am often met with, 'Are you blaming me for my fertility problems?' On the contrary, becoming aware of the mind/body factors involved can help free you from conscious and unconscious self-blame, regret, and anger that is often directed at yourself, your body or your mate. As you deepen your awareness of this vital connection between how you feel, your inherited belief systems, your learned conditioned responses to the circumstances,

people and events in your life and, what happens in your body, you can influence your ability to conceive by making changes in your life.

Trailblazing Boomers and The Reproductive Challenge

We may have lost sight of why millions of women throughout the world deferred childbearing for ten to fifteen years. There were complex social, political and psychological factors that gave rise to the Baby Boomers' decision to delay childbearing, altering the reproductive life patterns familiar to their parents and thousands of generations before them. This was not a capricious decision based on 'wanting-it-all'! It was born of a generation that did not want to repeat the often frustrated lives of their parents (particularly their mothers). Millions of boomers rebelled against the narrowly defined lives that they saw their mothers living in the 1950's. They said 'no' to early marriage and childbearing and 'yes' to defining and developing themselves. And many mothers of baby boomers, recognizing the lack of fulfillment and frustration that characterized their own lives, encouraged their daughters to seek college educations and professional careers.

For the first time in human history, via the pill and legalized abortion, women could take charge of their reproductive lives. This generation of women, generally healthier than their mothers were at the same age, have become trailblazers in challenging the stereotypical view of aging, affecting almost all facets of life.

Unjustly being labeled as 'old', particularly by the medical system, not only negatively impacts a woman's

emotional and physical health and well-being, it also affects younger generations of women and men. What are the messages we are sending? And what are the consequences?

Who Says I'm Too Old?

Ironically over the last 20 years, births to women over age 40 have increased by 50%. And in 1991, 92,000 women in the U.S. over age 40 had babies. That number continues to rise. A lot of forty-something women don't realize how fertile they are, which may account for the fact that they are second only to women ages 19-25 in frequency of abortions. (Christiane Northrup's, M.D. *'Health Wisdom for Women'*, Newsletter Issue, Vol.4, No.7, July 1997.

Understandably many women I work with initially feel devastated at being told that they or their eggs are too old, and, the age for this determination is getting younger and younger. My concern is that if women are convinced that they are 'too-old' and that there is 'little hope', if any, this belief will be reflected negatively in their bodies.

Mind/Body Research 'Talks'

As a biofeedback specialist, I have reviewed countless scientific studies that validate the mind/body interconnection and interdependence. Whether our conscious mind is aware of what we are feeling or not, our bodies register our reactions. The mind is an amazing recorder of events and feelings. Every single thing that ever happened to you is there, somewhere in your memory bank. In a sense, you have a whole personal history book inside your head. There is a constant 'dialogue' between our

thoughts, images, beliefs and feelings that leads to chemical, hormonal, neurological and muscular changes that can throw off the delicately balanced hormonal system involved in reproduction. Hormones released in response to emotional upset, tension or anxiety disrupts the natural flow of important pituitary gland secretions necessary to produce and release luteinizing hormone (LII) and follicle-stimulating hormone (FHS). With the disruption, menstruation may become irregular or ovulation may be suppressed altogether. Nerve fibers traveling through the spinal cord also link the brain directly to the ovaries, uterus and fallopian tubes. In men, because of similar links between the brain and the reproductive organs, tension can reduce sex drives and cause impotence.

For a period of time, researchers have known that chronic stress can cause unhealthy elevations in one's heart rate, blood pressure and create muscle tension weakening the immune system. Now they believe stress may dampen fertility too, by reducing egg quality, delaying release of eggs, preventing implantation of a fertilized egg or lowering levels of hormones needed for an embryo to thrive.

Relaxing and releasing any tension you may be holding in your body increases your blood flow, carrying oxygen and nutrients throughout your system, and particularly to the endometrium, the mucous membrane lining the uterus, essential to nourish and sustain the quality of the fetal blood supply.

As you deepen your awareness of this vital connection between how you feel, what conditioned your responses and what happens in your body, you can make important changes in your

beliefs and behavior influencing your general health and wellbeing and impacting on your ability to conceive.

To reiterate, negative emotional responses to these experiences (fear, anger, anxiety, depression, for example) are transformed by the brain into biochemical and electrical messages which are then released directly into the bloodstream and transmitted to the hypothalamic/pituitary/ gonadal axis, hormonally responsible for reproduction.

Birth of the Whole Person Fertility Program/The Fertility Solution:

I had no idea that fertility would become my life's work when I received my degree and began my professional life as a psychotherapist and biofeedback specialist. In working with biofeedback instruments, I saw tangible evidence of what I had always believed in my heart: mind and emotions have the power to affect the body.

The *Whole Person Fertility Program* and the book, *The Fertility Solution, A Revolutionary Mind/Body Process to Help You Conceive*, Thorsons, 2002, was conceived in response to the urgent need for an integrated mind/body approach to assist you if you are having difficulty conceiving or holding a pregnancy to term. This is the first mind/body fertility program used on its own or in conjunction with medical fertility treatments which offers a broader view of fertility and is intended to heal the split between emotions and bodily responses. This powerful step-by-step process has been responsible for assisting thousands of women and men in their efforts to conceive as they learn to listen to their mind/body's inner dialogue.

Deeply ingrained in all of us are powerful family beliefs, rules, messages, attitudes and patterns of behavior that influence your life and affect your sexual life, relationships and ultimately your reproductive system.

As family patterns are so influential, it is very helpful to understand how you may be repeating the past or reacting against it in your life today. We have accepted many of these patterns of beliefs and behavior often without knowing we are doing so, or, if known, we see them as irrelevant to our lives today. When clients make the connection between what they are feeling, what is going on in their lives, the emotional messages they are often unknowingly 'sending' to their bodies, and the symptoms they are experiencing, profound levels of healing take place.

Meryl and Richard's Story: The Power of Sibling Rivalry

In 1982, one of my clients, Meryl, 36, tearfully told me of her frustration at not being able to conceive. She and her husband Richard, 38, both attorneys, had been trying to have a baby for thirteen years. Meryl cried when she told me, 'It hasn't happened for us, but I can't give up my dream of having my own child'. I was deeply moved both professionally and personally. It was not until I did this work that I realized how my family history had affected by ability to conceive. Clinical case studies of adults reliving post and prenatal traumas — especially painful experiences, could be traced to events occurring during and before births.

Current research, such as that published by the Association for Pre and Prenatal Psychology is confirming

the incredible impact experienced in utero of parental emotional states, affecting our development throughout our lives.

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The medical diagnosis offered to Meryl and Richard was unexplained infertility...which meant no apparent medical reason why they were not conceiving. As we worked together, their life stories revealed unresolved family conflicts and painful childhood experiences. Meryl's parents were locked in an on-going combative relationship, abusively treating their children as unwanted beings. Meryl's father would lock Meryl out of the house, whether she was clothed or not, as a way of punishing her for the slightest infraction of his rules. While crying for a child, Meryl was also terrified that she would repeat her family's destructive behavior with her baby. I have heard many clients express this deep concern.

Richard's dad had died at 39 and his mother turned to his older brother Jim and himself as a substitute mate demanding their unrelenting attention. They had to be home by 4 p.m. every day regardless of their interests. Her major demand once her sons were married: 'I want

grandchildren!' Despite their mother's intense pressure, the brothers did not comply; both —oddly enough— experiencing 'sperm-quality' problems. Jim and his wife Irene were unable to conceive for 15 years.

Richard becoming consciously aware of the basis for his resistance realized he was not serving his own heartfelt desire for a baby. Our intensive therapeutic work ultimately resulted in the natural conception and birth of Ashley. Ironically when Meryl and Richard conceived, Jim and Irene became pregnant three months later! Jim's energy was fueled by his desire not to be 'outdone' by his younger brother. Amazing - in harnessing the power of sibling rivalry both brothers and their wives presented their mother with two children -three months apart.

Alex Kingston' Story

Recently, Alex Kingston, British actress in the TV drama ER, went public concerning her work with my program. The following article, which appeared in *Marie Claire* magazine, UK, March 2001 is included for illustrative purposes. 'I was put in touch with an incredible woman, Niravi Payne, who I spoke to twice a week. She's a therapist who specializes in fertility issues and is author of a remarkable book, *The Fertility Solution: A Revolutionary Mind-Body Process To Help You Conceive*.

She believes many fertility problems can be traced back to experiences in the womb and in childhood, which have blocked you. Until these experiences are released or acknowledged you may not be able to conceive. One of my sisters is physically and mentally handicapped,

and I realized that I was holding on to a lot of fear about that — it was something my mother and I didn't talk about. Niravi was brilliant when I was going through the intensely medical procedures over which I was starting to get very upset. I don't think I could have gone through it emotionally without her support. I was able to release a huge amount of stuff I'd been holding onto all my life without releasing it. While our talks were traumatic for me, they also made me much more calm. Yes, I did have Flo's wonderful support, but I needed somebody who knew what I was going through and who also knew, ahead of me, the emotional hurdles I would have to overcome. Counseling is not just needed during IVF treatment, but afterwards. I knew that if it didn't work this time, I would desperately need Niravi to help me accept it and to move on or try again.'

The circumstances of your family story may be quite different from that of Meryl and Richard - or that of Alex Kingston. It is the application of this system to your life situation that can make a reproductive difference for you.

'The Ephistogram: Mapping Your Family History/Exploring Your Attitudes Toward Pregnancy and Childbirth

To gain insight into your own emotional conditioning, you need to examine the patterns of your family members' emotional lives and physical illnesses and symptoms over as many generations as possible. In doing so, you can tap into a vast reservoir of details about your life-what your parents and grandparents felt about their lives, their attitudes toward menstruation, conception, pregnancy, the birthing process, and parenting,

and how this affects our difficulty in either conceiving or holding pregnancy to term.

The ephistogram maps out the interconnections and interdependencies of at least three generations - you and your siblings, your parents, siblings of parents, and grandparents. I often compare the process of creating an ephistogram to becoming master detectives of our lives, slowly and meticulously exploring the clues, plots, subplots, and counterplots in our family histories, the dark corners as well as the light. In your effort to understand your family's generational emotional climate, remember that physical symptoms, particularly reproductive problems, are indicative of a person's emotional state. Pioneering therapist Virginia Satir referred to parents as the 'architects' of our families. Their relationships - good and bad - serve as models for our current love relationships and our expectations of intimacy. The way in which our parents related to us shaped our self-image and sense of self-worth.

Your past experiences will always be a part of you, but your consciousness of these experiences and how they affect you will make a crucial difference in how you work with and respond to them. That is where the healing occurs.

EXPLORING YOUR FEELINGS ABOUT 'AGE'

What are your feelings about age-generally and in terms of conception? Also, consider how your parents regarded aging, particularly your mother: Was she afraid of getting old? Finally, compare your life today with that of your mother and father when they were the age you are now. Are there more differences or more similarities?

Take a few minutes to consider your initial reaction on hearing yourself or your reproductive organs labeled as 'infertile, too old, inadequate, incompetent,' or any other damaging, negative terms. How does that connect with the way you have been feeling about yourself? Write down all of these feelings in a journal.

Mini Attitudinal Questionnaire

The following questions are offered as an opportunity to stimulate your thoughts and feelings about you, your family history, your birth, and their impact on you today. Your responses may provide you with some clues. As you read the questions and respond, be aware of any reactions you may be experiencing in your body.

1. As you were growing up, did you hear negative stories about menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth or childbearing from your parents, grandparents, aunts or uncles?
2. Specifically, what did you hear about your birth? From which parent? Do the stories differ between your mother and father?
3. Do you feel that children were valued by your mother, father, grandparents and siblings? Do you feel that you were valued? How?
4. Did any of your siblings have difficulty conceiving? Did they conceive — and you did not? Do you have an idea why this may be so?
5. How does your family view working women and motherhood?
6. Are many of your major life decisions based upon whether your parents would approve?
7. Why do you want to have a baby? Why don't you?

Consider: Do you see any family issues in your responses? As you look over your responses, are there any significant factors that you have been aware of? Any material relevant to conception?

The real freedom from our negative parental conditioning occurs when we stop denying that we are like our parents. Rather, asking ourselves how we feel, think act and react like our parents is the beginning of our separation and healing process. When we look at our lives in this way, it is easier to bring to light multigenerational ambivalence about conception.

The Healing Journey from 'The Fertility Solution,' is an opportunity for you to identify and release repressed emotions that may be inhibiting your ability to conceive. As you confront these conception-blocking feelings, you will create an emotionally open space that can respond to positive, loving, fertile images. This journey will help you create a healthy emotional base from which to move toward the life you desire and deserve, and toward the life you will be creating.

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