

Introduction

I have learned everybody has a story but that many are not willing to tell it. This, I believe, is especially true when it comes to infertility. For many years I refused to let people enter my world of shame and embarrassment. It was not something I was proud to own, and I was not about to let people know of the challenge that I thought degraded me.

Not being able to have children can have a dramatic impact on one's life. I know because I suffered from infertility, which impacted me in ways I could never have imagined. It had a life-altering, gripping effect that changed the very way I viewed myself and those around me. The effects of infertility are not easily understood by those who have not experienced it.

During my infertility battle, my focus was primarily on what I felt had gone wrong or what I thought I could not have. I became so consumed with my emotions that I forgot about the many wonderful things that I had in my life. Because of its all-consuming impact, I missed out on many of the great gifts life had to offer me. My infertility became so overwhelming that the joys of life no longer mattered.

I wanted to create life with my husband and feel that life growing inside of me. I wanted to experience that mother-child bond I had heard so much about. I longed to know what it felt like to hold my newborn child for the very first time and feel its tiny body on my chest. I wanted to be fruitful and add to our family tree.

The desire to conceive was so strong that it shook me to my very core. I wanted what my mother and my sisters had. As time went on, I witnessed my nieces and even my stepdaughter bring life into the world. With the birth announcement of each new child, my desire continued to grow, and my heart ached continually for what I felt I would never experience. They were able to accomplish something that I was denied. It seemed completely unfair and even cruel until the day I finally woke up. I awakened from my self-inflicted nightmare and began to see life in a more beautiful and enlightening way. It is that enlightenment that I have chosen to share with you.

Infertility is like being trapped in a room with no windows: all I could

see was what was before me, and this is how I got stuck. I was sabotaging my own happiness, until I was able to acknowledge that even though what I was going through was indeed real and painful, life wouldn't be over for me if I never conceived and birthed children. After accepting infertility as a part of my reality, I slowly began to stop grieving and started the journey of moving forward. As time passed, I realized that the room that had held me captive now had windows and doors.

Overcoming the Emotional Stigmas of Infertility: Barren but Not Ashamed is a memoir of my personal journey through infertility. I share the various disappointing events that led me to accept a mindset of defeat and embrace a myriad of negative emotions and stigmas that, for a period of time, took power over my life. On the outside I appeared happy, carefree, strong, and confident, but behind that mask I hid shame, pain, hurt, self-ridicule, and constant disappointment that wasn't evident to many people, including those closest to me.

"Barren" is a biblical term that is not commonly used today as it relates to infertility, but it described my situation perfectly. Yet my womb was not the only thing that was barren. My hopes and dreams of having children, which many of the women in my family saw come true, had become barren, as well. I constantly wore a "damaged goods" label that presented itself with each disappointing realization. Along with that label came discouragement, self-pity, isolation, anger, sadness, loneliness, hurt, embarrassment, and a laundry list of other tormenting thoughts and emotions.

I was taught to be thankful for everything that happens in my life, but how could I possibly give thanks for being infertile? I lost touch with the real me and began to lose sight of the things that made me special. I devalued myself and could not see how anything good could possibly come from my circumstances. I definitely was not thankful and did not consider this to be a blessing. For this reason, I struggled with the concept of thankfulness for my infertility for a long time.

I was able to overcome my infertility stigmas and reclaim the power that I had previously relinquished, which allowed me to heal within and ultimately remove the mask that had kept me afraid and reluctant to speak openly about my truth. I was not only able to move beyond the damaging effect of my circumstances, I was able to recognize good in it.

The desire to rise above my situation sent me on a journey of looking deep within, rediscovering who I was and why my experience

with infertility was purposeful. The process was empowering, and through it I learned that my journey was not just about me; it was also to help others who are suffering. The concept of being grateful for all things had a greater meaning for me, and it all made sense. Instead of focusing on my pain and disappointments, I learned the importance of being thankful for every part of my life, including my infertility journey.

Perhaps there are similarities between my experiences and the ones you are encountering. I am sharing my story because there are many women and men who are struggling with the inability to have children and are embarrassed or ashamed by it, like I was. Others are dealing with the torments and emotional stigmas associated with it, just as I did.

In this book, you will learn the emotional coping mechanisms and strategies for infertility that I used to overcome negative emotions and stigmas. These techniques allowed me to break free from my own tormented thoughts and gave me the power to remove the mask that kept me hidden for many years. It is my desire that you embrace the words in this book and allow them to help you during this trying period in your life. It is also my hope that you find a purpose in your infertility challenges.

You may be wondering if this book is for you. If so, consider the following: If you have ever longed to have children and were told your chances were slim to none, this book is for you. If you feel an empty feeling in your heart and a void in your soul every time you see a pregnant woman or a family with children, this book is for you. If you ever feel like giving up on conceiving but need the strength to go on, this book is for you.

If you have ever gone through a cycle of fertility treatments only to see your empty womb on the ultrasound screen and felt the sting of disappoint, this book is for you. If you have ever conceived a child and lost it from a miscarriage, this book is for you. If you are a man and have been diagnosed with infertility, this book is for you. If you are a husband or a loved one who shares in the heartache of a person facing infertility, this book is for you. If you are a stepparent, this book is for you.

If you feel embarrassed because you have fertility challenges, this book is for you. If you have felt heartache after seeing another negative pregnancy test, this book is for you. If attending baby showers has become too difficult, this book is for you. If you have dealt with

infertility on any level, this book is for you.

Infertility is one of the most common medical issues for women and can cause heart-wrenching feelings. Its reality can make a person feel incomplete and ashamed. African American women have been stereotyped as being highly fertile, but infertility is quite prominent in this community. I have learned that more and more people from this ethnic group are being diagnosed with infertility. *Women's Health* magazine states that infertility affects at least 12 percent of all women up to age forty-four. Studies suggest Black women may be almost twice as likely to experience infertility as White women. That being said, the belief that any ethnic group can easily conceive is being challenged, and the dream of starting a family doesn't happen as easily as one may think.

Infertility is commonly associated with women, but a large percentage of men are diagnosed, as well. According to the American Society for Reproductive Medicine, "New studies show that in approximately 40% of infertility couples, the male partner is either the sole cause or a contributing cause of infertility." It is my belief that infertility threatens men's virility and masculinity. I believe they can hide behind a mask that can be as emotionally impacting as a woman's, if not more so.

I decided to use my life story as a means to help others move forward in their journey. I am a certified professional coach, an energy leadership index master practitioner, a member of the International Coach Federation, and have more than twenty years of personal infertility experience. Becoming an infertility and life-purpose coach allows me to assist those who are facing the turmoil and difficulties of infertility. This gives me the opportunity to help them sort things out; get unstuck; and find balance, endurance, and acceptance during their journey. I also lead a monthly infertility support group in my area.

I understand that everyone's experience with infertility is extremely personal, so I will not say that I know exactly what others have encountered or are feeling. I only know what I have experienced and that my infertility challenges led me to evolve into a stronger and better person. Without them, I would not have the experience and compassion to help others in their journey.

Infertility is like a thief in the night. It can rob you of your life. I let it rob me of mine for a very long time, but I found the strength and courage to stop it from stealing another moment of my peace,

joy, and happiness. I am now stronger, wiser, more courageous, and free. It is my hope that by learning from my experiences, you will let go of any unproductive emotions and reconnect with the strength, courage, peace, and power that dwells within you.

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