

CAN YOU STILL BE HAPPY IF YOUR BABY DREAM FAILS?

One in five of us in our mid-forties hasn't started a family. Here, Closer speaks to a woman who's learned to love being childless

After ten years of trying for a baby, 11 rounds of IVF and five miscarriages, Jessica Hepburn finally realised the truth – she'd never have a child of her own. Jessica, 47, from London, had taken out loans, re-mortgaged her home and maxed out her credit cards to afford the £70,000 cost of fertility treatment – only to be left heartbroken. But now, after accepting that her baby dream will never become a reality, Jessica says there is more to life than having children.

STRUGGLE

She says, "The battle to conceive was physically and emotionally draining, but after trying so hard for so long, I accepted defeat. I was forced to find other ways to be happy. Now, I can say I've swum the English Channel – another childhood goal of mine – and I'm planning to climb Mount Everest. I may not have achieved my dream of becoming a mother, but I've learned I can still live a fulfilled life."

Two weeks ago, *Loose Women* star Lisa Riley revealed how, aged 41, she had given up trying to have a baby following seven months of IVF. But she said she had accepted it, adding, "It's OK not to have a child. I have a lovely life."

Jessica's fertility struggle is one that is shared by many 40-something women, with statistics showing that 18 per cent of women aged 45 are

childless – a figure that has doubled in a generation.

Catherine Hill, from the Fertility Network UK, says that, while some women are childless by choice, many are childless by chance. She reveals, "As well as medical, social and economic factors, many women haven't been able to find a partner who is ready to commit before their fertility declines. We need more understanding about the grief caused by childlessness. We always encourage women to seek counselling to cope with this. We also encourage people to consider the circumstances, before asking a woman probing questions about why she may not have children."

Jessica, an author, began trying for children with her partner, Peter, when she was 34. She says, "I thought that the moment I stopped using contraception it would happen, but after a year of disappointment, we went

to a fertility clinic and, in 2005, a doctor diagnosed unexplained infertility."

Over the ten years that followed, Jessica underwent 11 rounds of IVF. She says, "No one warned me how gruelling and debilitating the constant injections and hormonal changes would be. Peter and I bickered constantly, it was extremely hard to cope with. I had three early miscarriages, one very late and one ectopic pregnancy. Friends' pregnancy announcements would

'I REALISED HAVING A CHILD WASN'T THE ONLY INCREDIBLE THING I'M CAPABLE OF'

leave me in tears, and they eventually stopped inviting me to baby showers for fear of upsetting me."

After her 11th failed attempt at IVF, Jessica finally realised she had to move on. She explains, "I started to think of other ways that I could feel fulfilled that didn't involve children. I gave up so much of my 30s to IVF but, in my 40s, I wanted to live life to the full. Swimming the English Channel was a dream I've had since childhood, so I decided to train for it."

While training for her swim, Jessica decided to research more into what her life would

One in five women won't ever be a mother

mean without motherhood and invited different women – some mothers, some not – to dinner parties.

She explains, "I wanted to meet with different women to see if I could answer the question of whether motherhood makes you happy. I met so many inspiring women

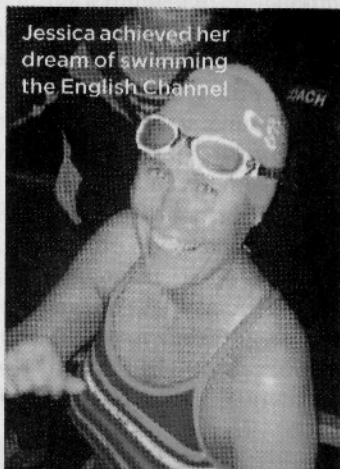
– one who had her first baby at 56 after egg donation, another who never became a mother but loves her stepchildren. I also met a few women who

never wanted children and are sick of being asked why.

LIFE-CHANGING

"It helped me understand my own position a lot more, and I realised that there are a lot of different routes to motherhood – whether you have your own biological children or are involved in a much more indirect way by helping out in a community."

And Jessica said she also met mothers who wished they hadn't had children. She says, "I had a very honest conversation with a filmmaker, who said motherhood was the worst thing that had happened to her.



Jessica achieved her dream of swimming the English Channel

WHERE TO TURN

Fertility Network UK's Catherine Hill offers the following advice if you're having difficulty conceiving:

- **Speak out.** It's important to remember that you're not alone.
- **Seek Help.** There is counselling and emotional support available to you. As a starting point, The Fertility Network runs a More To Life webinar series, offering talks and advice from professionals on how to move forwards.
- **Find others.** Talking with those going through similar circumstances can really help. Fertility Network UK organises meet-ups in safe spaces. Visit our website, www.fertilitynetworkuk.org for more information.

Jessica says she has learned to focus on other dreams

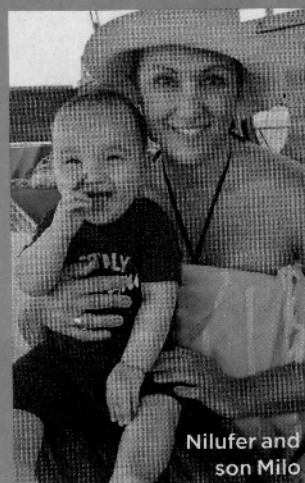
Nature as to whether the currents in the sea were gentle enough for me to do it.

"It was a life-changing moment and a huge achievement that I'll always look back on. It made me realise that having a baby wasn't the only incredible thing a body was capable of. Since then, I've also run a marathon and I'm training to climb Mount Everest. I also campaign to raise awareness of fertility issues. I won't pretend that it doesn't still hurt to think I'll never have a child, and I'll carry that pain like a bruise, but I refuse to let it define me. I haven't ruled out adoption or becoming a mother another way, but I've learned to focus on other dreams."

By Anna Matheson

● *21 Miles: Swimming In Search Of The Meaning Of Motherhood* by Jessica Hepburn is out now

'MOTHERHOOD ISN'T EVERYTHING'



Nilufer and son Milo

Mum-of-one Nilufer Atik, 42, is a writer from Surrey. After being told she'd be unlikely to conceive, she was left devastated - until she accidentally fell pregnant. But she admits "motherhood isn't everything". She says, "I really wanted kids, but was very focused on my career, social life and travelling in my 20s. I was planning to try for kids with my ex until we broke up when I was 38. Then, due to a hormonal condition, I was told the chances of me

having children were slim. Suddenly, everywhere I went I'd see mums cooing over their babies and I'd feel that longing. I was convinced I'd never be truly happy unless I had a child.

"I met my partner, Matt, when I was 39, and ten months into our relationship, I fell pregnant. Our son Milo, now one, enriches our lives in ways I could never have imagined. But looking back, I realise I loved my life before him, too. I had a great career, nice holidays, tons of friends, a gym-honed body I was proud of and I didn't have to answer to anyone. I became so convinced that my happiness was linked to having children, that I almost forgot about how amazing my life was. Of course I love Milo, but I genuinely think I'd have been just as happy had I never had children."

It's a taboo subject, but it clearly happens a lot."

After completing her English Channel swim in September 2015, Jessica decided to turn her research into a book, charting the conversations she held about motherhood.

She says, "The swim took 17 hours and it was one of the hardest things I've ever done. In a way, it was a lot like going through labour, as I was completely reliant on Mother