



# THE THINGS I WISH I'D KNOWN

Jessica Hepburn, *Fertility Road* Columnist and Author of *The Pursuit of Motherhood*, talks to women on other side of their difficult journey to parenthood about the advice they would give to those just starting out on this path.

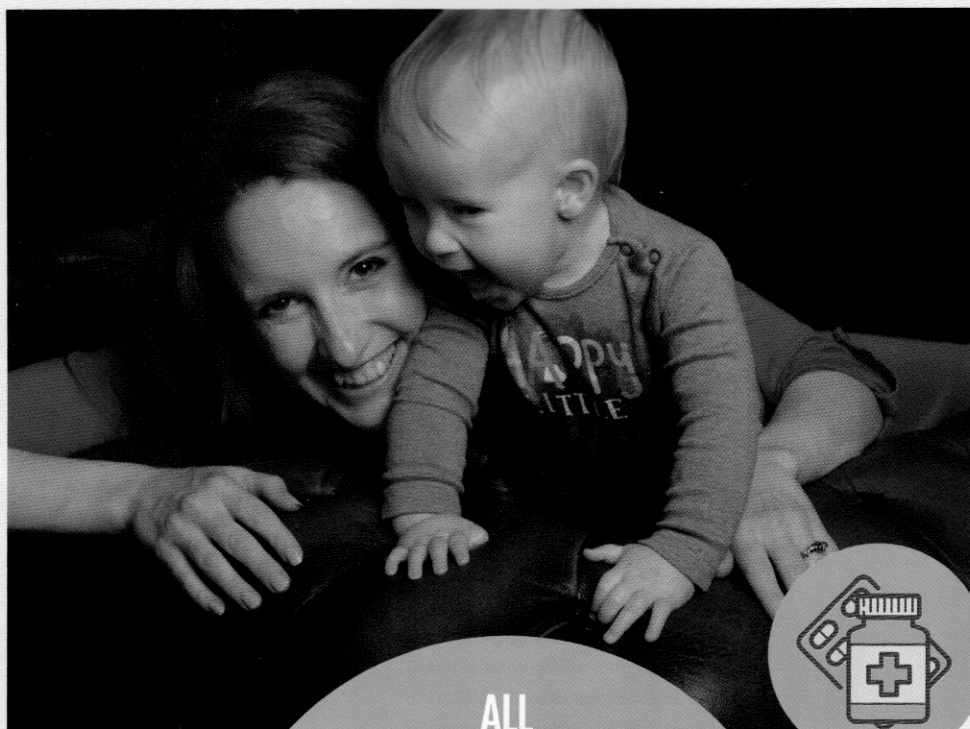


**“** The obvious answer is that I wish I'd known the end of the story, that I would end up having my son, but that is the heartbreaking reality of living with infertility: you just don't know what's going to happen.” These are the words of Naomi, who at 19 was diagnosed with severe endometriosis and was told bluntly by her doctor that she was unlikely to ever have children.

Her words struck me immediately because they sum up the pain of infertility so perfectly: the fear of the unknown and worry that you may never be happy. If you have always wanted to become a parent or even just assumed it would be part of your life plan, being denied it is possibly one

of the hardest things you will ever have to go through. So this is an article about the wisdom of women who have been through long fertility struggles and what they would want other women embarking on the journey to know.

Leyla and her husband, Richard, met on the third day of university. They got married six years later and always knew they wanted a family together. However, in the early years they were enjoying living, working and socialising in London and starting that family wasn't their top priority. When they were both in their late twenties, Leyla was diagnosed with a genetic condition called Ehlers Danlos Syndrome which meant that carrying her own child would likely prove



**ALL  
THE WOMEN I SPOKE  
TO AGREED THAT ONE OF  
THE MOST IMPORTANT PIECES  
OF ADVICE THEY WOULD GIVE TO  
OTHERS EMBARKING ON THE  
FERTILITY JOURNEY IS TO  
GET SOME EMOTIONAL  
SUPPORT.**



fatal for both her and her unborn baby. She says they buried their heads in the sand for a couple of years as the prospect of IVF and then surrogacy seemed incredibly daunting. But then as all their friends started getting pregnant they knew they had to act.

The couple were lucky enough to find a surrogate fairly quickly but the process did not go smoothly. Leyla reacted badly to the IVF drugs and suffered a life-threatening aneurysm days before egg collection and then they went through several rounds of unsuccessful treatment in which the embryo did not implant in their surrogate's womb. "Eventually, we were advised to draw the team to a close," she says; "it was so difficult to do it." They were back to square one - the experience of so many couples going through fertility treatment. It's hard when nature doesn't work the way it's supposed to and it often gets even harder when science doesn't work immediately, either. But Leyla and Richard went onto meet a new surrogate named Rachael. "She and her husband James have three children and have only ever associated pregnancy with positivity," Leyla says. "That great mentality seemed to rub off on us, as on our first attempt, Rachael got

pregnant. Zeki was born nine months later, a whopping 10.5lb!" Leyla says the piece of advice she'd give to anyone starting their fertility journey is to be open to achieving your dreams differently to how you imagined. "You might not end with the kind

of parenthood you thought you would have, but if you keep trying you will become parents."

As someone who has been through eleven rounds of unsuccessful IVF treatment myself and not had a baby, I absolutely agree with Leyla. I think in the modern

*Above:  
Naomi and son*  
*Below:  
Leyla and Richard*

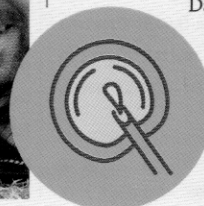


world it is possible for everyone to become a parent but if it doesn't happen naturally you have to embrace the different routes to achieve it, whether that's through IVF, surrogacy, donation, adoption or fostering. But I also think it's possible to have a fulfilling life without children after unsuccessful treatment if that's what you choose. However, it's never easy adjusting to a life that's different from the one you dreamed of and you have to do a lot of soul searching to get there.

Aysha is 45 years old, works as a receptionist in central London and knows exactly what it's like to become a parent in a way you never imagined. She has just become a single mother as a result of embryo donation, the gift of an egg and a sperm from two people she has never met and who have never met each other. Aysha and her husband spent six years trying for a baby but their marriage broke down just before they were about to embark on IVF. It took her a long time to get over the break up; all her life she had wanted to be a mother so when she was in her early forties and hadn't met anyone else, she decided to go through it alone. She tried initially with her own eggs and donor sperm before moving onto double donation. She acknowledges that there is still a stigma around single women embarking on treatment and motherhood alone. "It can be hard," she says, "but I've been through too much to worry about what others think. I feel so thankful that I have been blessed with my beautiful daughter. I followed my heart and was very lucky. I wish every women who is in a similar situation gets to experience the same joy."

In fact there is still stigma associated with all forms of fertility treatment but in the case of surrogacy and donation it is often related to the feeling that the baby is somehow not yours, because it's not your own egg or you haven't given birth to them. Sarah, who is also in her mid forties and a mum through egg donation with her husband's sperm says: "We get hung up on genetics and are frightened we won't feel the same bond or connection." But she goes on to describe how just like all new mums, she fell in love with her daughter,

Daisy, at first sight and now counsels other couples considering donor treatment in how little genetics matter. "Parenting is a verb not a noun," she says.



"It's about keeping another human being alive and happy 24 hours a day."

All the women I spoke to agreed that one of the most important pieces of advice they would give to others embarking on the fertility journey is to get some emotional support. The Government regulator of fertility treatment, the HFEA, recommends that all patients should receive counselling but one of the sad and shocking facts about the fertility industry is that many clinics are still not proactive about offering it. However, the experience of infertility is considered to be similar to being diagnosed with a terminal illness or suffering a bereavement and going through it can be psychologically devastating. The hurt often starts long before you begin treatment, with all the heart-wrenching pregnancy announcements, baby showers and christenings as well as having to endure the constant enquiries about hearing the patter of tiny feet when that's all you want to hear too. Then there is the stress of treatment itself and the heartbreak if it doesn't work first or second time. Perhaps the hardest thing is that because of the culture of secrecy and shame that still surrounds infertility many people suffer in silence and become more and more isolated.

After nearly two years of trying to conceive, Naomi said she hit rock bottom and was signed off work with extreme anxiety. She wished she had got support a lot

sooner and when she did, it felt like a weight had lifted. Aysha also regrets not looking for and finding a support group for women who were thinking about or had already done the same thing. "At the time I didn't know that any existed," she says. "It can be a very lonely journey to be on without the support of other women in a similar situation." She eventually found that support after her baby daughter was born through the Donor Conception Network [dcnetwork.org](http://dcnetwork.org), an organisation that works to support families with children conceived by donated eggs, sperm or embryos. When Leyla and her husband were finally ready to start what they knew was going to be a challenging journey to parenthood they did some research and joined Surrogacy UK [surrogacyuk.org](http://surrogacyuk.org): "We quickly became part of a huge network of surrogates, their partners and other intended parents. It was such a relief finally to feel that we could completely open up to people who really 'got' what we were going through."

Support for people suffering from infertility comes in many forms and it's vital that people going through treatment or coming out the other side either successfully or unsuccessfully are made aware of this and are encouraged to seek help. Infertility Network UK [infertilitynetworkuk.com](http://infertilitynetworkuk.com), the national charity supporting people with fertility issues has a list of support groups across the country. BICA, the British Infertility Counselling Association

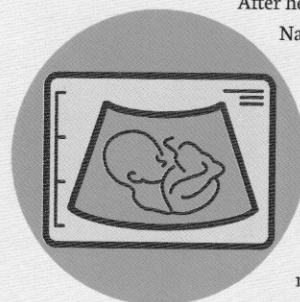
bica.net holds the register for specialist infertility counsellors.

It saddens me that society often belittles the effects of infertility and the decline in treatment on the NHS is one of the outcomes of this. 'You're not dying!', 'The world doesn't need anymore people!' or 'Why don't you just adopt?' are all common statements. But I know from my own personal experience and from the hundreds of women who have contacted me since I wrote my book, *The Pursuit of Motherhood*, that being denied the opportunity to become a parent which we are all led to believe is a given of the human condition and then being surrounded by people who have what you want and whose lives are going in different directions is terribly upsetting. You just can't get through it without support.

After her diagnosis of endometriosis, Naomi went through three rounds of fertility treatment and suffered a miscarriage before eventually falling pregnant naturally on her 46th month of trying. It's just another example of how your route to parenthood may not be the one you're preparing for. Stories like this

really do happen! She has now set up an online support community called Embrace Fertility for people struggling to conceive as well as another for people who have become parents after fertility issues. She's quick to say that just because you have a baby it doesn't mean you are suddenly ecstatically happy, and one of the problems people encounter after successful treatment is that they feel guilty that they're not. "I know that it is difficult but try to focus on keeping yourself happy now rather than getting yourself pregnant. Finding ways to deal with the uncertainty and even be at peace with it is so powerful so I wish I'd known that I could be okay with the uncertainty and added things to my lifestyle to help me achieve that rather than spending years being tormented by the what ifs."

Although my outcome is very different from Naomi's and I am still on my pursuit of motherhood I totally agree. It will be ok, whatever the outcome. As Aysha says, "follow your heart", trust and believe.



Below:  
Sarah and Daisy

