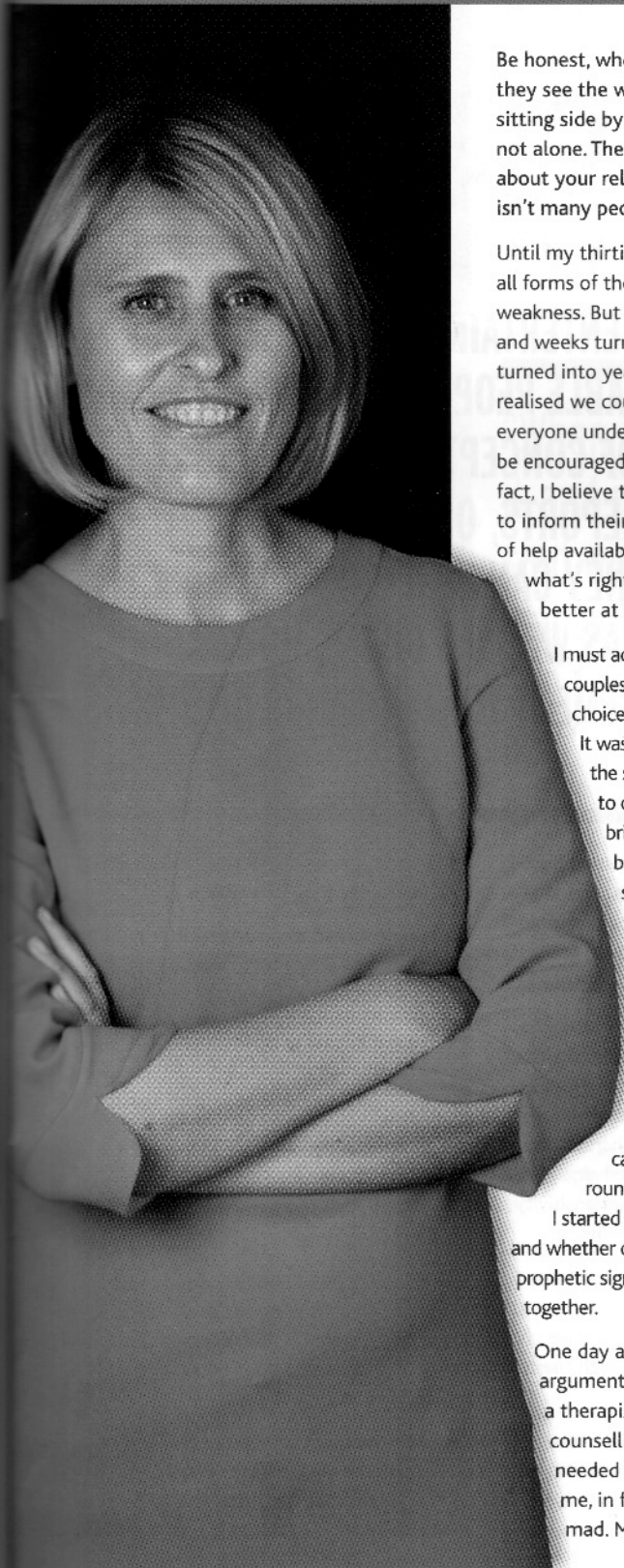


# FROM A PATIENT PERSPECTIVE

A COLUMN BY JESSICA HEPBURN, AUTHOR OF *THE PURSUIT OF MOTHERHOOD*  
THIS MONTH: COUPLES COUNSELLING



Be honest, who thinks #Aghhhhhh when they see the words 'couples' and 'counselling' sitting side by side. If you do, you're certainly not alone. The thought of talking openly about your relationship in front of a stranger isn't many people's idea of a good night out.

Until my thirties, I was pretty sceptical about all forms of therapy. I thought it was a sign of weakness. But when our fertility journey began and weeks turned into months, and months turned into years that scepticism shifted. I realised we couldn't go it alone. I now feel that everyone undergoing fertility treatment should be encouraged to seek therapeutic support. In fact, I believe that clinics have a responsibility to inform their patients of the different types of help available so that individuals can decide what's right for them (some are currently better at doing this than others).

I must admit that my introduction to couples counselling was not a considered choice nor were we referred by a clinic. It was made out of desperation. One of the saddest things about struggling to conceive, is that what starts by bringing a couple together, soon begins to tear them apart. Our sex life became governed by the tyranny of the 'Ovulation Predator Kit'. I guess alarm bells should have started ringing when I flew off the handle one day when my partner didn't get back in time from a conference for us to make love within the 48-hour ovulation window. On top of this came the deep disappointment of round after round of unsuccessful IVF.

I started to question who was to blame and whether our infertility was some sort of prophetic sign that we weren't meant to be together.

One day after a particularly fierce argument, I turned to Google and found a therapist who specialised in couples counselling. At the time I felt like I needed an independent witness to tell me, in front of him, that I wasn't going mad. My partner was reluctant to go,

as I think many men are (apologies to any male readers for the blatant generalisation). A sure sign of this reluctance was that he arrived one-and-a-half hours late for our two-hour session. His excuse was the traffic and although admittedly he had driven a long way from a business trip, it didn't wash with me.

But in just half an hour, and then the sessions that followed, our relationship recalibrated. I think one of the most useful things about it was that it gave us an opportunity to listen to one another again. In fact, I'm sure that all long-term relationships would benefit from this. We had become so entrenched in our fertility failure that it was difficult to hear or see each other from any other angle. When our therapist said that from her point of view we seemed like 'a great couple', it was such a surprise and a reminder that we had come together for other reasons than having a baby.

Of course it's possible that friends can fulfil a similar function (and certainly they cost less) but the psychiatrist's chair (or sofa if there's two of you) is a safe space where you can challenge yourself to be brutally honest about how you're feeling. In real life we all have a tendency to protect ourselves and others by putting up a barrier to the truth. But whilst for many of us the medical truth of our infertility can be elusive, the psychological truth of its effects can be explored and overcome if we allow ourselves to say them. Whilst this can sometimes reveal fractures in a relationship that cannot be mended, it can also be a powerful healing tool.

Since writing my book, *The Pursuit of Motherhood*, I have had so many emails from women who have thanked me for laying bare the impact that infertility has had on my relationship. People have also commented on the bravery of my partner for allowing me to tell our story. I have no doubt that the therapy we did together made that possible. We now know each other in ways that highly fertile couples can maybe only dream of. It has brought us closer and made us stronger. And for that I bless my infertility. Because in the words of Sigmund Freud "being entirely honest is a good exercise". And in my book, it's essential.