

The Mind/Body Connection: Its Role in Fertility and IVF by Christo Zouves, M.D. and Suzanne Duffy

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Western Medicine has traditionally been resistant to alternative therapies, focusing on the management of disease after it presents, often ignoring the fact that a particular organ or system actually belongs to a person or patient. Alternative therapies and traditional medicine in many cultures, have focused on the whole person and have generally asked the questions about causation and methods of prevention.

Ignoring lifestyle, diet, exercise and the power of the mind, has forced patients to choose between alternative therapies and Western Medicine instead of combining the best of both worlds.

Mind and Body medicine combines modern scientific medicine with psychology, nutrition, exercise, and stress management. At Zouves Fertility Center we believe in the connection between the mind and body and the beneficial effects of aligning these for optimal results with our fertility treatment.

Research has shown that women experiencing infertility have higher levels of physical and psychological symptoms, which could include but are not limited to: insomnia, headaches, back pain, fatigue, anxiety and depression. These symptoms may affect the ability to implant successfully through abnormalities detectable in the immune system. A recent study from Italy, demonstrates that patients doing IVF who have higher scores for anxiety, also have abnormalities measurable within their immune systems, and that this group of patients has lower implantation rates and lower success with IVF compared with patients who were less anxious and were found to have less disturbance of their immunological systems.

Mind and Body techniques are aimed at helping to reduce stress and promote positive attitudes. This has been shown in studies to prevent illness and help a person improve the quality of their life while undergoing medical treatment even in the face of terminal illness.

We want to make sure that our patients are maximizing their chances of pregnancy by aligning the body and the mind optimally. We encourage all patients to speak via a free phone consultation with our licensed therapist, Shelley Tarnoff, JD, LMFT to help find ways to reduce the amount of stress that infertility and its treatment engenders. We also urge patients to look into other services such as acupuncture, Chinese herbs and yoga that may reduce their stress and help them to regain the control that they have lost in their struggle with infertility.

In addition, studies conducted in the Bay area, show that nutritional supplements like antioxidants, multivitamins and amino acids can enhance both egg and sperm production leading to better fertility outcomes.

Acupuncture with and without Chinese herbs and diet modification, has been used for centuries. Meridians exist throughout the body, connected and connecting the body and all the autonomic functions that control well-being. It is believed that appropriately directed acupuncture can increase blood flow in the pelvis thereby promoting follicular development and also implantation.

The practice of Hatha yoga promotes physical as well as emotional well-being, assisting in the alignment of the Mind and Body. Hatha yoga can also be extended to include meditation as well as visualization and these techniques have been shown to decrease stress and the release of stress hormones thereby creating an optimal environment for implantation.

We encourage patients to examine their habits and lifestyle in general, paying attention to the elimination of obvious dangerous behavior like smoking or inappropriate alcohol consumption, while evaluating diet and exercise and dealing with stress. There is an epidemic of obesity in our society and this causes significant mortality and morbidity, and there is recent evidence that obesity affects fertility by promoting hormonal imbalance and problems with ovulation and implantation.

A recent study conducted in Germany, shows improvement in IVF outcome when two sessions of acupuncture were added on the day of embryo transfer. The pregnancy outcome improved from 26% to 42% in each of 80 patients who were randomized to treatment with or without acupuncture within the same IVF program. We encourage patients to evaluate this addition to their IVF treatment, not only confining the therapy to the day of embryo transfer, but incorporating acupuncture along with diet and life-style changes before IVF is initiated and also after successful implantation. We should always be aware of positive and negative interactions between medications and therapies as we strive to achieve the best results for our patients.

Therapies that do not address the whole individual including their genetic predisposition, their environmental exposures and life-style choices, are destined to achieve less than optimal results. We are just

beginning to appreciate the concept of wellness and to realize the power of the Mind over the Body in all facets of our daily health especially in the area of fertility.

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