

The Scarlet I: Infertility survivors lend voices to U of I prof's new book

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Infertility and isolation are soul sisters, says University of Illinois professor Constance Hoenk Shapiro. As friends, siblings, and co-workers effortlessly become pregnant and deliver babies that become the center of their lives and conversations, an infertile woman—and her partner—often feel defeated and alone.

Shapiro's new book *When You're Not Expecting* has the potential to change all that by providing a sisterhood of survivors who have been there and know how it feels.

The author draws on her 20 years of experience as an [infertility](#) counselor to address such topics as the [emotional impact](#) of invasive medical treatments; what to do when making love becomes hard work; how to cope with baby showers, family gatherings, and child-centered holidays; recovering emotionally from [pregnancy loss](#); and putting your life on hold while you're waiting for expensive treatments to succeed.

"I've worked with hundreds of people who have been diagnosed with infertility, and my book uses the well-disguised voices of my clients as they talk about their challenges and coping strategies," she said.

"I think readers will feel validated in the emotions they themselves are having and find the women's accounts of their experiences a lifeline to sanity and survival. It's a hopeful book, with compelling stories, humor, and honesty," she said.

But the book provides more than catharsis. At the end of each chapter, Shapiro offers therapeutic tips that take up the issues her clients are coping with.

There's help here too for men and for women with social factor infertility, experienced by lesbians and [single women](#) who want to become parents. Medical professionals, therapists, clergy, and parents and in-laws will also benefit from reading the book, she said.

"One of the things a couple has to decide is how much and with whom they're going to share this personal information. How much of their emotional struggle will they expose to the view of co-workers, supervisors, and their parents who long to experience the joys of being grandparents?" she said.

"I make the case that a couple should thoughtfully and selectively share information because the fallout from infertility is too heavy a burden for a couple to carry alone forever. They may be tightly locked in support of one another but still have very different ways of looking at the issue.

"It's not unheard of for the infertile partner to offer to let the fertile partner out of the marriage so that person can have children with someone else," she said.

For many couples, infertility treatment ends successfully, but the experience is never forgotten, she said.

Other persons and couples will find resolution in adoption, surrogacy, or the choice to live without children. But, before that happens, they will need to complete the anticipatory mourning they have probably been doing for some time, she said.

"It's a lifetime loss," she noted. "In our culture, people meeting a new

couple for the first time are likely to begin a conversation with 'Do you have any children?'"

Shapiro said that the inability to give birth to a child will always be a piece of a person's identity, but she urged infertility survivors not to let their infertility define or consume them. Hobbies, caring relationships, work, volunteer activities, and travel can add balance as individuals and couples seek new ways to find meaning and purpose in their lives.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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