

The Newest Fertility Accessory: A Wellness Coach

More and more clinics are offering deep breathing, meditation and yoga lessons before stressful appointments, but will they help women get pregnant? The data is mixed.

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When Emily McCourtney arrived for her uterine evaluation at a fertility clinic in Southern California, she was nervous about how it might feel. The ultrasound test, which involved threading a catheter through her cervix and filling her uterus with saline, would help her doctor spot any abnormalities that might affect her chances of becoming pregnant. Half an hour before her appointment, McCourtney met with Elaine Wang, a wellness coach at the clinic, who explained what was going to happen on yoga mats in a back room. They practiced deep breathing exercises to help McCourtney decompress, then Wang followed her into the exam room so they could practice her breathing during the procedure.

“After that, walking away, I felt more relaxed than at any other time at this office,” said McCourtney, 35, who later conceived via in vitro fertilization and is expecting a baby in April.

For most people, a visit to a fertility clinic involves more apprehensiveness than calm. Checkups and procedures can be uncomfortable experiences, with lots of poking and prodding, and a more sterile than welcoming vibe. But more and more, a small but growing number of fertility clinics across the United States are hiring wellness coaches to guide women (and their partners) through their appointments, helping them relax with mindfulness techniques like breathing exercises, yoga, positive affirmations and guided imagery.

Wang, 45, who holds a master’s degree in dance and has training in physical education, yoga and social-emotional learning, has been a wellness coach at West Coast Fertility Center in Fountain Valley, Calif., for three years. She remembered how out of control she felt — emotionally, physically and financially — during her own egg-preservation treatments when she was 39, and wanted to help others navigate the process.

Few scientists have studied the mind-body connection to fertility. But there is some, albeit limited, evidence that mindfulness training might reduce anxiety and depression among fertility patients, and possibly even increase their chances of becoming pregnant. It’s not entirely clear *how* such practices might help, however, and because evidence is mixed, much more research is needed.

In Southern California, Wang works alongside Dr. David Diaz, M.D., founder and medical director of the West Coast Fertility Center at Fountain Valley Regional Hospital and Medical Center. First, they identify the times when fertility patients tend to feel the most stress. That’s typically the day of egg retrieval, when the doctor guides a needle through the vagina and into the ovarian follicle to collect eggs, and the day when doctors transfer embryos back into a woman’s uterus.

For Dr. Diaz, it’s easy to tell when a patient is stressed. “If the procedure doesn’t work, or even if it does work, that’s when we see the patient’s blood pressure skyrocket — sometimes it is off the scale,” Dr. Diaz said. It’s understandable why: Fertility treatments can come with feelings of shame and inadequacy, as well as a high price tag — and what if they don’t work?

Dr. Diaz offers Wang’s wellness coaching services to all patients for no extra fee. About half an hour before a medical procedure, Wang sits with the patient in a back room. Sometimes they do grounding exercises — asking the patient to close her eyes and feel the weight of the yoga mat beneath her — to practice relaxing in the stirrups. They take deep breaths, focusing on the exhale to signal the body to relax. Wang advises patients to use this breath when the speculum enters and exits their body. She also tells them to imagine their favorite place while giving them positive affirmations, “I am safe, all is well.”

“I think of myself as a cocktail before they actually go under with anesthesia,” Wang said. Once they’re in the clinic room, they repeat the practice there. “Dr. Diaz and I kind of tag team,” she said, “and he’s, like, good about telling them this is what’s happening. This is something you might be feeling. Now, the speculum is going in. O.K., let’s all take a breath together.”

Wang uses these techniques to help patients through hysteroscopies (inspections of the uterus), hysterosalpingograms (tests for blocked fallopian tubes), egg retrievals and transfers. For procedures that involve anesthesia, like egg retrievals, Wang doesn’t often follow them into the operating room because they go under anesthesia shortly after they arrive. Patients can pay extra for additional one-on-one coaching and for customized fitness, nutrition or stress management plans.

There is growing interest among researchers in understanding how mindfulness and fertility interact, said Diana Winston, director of mindfulness education at the U.C.L.A. Semel Institute’s Mindful Awareness Research Center. While it’s not yet known whether stress can impact fertility, it’s clear that infertility can cause stress, she said. And some evidence suggests that mindfulness practices — including meditation, breathing and guided imagery — can reduce anxiety and depression in some people.

Mindfulness training, according to Winston, can also help prevent people from getting swept away by the tidal waves of emotions that can come with trying to get pregnant. “It’s about recognizing thoughts as thoughts, rather than as, like, oh no, this is a fact,” Winston explained. For example: *I’ll never get pregnant*. That’s just a worry, she said. Mindfulness can help people recognize the thought without getting caught up in the emotions surrounding it, and eventually return to the present moment in a nonjudgmental way.

Researchers are still trying to untangle how the mind and fertility are connected, said Dr. David Keefe, M.D., chair of the department of obstetrics and gynecology at N.Y.U. Langone Health, who also trained in psychiatry. N.Y.U. Langone employs a yoga coach, acupuncturist and reproductive psychiatrist to help patients reduce stress levels throughout the fertility treatment process. Dr. Keefe pointed out that there are so many moving parts to fertility, including ones that can’t be righted by lowering stress levels. For example, if a woman’s fallopian tubes are blocked, or if a man has no sperm, no amount of acupuncture or mindfulness is going to help a couple get pregnant. “Eighty percent of the time, when we’re doing I.V.F., we don’t really know what’s going on,” said Dr. Keefe.

[What to know about I.V.F.]

Though data is mixed, some studies suggest that certain types of mindfulness practices may benefit women who are trying to conceive. In one randomized controlled study, published in the journal Behavior Research and Therapy in 2016, researchers from China showed that among 108 infertile women undergoing I.V.F. for the first time, those who practiced mindfulness techniques for about two hours per week for 6 weeks were about 72 percent more likely to become pregnant than those who did not. Techniques included yoga, meditation and body awareness and acceptance practices. Another study, this one a 2020 systematic review of 12 earlier studies, concluded that there is some evidence that infertility and mind-body interventions like mindfulness training and yoga might reduce anxiety and depression in infertile women undergoing fertility treatment. It also found a “possible improvement” in their chances of becoming pregnant via I.V.F., but much more research is needed to confirm that link.

Dr. Keefe said that one way mindfulness training might help women conceive is by allowing them to understand and process negative thoughts and emotions in a way that makes them more likely to continue with infertility treatment when they otherwise might stop because of the stress. “One thing that’s pretty consistent with all studies is that I.V.F. is inefficient,” said Dr. Keefe. “So, if you can’t stay in the game, you’re less likely to win it.”

Dr. Keefe wondered whether there might be some kind of biological mechanism in the body that is improved with lower stress levels. Scientists are just starting to look into how that works, he added.

Mindfulness has exploded as such a buzz word that it can start to look like “McMindfulness,” Dr. Keefe said. It’s important that patients find a path that works for them, and not feel guilty if they can’t reduce stress appropriately. Ultimately, he said, mindfulness in getting pregnant is just a starting point for understanding how to regulate your emotions — especially considering the stresses that come with parenting babies and toddlers.

As for Wang, she is not just a wellness coach for Dr. Diaz, she was recently his patient: She gave birth to twins via I.V.F. last fall, an experience that only deepened her connection to the patients in the clinic. “I sometimes think of myself as a pre-doula doula,” she said “because I feel like it only makes sense that someone would coach someone through this.”