

PARENTHOOD

INFERTILITY

PRESENTS UNIQUE CHALLENGES FOR MILITARY FAMILIES

By Risa Kerslake

It's been 14 months since Ashlee Jarvis and her husband, a corporal in the Army National Guard based in Montana, started trying for their second child. They're preparing for his deployment in the fall.

"My main fear is not having him to lean on for support," Jarvis explained. "We haven't told many people about our struggle, so it'll be hard if we're not pregnant by the time he leaves."

In the process of relocating, Jarvis is feeling the stress. She wants to switch doctors but needs to figure out if they should wait until they move, or do it right now on the chance they get pregnant.

"I have no family where we're at and if he's gone I'll really have no support," Jarvis added.

Infertility and the stress of military life

According to the Centers for Disease Control, about 12% of women in the United States ages 15-44 have trouble getting pregnant.

Coping with infertility is hard enough as a civilian, but other aspects of military life such as PCS moves and deployments can increase those already heightened emotions.



Brandy Lyon and family, courtesy photo.

"I think most people struggle with anxiety, depression, and a lot of stress during fertility treatments," Dinah Dziolek, an Air Force spouse and licensed professional counselor who specializes in military families, explained. "So military life puts more stress on what's already there."

A fact Marine spouse Brandy Lyon knows all too well. Her husband, now retired, sustained long-term injuries after an IED blast in 2006.

Along with other health issues, Lyon's husband needed a varicocele repair to increase their chances of having a baby. A varicocele, an enlargement of the veins within the testicles, can impact sperm production. Nearly 40%

of men experiencing infertility have this condition.

For Lyon, the constant deployments and relocations were the hardest things about navigating infertility. She coped by staying busy.

"I always felt more comfortable on the base when he was gone than at home," Lyon explained.

"The people around me could relate and knew what to say and not say a little better than all of our family back home."

The loneliness of infertility

Sometimes, though, the sense of community while living on base isn't

there if you're the only one in your circle experiencing infertility. Now remarried with two children, Stormi Miron remembers the period of trying to get pregnant with her Army husband.

Miron knew it might be a challenge. She was diagnosed in high school with polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS), a hormone disorder that affects the ovaries. While stationed at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson in Alaska, Miron got pregnant. The excitement was short-lived when they discovered they were having a miscarriage. Near what would have been the baby's due date, they got pregnant again, only to have a second loss.

"I coped poorly, distancing myself further from everyone, including my husband, because no one understood," Miron said. Being the only married couple without children, Miron and her husband found themselves excluded from many events.

"My ex wasn't close to his unit mates or their families so I didn't have anyone on the base I could count on." She ended up finding support through an online infertility community.

With relocating, Miron says, it's rare you see the same doctor twice. Sending over her medical information to another state and having the second doctor question it all was particularly hard for her.

"A military spouse has no real connections at the next duty station," Dziolek explained. "That's the challenge with the PCS and fertility treatments because they really have to set up everything from ground zero."



Ashlee Jarvis and family, courtesy photo.

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Advice on coping with infertility during a deployment or PCS

Fortunately, there are things that can help manage the emotions of infertility that come when change is approaching.

Focus on yourself

Miron purposely took time to relax. "I got to do things like reading and crafting that I wouldn't have had time for otherwise," she said.

Consider therapy

Therapy, especially with a counselor who understands military life, infertility, and ideally, both, can be beneficial. Many of the clients Dziolek sees stay in therapy long term because they know they need the support.

Find a support group — or start one

People going through infertility need as much support as they can get, according to Dziolek. She knows — Dziolek went through it herself. RESOLVE, the national infertility association, has support groups to join. And if there are no groups around you, create your own.

"The most important thing that I would want people to remember is you're not the only one struggling. There are many other people out there, and they're all there to support you," Dziolek said. ●