

Emotional Numbness in IVF Patients: When Coping Becomes Psychological Shutdown- A Narrative Review

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Abstract: Infertility and assisted reproductive technologies, particularly in IVF, are often accompanied by significant psychological challenges. The existing literature has largely focused on anxiety, depression, and stress among the patients, but it has given less attention towards emotional numbness and emotional blunting as a distinct psychological response. This narrative review aims to explore the phenomenon of emotional numbness in IVF patients, examining how coping strategies may gradually evolve into psychological shutdown when sustained over time. This review further discusses therapeutic implications, emphasizing the need for humanistic and IVF-specific counselling approaches that validate emotional numbness within the discourse on infertility-related mental health, this review seeks to contribute to a nuanced and compassionate understanding of emotional experiences of individual undergoing IVF treatment.

Keywords: Emotional Numbness, In-Vitro Fertility (IVF), Psychological Shutdown, Coping Mechanism, Emotional Blunting, Humanistic Approach, Infertility-Related Distress.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Infertility is a prevalent issue today, yet its effects on mental health for individuals are not as widely recognized. Assisted reproductive technology is a medical procedure used to help couples who are dealing with infertility. It involves handling sperm, eggs, and embryos in a laboratory and helps in pregnancy. The most common procedure of ART is IVF (in vitro fertilization).

IVF is a procedure in which the female eggs are retrieved from the ovaries and male sperm are fertilized in a lab through the procedure of ICSI, and after that, the resulting embryos are transferred into the female uterus.

The complex relationship between infertility and mental health issues is bidirectional. On one hand, prolonged infertility can lead to psychosocial issues, as patients often experience feelings of numbness, marginalization, and social stigma. Such emotional reactions can manifest as increased depression, anxiety, tension, guilt, anger, and/or severe stress, significantly impacting sexual health and overall quality of life.¹

Existing research on IVF-related mental health has predominantly focused on anxiety, depression, and stress-related outcomes. While these conditions are important, such an approach may overlook the other psychological responses

that emerge under chronic emotional pressure, which is emotional numbness characterized by emotional blunting, detachment, and difficulty in relationships.

➤ Emotional Blunting

Emotional blunting is characterized by a decreased ability to feel or express emotions, which is known as emotional blunting, and it is becoming more common in IVF patients. Psychological coping mechanisms can be overwhelmed by prolonged exposure to uncertainty, numerous treatment cycles, hormonal therapies, and the emotional weight of possible failure. As a kind of self-defense, patients consequently unintentionally repress their emotional responses. As a counselor at Indira IVF, patients frequently report feeling "empty," "detached," and numb rather than overtly depressed or anxious, even when they receive a positive result, the effect of repeated failure makes them feel so emotionally numb that they are unable to express the joy of receiving a positive pregnancy kit.

➤ Emotional Detachment as a Coping Mechanism

Emotional Detachment during IVF treatment is very common. The patient emotionally detach themselves from their emotions or relations intentionally or unintentionally, to avoid the psychological pain associated with repeated disappointments.

The biological perspective of emotional numbness in IVF treatment involves the complex interplay of hormonal changes, psychological stress, and the emotional impact of the treatment itself. Hormonal medications used in IVF can intensify emotional distress and mood fluctuations, leading to feelings of numbness or emotional detachment. The psychological stress associated with fertility struggles can be all encompassing, affecting every aspect of life, including emotional well-being.ⁱⁱ Infertility is considered a chronic stressor, leading to the excessive production of stress mediators such as cortisol and norepinephrine. These substances can activate the fear response system, cause anxiety, while simultaneously diminishing the reward response associated with depression.ⁱⁱⁱ

➤ *Relationship Difficulties During IVF Treatment*

Relationship adjustment emerged as an important protective factor. Women who reported stronger dyadic adjustment also experienced better relational quality of life, highlighting the role of mutual understanding, emotional reciprocity, and supportive communication within partnerships. Although many participants described receiving logistical or financial help from their partners, qualitative accounts revealed that emotional support was frequently limited. This distinction emphasized that positive relational outcomes depend not only on cooperation but also on shared emotional engagement.^{iv}

Emotional Withdrawal may reduce emotional intimacy between partners, leading to communication gaps, misunderstanding, and loneliness. Differences in coping styles between partners appear emotionally disengaged, affecting their marital satisfaction and emotional connection.

When individuals are repeatedly expected to lose, disappointment, and lack emotional validation, emotional detachment may emerge to continue functioning while minimizing further emotional pain. This narrative review seeks to explore emotional numbness in IVF patients and examine how coping strategies, when prolonged, may gradually evolve into psychological shutdown.

➤ *Aim-*

To understand emotional numbness in IVF patients as a psychological coping response and how prolonged coping may evolve into emotional shutdown.

➤ *Objectives of the Study-*

- To examine the psychological factors contributing to emotional numbness during IVF treatment
- To understand emotional blunting and detachment as a coping mechanism in repeated IVF failure
- To explore the impact of emotional numbness on interpersonal and marital relationships.

II. METHODOLOGY

This narrative review is based on an integrative examination of existing literature associated with infertility and IVF treatment. Relevant peer-reviewed studies, review

articles, and clinical papers were identified as infertility-related stress, IVF, emotional numbness, emotional detachment, and coping mechanism.

Inclusion- Psychological, and emotional experience of couples undergoing IVF treatment or other ART. Emotional numbness, detachment and coping strategies qualitative method or review based methods are included

Exclusion- the studies which focus solely on medical or biological outcomes without psychological components and address infertility without reference to emotional or mental health aspects.

➤ *Psychological Factors Contributing to Emotional Blunting*

- **Chronic Treatment Stress-** IVF treatment exposed to prolonged and unpredictable stress which can become exhausting to a person for a long period of time, it leads to disappointment and emotional strain.
- **Repeated Cycle Failures-** Repeated cycle failure leads to significantly impacting the patient's emotional processing. Each unsuccessful cycle reinforces feeling of loss, grief, and helplessness. To prevent this feeling, an individual, suppress both their positive and negative emotions.
- **Social Stigma and Isolation-** Infertility is accompanied by social stigma, intrusive questioning, and invalidation from family or closed ones. This withdrawal from emotional communication leads to isolation, overthinking, negative thoughts, and many more things.
- **Loss of control and uncertainty-** IVF patient often experience a profound loss of control over deeply personal life goals. Despite strict adherence to treatment protocol, outcome remains uncertain. This persistent unpredictability leads to helplessness and emotional fatigue.

➤ *Illustrative Clinical Example*

To enhance contextual understanding, an illustrative clinical example-based counselling observation in an IVF setting has been included. The participant was a woman in her early forties, sought for IVF treatment after several years of infertility and previous unsuccessful treatment attempts. When she first presented counselling, her emotional state was marked with withdrawal and detachment. She spoke very little, avoided eye contact, and often described her internal experience as “nothing” or “blank”. Rather than expressing distress openly, she appeared emotionally shutdown, as feelings had been muted over time.

As session progressed, it became evident that this emotional numbness was not an absence of feelings, but proactive response developed after prolonged exposure to uncertainty after repeated medical interventions, pregnancy loss, and limited emotional support from her environment. The participant shared that she felt unsupported by both her family and her spouse, which further contributed to a sense of isolation and emotional unsafety. Moments that might typically evoke sadness, hope, or disappointment were instead met with silence or emotional distance.

Following a brief period of treatment, the participant experienced a pregnancy that ended in miscarriage. During this phase, she demonstrated intense emotional distress, accompanied by self-blame and feelings of worthlessness. However, after this acute emotional numbing. This fluctuation between overwhelming distress and emotional shutdown suggested a pattern of coping in which detachment served to survive repeated loss.

Within a consistent and supportive therapeutic space, the participant in therapeutic space, the participant was gradually able to reflect on her internal experiences without pressure to “feel” or respond in a particular way. Over time, she began to articulate previously unexpressed fears related to loss, failure, and her perceived value as a woman and potential mother. The therapeutic process focused on emotional safety, validation, and self- understanding rather than symptoms reduction and outcome-based change. Through this process, the participant slowly developed greater awareness of her emotional world and began to reconnect with a sense of self that extended beyond her reproductive journey.

➤ *Therapeutic Implications for Emotionally Numb IVF Patients*

Emotional numbness in IVF patients should not be viewed as resistance or lack of motivation for therapy, but rather as a protective psychological response to prolonged emotional distress. Counseling and therapy offer a safe space to process complex emotions and develop coping mechanisms. Many mental health professionals specialize in fertility issues, bringing a deep understanding of the unique challenges faced by those undergoing IVF.^v

From humanistic perspective, therapy must first focus on creating a space where emotional numbness itself is validated. Patient often report guilty or confusion about their inability to feel hope, excitement, or grief during the treatment. Normalizing numbness as a survival response rather than a personal deficiency, which helps in reducing self-blame and allow patients to engage in therapy without fear of judgement. Validation of the patient’s lived experience becomes the primary therapeutic task before any emotional exploration is attempted.

“My therapist helped me see that my worth wasn’t tied to my ability to conceive,” shares Michael, who sought counseling during his and his wife’s IVF journey. “It was a perspective shift that I desperately needed.” Knowing when to seek professional help is crucial. If you’re experiencing persistent feelings of sadness, anxiety, or hopelessness, or if these emotions are interfering with your daily life, it may be time to reach out to a mental health professional.^{vi}

Overall, Therapeutic implications highlight the need for IVF-specific, trauma-informed, and humanistic counselling approaches that acknowledge emotional numbness is a meaningful psychological response rather than a therapeutic barrier.

III. RESEARCH GAP AND FUTURE DIRECTION

Despite the growing body of literature on psychological distress associated with infertility and IVF treatment, several critical gaps remain in the understanding of emotional numbness among IVF patients. Most of the existing research has predominantly focused on anxiety, depression, and stress-related outcomes, often overlooking emotional numbness as a distinct psychological response. Emotional blunting and detachment are frequently subsumed under depressive symptoms, leading to limited conceptual clarity and insufficient targeted interventions for this population.

Quantitative measures often fail to capture the subtle, internalized nature of emotional numbness, which is commonly described through subjective experiences such as emptiness, emotional numbness, or a sense of disconnection. There remains a paucity of in-depth qualitative research that allows patients to articulate how coping strategies gradually evolve into emotional shutdown over prolonged treatment periods. There is limited research examining emotional numbness within non-Western and culturally specific contexts, particularly in the Indian socio-cultural setting. Social stigma, familial expectations, gendered blame, and silence around infertility may intensify emotional withdrawal, yet these contextual factors remain underrepresented in current literature. The absence of culturally sensitive frameworks restricts the applicability of existing findings to diverse populations undergoing IVF treatment.

Future research should aim to conceptualize emotional numbness as a process rather than a symptom, examining its progression across different stages of IVF treatment. Longitudinal studies tracking emotional changes over multiple treatment cycles would provide deeper insight into how repeated loss, uncertainty, and medicalization contribute to psychological shutdown. There is also a pressing need for research focused on therapeutic models and intervention strategies specifically tailored to emotionally numb IVF patients. Empirical evaluation of humanistic, trauma-informed, and mind–body integrated approaches could help establish evidence-based counselling protocols. Developing IVF-specific mental health guidelines would contribute significantly to improving psychological care within fertility treatment settings.

IV. CONCLUSION

Emotional numbness in IVF patients represents a complex psychological response to prolonged uncertainty, repeated loss, and the emotional demands of medicalized reproduction. Rather than indicating emotional absence or disengagement, numbness often reflects an adaptive coping strategy that enables individuals to continue functioning in the face of persistent emotional strain. This narrative review highlights how emotional blunting and detachment may gradually emerge as self-protective mechanisms, influencing not only individual well-being but also relational and marital dynamics. Recognizing emotional numbness as a meaningful response—distinct from anxiety or depression—allows for a

more nuanced understanding of the emotional landscape of IVF treatment. Integrating humanistic, trauma-informed, and context-sensitive therapeutic approaches can support patients in navigating emotional shutdown without forcing premature emotional expression. Acknowledging and addressing emotional numbness within fertility care may contribute to more compassionate psychological support and improved holistic outcomes for individuals undergoing IVF.

ⁱ <https://www.bing.com/ck/a?!&&p=b4b97dc0e1234f60f77dc779fb56efe4ad9d5dfd1999cfa04acb518a0e2fbfddJmltdHM9MTc2ODg2NzIwMA&ptn=3&ver=2&hsh=4&fclid=0f95d8ae-49d2-6e53-1e64->

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ⁱⁱ <https://www.bing.com/ck/a?!&&p=e6a19361d0d2c06cfbaf71caf3a7d0756ab6f345e53c7248f9f3f571eac3a8c9JmltdHM9MTc2OTM4NTYwMA&ptn=3&ver=2&hsh=4&fclid=0f95d8ae-49d2-6e53-1e64->

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ⁱⁱⁱ Mental health and fertility related quality of life of women undergoing IVF treatment

^{iv} <https://www.bing.com/ck/a?!&&p=e6a19361d0d2c06cfbaf71caf3a7d0756ab6f345e53c7248f9f3f571eac3a8c9JmltdHM9MTc2OTM4NTYwMA&ptn=3&ver=2&hsh=4&fclid=0f95d8ae-49d2-6e53-1e64->

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^v IVF and Mental Health: Navigating Emotional Challenges

^{vi} <https://www.bing.com/ck/a?!&&p=6ef2600e1b0d52ab44a6cf72c3d94e5ac9d358cb4d73b8214630bd90690bbc25JmltdHM9MTc3MDY4MTYwMA&ptn=3&ver=2&hsh=4&fclid=0f95d8ae-49d2-6e53-1e64->

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