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Well-Being

Waiting Too Long To Conceive

Joan Indiana Rigdon, 08.06.09, 5:15 PM ET

I was about 28 when a friend of a friend in her mid-20s told me of an alarming visit to her gynecologist.

It was a routine check-up. Nothing out of order--until her gynecologist noted that she'd had the same boyfriend for years and asked her if she thought she might ever have children. Maybe, she said, but she wasn't sure when.

"Then what are you waiting for?" he yelled. He proceeded to bully her, going on about how it gets harder to conceive with age, and did she know how many women cried in his office because they had waited too long, and now couldn't?

The woman was clearly rattled. We were standing on a hillside overlooking the San Francisco Bay, about to start a hike with the men we ended up marrying. Neither one of us had even considered motherhood. She was finishing a Ph.D.; I was just five years into my writing career. We were more interested in canoe camping and throwing parties than anything else.

Normally, our reaction would have been rage: Who did this medical Neanderthal think he was, telling us to stop our lives and derail our careers in order to breed?

But the thought of the crying women gave us pause. Clearly, this man at least *thought* he had our best interests at heart. We wondered out loud whether we *should* be worried, but at that moment our guys strolled near, and we dropped the conversation.

I'm not sure what happened to her, but as for me, I married at 30, spent another year in San Francisco, the next two traveling with my husband, and another trying to get rich in California's dot-com boom. We didn't try to conceive until we were both age 35, when it was clear my company was cratering, and we estimated we had enough savings to resettle in a less expensive region with just one job.

That was the plan. But when months passed with no pregnancy, I remembered that moment on the hillside and, of course, panicked. Soon I was devouring blogs documenting fertility problems and solutions involving major depression, chemistry kits and long needles. Then I bought books (I now swear by Toni Wechsler's *Taking Charge of Your Fertility*) and basal thermometers, and started tracking my temperature on spreadsheets. At some point I called a fertility specialist, who refused to see me until I could say I had tried and failed for a year.

My husband and I were lucky. After several months, we conceived our daughter without aid and--yes, because of my paranoia regarding fertility, we planned it this way--we conceived our son less than a year after she was born. By then I was 37 and an automatic referral for the high-risk pre-natal specialist because of my age.

Now I wonder: If my daughter ever wants her own family (which seems unlikely, given that even at age seven, she is never, ever her dolls' mommy--just their friend), would I tell her to take the same odds on her fertility that I did on mine?

I doubt it.

Just the other day, a woman I know who had children in her early 20s told me that she wants her children to wait until their 30s before marrying. She wants them to travel first, live a little.

It's entirely personal of course. And really, I am a huge fan of post-marital, pre-diaper bag bliss. But there's a price to pay for waiting extra years to conceive--for both men and women--since fertility starts declining, ever so slightly, as early as the late 20s. By age 35, the clock is definitely ticking.

Now that I'm in my 40s, I know plenty of couples who've had trouble conceiving. Some started early and couldn't. Others managed

to have one child in the woman's 30s and wanted to have a second, but were waiting for the right time and never did.

I'm not saying we should all have children, or more than one if we do, or even that we need a mate to do it. And of course, in vitro and adoption are fantastic alternatives.

But I do think my generation was sold a bill of goods about how long we could wait and still have the choice of biological motherhood be ours.

Maybe some day, scientists really will develop the so-called "career pill"--which would shut down our ovaries during years we aren't ready to conceive, and allow them to begin functioning again when we are.

Until then, I'm hoping that if my daughter is so inclined, she'll try to start her family at least half a decade earlier in life than I did.

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