

Infertility: acceptance and action

by Andrew Sanderson

Andrew and Olivia Sanderson were inspired by their fertility journey to create [Routes to Parenthood](#), a series of exhibition events with speakers and experts, staged at venues across the UK. Andrew, 37, tells how he found out he was infertile, how he and Olivia, 38, came to terms with it as a couple, and how they tried IVF and ultimately adopted their two children, CJ and Emma.



Infertility in men can be a crippling experience – and I speak from having been through that experience aged 30, when my GP told me that I had a sperm count of approximately zero. It was hard to tell who was more uncomfortable, him or me. We both understood that it **felt like a bull's eye to manhood**.

Men the world over feel that they have a duty of care to be seen as the breadwinner, the head of the house, and with that comes a machismo need to fertilise one's partner. Any complication on this front is a direct hit to a man's virility.

Men, of course, can handle this issue with a wide variety of tools – ignorance, blame, and a problem-solving approach that can often be devoid of emotion, and built entirely around fixing the issue, like the engine of a car.

I would be doing men a disservice if I said that every one handled it in this way. Not all are the same. I have heard stories of men typifying this behavior, but in today's society we don't really have 'blue roles' and 'pink roles', just things that adults do.

For me, the experience of infertility was something I shared with my wife from the get-go, something I am deeply grateful for today. At no point was blame placed on either one of us, instead **we viewed infertility as an obstacle that we had to hurdle together, as a team; as a family.** As a result of this, **our relationship is stronger, and our view of our adopted children, I am certain, is different to what it could have been had we not experienced infertility.**

Shock and support

Although technically still infertile, I don't view myself with an affliction or medical issue. **I view infertility as a period of my life that I had to negotiate.** However, negotiate it I did, or I should say, **we did.**

This may not strike many chords, but during this period of time, with the exception of my wife, I relied on one bit of kit above all else to help me through a period of grieving and solemn contemplation: my Xbox.

My gaming console was a vessel for me to transport myself from reality and live in a world of fantasy, free from bills, responsibilities and, yes, infertility. I could play football in the Premiership, shoot endless amount of bad guys without consequence, and race around some of the finest Formula 1 tracks in the modern era. It was immature I know, but it was something that released the pressure of constant worry, and allowed me time to think hard about the prospect of not fathering a child.

The Xbox was great, but this would never have succeeded had it not been for my wife, who played the devoted but distant wife perfectly. This is not an insult; this is very much a show of appreciation. My wife's understanding of me saw her give me the space I needed to process our predicament on my own terms without shying away from what was going on. She knew when to raise the subject and when to change it, when to press, and when to pull back.

Hope and despair

When I was first diagnosed with infertility in the summer of 2008, my analysis was so poor I actually laughed. Quickly though, the realisation of what was upon was starting to sink in, partially at least. I always thought that this problem had a viable solution, and in the earlier days I thought it was just a matter of time before someone somewhere solved it. One day a friend commented as an obligation rather than through any kind of forethought that we would be all right, and it would work itself out. When he said that a red flag popped up in my head – how did he know it would be all right?

As the medical appointments mounted, I had a procedure to address varicocele (varicose veins in the testes) and we saw several specialists, all with contradicting views on what may be the issue, my hope began to wane.

It was replaced by chains of despair all weighing me down. We qualified for an IVF attempt courtesy of the NHS, which we had at the end of the summer in 2009, but that went wrong, and highlighted some potential issues with my wife's eggs as well as my sperm.

Eight eggs were harvested and enough sperm to introduce the two in a laboratory, but by the time that could happen, seven of the eggs had died. So we had one egg of dubious quality. We were told we couldn't start the process again so we went ahead, the egg didn't cleave properly, but the transfer went ahead.

The period between the transfer and the negative pregnancy was filled with sadness, disappointment bordering on despair. The period afterwards felt worse, having been through the whole demanding procedure and being left with nothing, no eggs or embryos to offer us hope of a second opportunity, and a lack of faith in the system that brought us to that point.

A specialist said that there may be a problem with Olivia's eggs and that the hormone doses had been wrong, and that the varicocele procedure wouldn't have improved my sperm quality.

We were both at a low point, bitterly discussing trying to sue the clinic, and raising the issue with our MP. That was futile though, and we knew deep down that we didn't really have a case; we were just tired and angry. IVF does incredible things for people around the world, we knew that then and we have an even greater appreciation for it now that we see so much more about it with **Routes to Parenthood**, but the disappointment when it didn't work was difficult to bear. It's an emotionally challenging process.

Alternatives and adoption

Weeks went by and we were exhausting our list of ideas on what to do next, and perhaps more pertinently **exhausting our emotional capacity to deal with the situation**. We discussed blowing our savings on a number of huge holidays, and talked about a life without children. But that wasn't what we wanted.

We felt like we would get different answers from different people, and so were effectively none the wiser. No one really knew what the problem was with the sperm or the eggs (if indeed there was one) and we were not going to get an answer anytime soon.

Then one night, a few months after IVF, we went to visit friends and the subject of adoption came up. As we discussed the idea, I felt the weight of infertility lift off of me. Liv and I became more animated in the car, and the discussion became so intense we missed our junction off the M1 to get home!

By the time we arrived home we had both all but landed on our decision. "*Let's just say what we both feel, love,*" I said to my wife.

We put the idea of fertility treatment to bed and like a phoenix from the flames, with renewed vigour we started our journey on adoption.

The adoption process wasn't easy, and we hit some significant walls during the process. Fortunately now the Government has changed key elements of adoption, and what we went through won't be repeated.

In January 2013 we adopted our son, a 15-month-old boy with a lust for life that instantly rubbed off on us.

By December 2013 I had been on adoption leave for a year. It was then that we launched **Routes to Parenthood**; a series of exhibitions to help people around the UK obtain information on **how to take the next steps in their journey to parenthood**. It was something we had toyed with for a while and at that time, we felt it was a good opportunity to start.

The following summer, we discovered that our son had sister just a few months old, who had been taken into care, and when it became clear that she was not to stay with her birth parents, it was everyone's focus to get her to live with her brother as soon as possible. CJ's sister Emma moved in the Autumn of 2014, and just over a year later in November 2015 our family was complete when we went to court for the final hearing of our daughter.

Adversity and strength

It is no coincidence that our relationship is stronger after what we have been through, **as the old adage goes, through adversity comes strength.**

We are now in a position of strength. **We have learned lessons, gained experience and most importantly become parents to two wonderful children.**

It has been no picnic, but our experience of infertility, IVF and indeed adoption within the UK has made us stronger, and we are now passing on our experience to others to help them come through their own adversity.

I am not going to be advising Microsoft to be repositioning their flagship games console as a cure for infertility, but **I would advise men and women who experience infertility to find their own release valve – whatever it is.**

And one final piece of advice – **don't place blame on each other, or anyone for that matter, the last time I checked saying or thinking "it's your fault" never got anyone pregnant, so focus on something else, and good luck.**