



Waiting for a baby: Navigating uncertainty in recollections of trying to conceive



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ABSTRACT

Objective: Guided by the uncertainty navigation model, this study examined experiences of uncertainty associated with trying to conceive and identified predictors of this experience using a multi-method approach.

Method: 429 American adults from Amazon's Mechanical Turk who had a child under age three completed online questionnaires regarding their experiences trying to conceive, including recollections of psychological adjustment, use of coping strategies, and individual and situational variability. Then they provided open-ended reflections of their experience trying to conceive. Participants' descriptions were analyzed for word use using LIWC, a text-analysis software program, to obtain an unobtrusive and pseudo-observational measure of coping resources.

Results: Consistent with the uncertainty navigation model, recollections of distress as individuals tried to conceive were associated with lower levels of dispositional optimism; intolerance of uncertainty; fewer social, emotional, and cognitive resources (reflected in word use); placing greater importance on conception; lower risk for infertility; and less searching for meaning in life.

Conclusions: This study revealed many novel insights regarding the experience of trying to conceive, including protective factors and vulnerabilities that may buffer or heighten the distress associated with this experience.

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Young adults consider having children a valuable part of adult life (Gerson et al., 1991), and many parents report that having children is the most positive event in their lives (Berntsen et al., 2011). In many cases, the process of becoming a parent begins with a concerted effort to conceive. Although most people who try to become pregnant eventually succeed, the average time to conception may be as long as six months (WebMD, 2000), and millions of people seek fertility treatment (CDC, 2014a). Use of assisted reproductive technology (ART) has doubled over the past decade, such that 1% of all infants born in the United States are conceived using ART (CDC, 2014b).

In light of the importance many people place on having children, it is unsurprising that people report high levels of distress in

response to struggles with infertility (Greil, 1997). Although the research literature largely focuses on women or couples seeking treatment for infertility (e.g., Greil, 1997; Verhaak et al., 2007), the months leading up to the decision to seek treatment, during which the couple is actively trying (and failing) to conceive, is likely also a stressful time. Most experts suggest that women over 35 years of age spend six months trying to conceive before seeking treatment, and women under 35 are typically counseled to try for a full year before seeing their doctor (U.S. National Library of Medicine (2014)). During these months couples face a rollercoaster of uncertainty, with efforts to conceive followed by several weeks of waiting, then pregnancy tests (or menstruation) and disappointment, then more waiting before the cycle begins again.

The present study addressed three primary questions regarding people's experiences trying to conceive: (1) How distressing is trying to conceive? (2) How do individuals manage the distress of trying to conceive? (3) Is trying to conceive harder for some people, or in some circumstances, than others?

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1. Waiting for uncertain news

Anxiety is commonly associated with uncertainty (Penrod, 2001), particularly when one is awaiting uncertain news (Sweeny and Andrews, 2014). In fact, the complex experience of waiting for an uncertain outcome may cause more anxiety than facing bad news (Boivin and Lancastle's, 2010; Sweeny & Falkenstein, in press), and anxiety is associated with poor health and diminished quality of life (e.g., Sherbourne et al., 1996). Moreover, rumination may add to the anxiety people feel when awaiting uncertain news (Sweeny and Andrews, 2014) and is itself associated with numerous harmful outcomes including depression, deficits in problem-solving, lack of motivation and initiative, and deterioration of ruminators' relationships (see Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 2008). The consequences of rumination and anxiety are a recipe for significant distress during experiences of uncertainty.

Despite their ubiquity and the distress they cause, waiting periods have received relatively little empirical attention. Recent studies examining the experiences of people waiting for their results on the bar exam have found high levels of anxiety, rumination, emotion regulation efforts, and pessimism during this waiting period (Sweeny and Andrews, 2014). Another study examined women's experiences undergoing *in vitro* fertilization, surveying these women regarding their emotions each day during the period between embryo transfer and the pregnancy test and comparing these waiting experiences to their emotions following news of a failed cycle (Boivin and Lancastle's, 2010). This investigation found high levels of anxiety during the waiting period, which increased substantially as women approached the day of the pregnancy test. Although women who received bad news reported significant levels of negative emotion, their anxiety was lower than it had been in the days prior to testing. This study provides initial insight into the experience of trying to conceive, yet little is known about couples' experiences as they try to conceive naturally, and existing findings are limited to women. Furthermore, Boivin and Lancastle's (2010) study focused only on temporal patterns of emotions and a short list of coping strategies rather than examining predictors of distress (e.g., personality, situational characteristics), as we do in the present study.

2. Variability in waiting experiences

A key goal of the present study was to examine not only

individuals' recollections of their emotional experiences when they were trying to conceive but also the strategies they recall using to cope during this experience. The uncertainty navigation model (Fig. 1) provides a theoretical basis for identifying and evaluating common strategies people use during difficult waiting periods (Sweeny and Cavanaugh, 2012). This model suggests that individual and situational variability predicts fluctuations in anxiety and rumination, which drive the use of uncertainty navigation strategies including consequence mitigation, reappraisal, direct emotion management, and information seeking.

Personal and situational characteristics can also lead to variability in the experience of trying to conceive. Previous work on waiting for uncertain news (Sweeny & Andrews, 2014) as identified individual differences that serve to heighten the unpleasantness of uncertainty, most notably pessimistic tendencies (Scheier et al., 1994) and general discomfort with uncertainty (Buhr and Dugas, 2002). The present study examined the role of these individual differences in the experience of trying to conceive and also extended earlier work by including measures of trait-like emotion regulation tendencies and well-being in light of the study's focus on emotional aspects of trying to conceive.

Finally, the uncertainty navigation model proposes features of the situation that are likely to predict waiting experiences, such as outcome importance, risk of a bad outcome, and coping resources (Sweeny and Cavanaugh, 2012). Accordingly, we included proxies of these variables in the present study. Specifically, we measured outcome importance by assessing the total number of methods people tried in their effort to become pregnant and the centrality of parenthood to their identity, and we measured risk of a bad outcome by inquiring about previous and current fertility issues (e.g., miscarriages) and length of time to conception. We measured coping resources by analyzing word use in participants' open-ended responses to operationalize the degree to which they viewed the experience of trying to conceive as shared with their partner and to assess cognitive and emotional resources (Pennebaker, 2011; Robbins et al., 2013; Rohrbaugh et al., 2008).

3. Overview and hypotheses

The current study examined individuals' experiences of uncertainty associated with trying to conceive, including their reflections on the experience and their reports of anxiety, positive and negative emotions, rumination, and use of uncertainty navigation (i.e.,

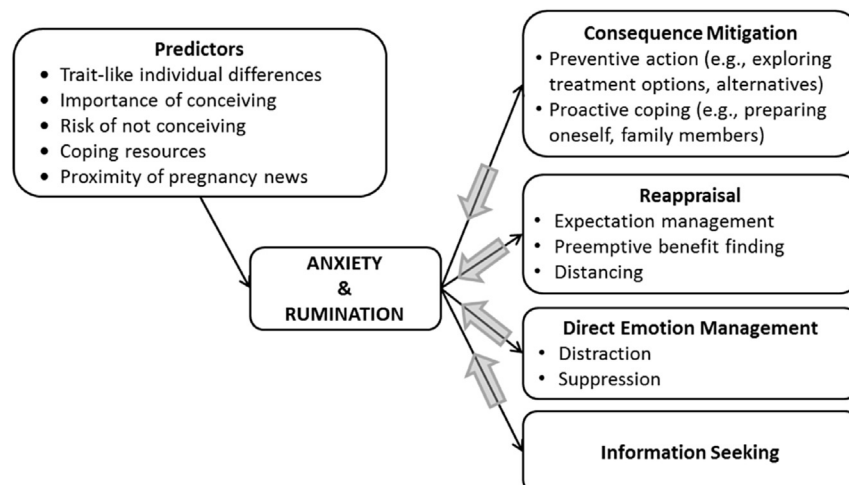


Fig. 1. The uncertainty navigation model in the context of trying to conceive.

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