



Preparing Your Heart For Social Gatherings

Worrying about potential minefields

Social gatherings, whether around the holidays or any other time of the year, can often feel challenging to those struggling with infertility. Anxiety is felt ahead of time, worrying about the myriad triggering comments that *could* be said, how we should respond, and how we might feel afterwards. While we can't avoid all potentially triggering social situations, we can do some preparation and practice some good cognitive strategies to help us navigate those situations in a healthier way.

5 steps to prepare your heart and mind

★ Pray ahead of time

Social gatherings can be full of situations that tempt us to compare, respond in anger, harbor uncharitable thoughts, or be left feeling misunderstood or depressed. Let's pray *before* we head into these situations, asking God and our guardian angel to fill us with peace and right understanding, charity towards others, wisdom for our responses, and comfort if our hearts are wounded. Ask the Lord to remind you of His love for you, that He is good and has good plans for you.

★ Identify your fears and script out potential scenarios and responses

Anxiety before a social gathering often revolves around two main concerns: firstly what we will have to talk about when others are focused on chatting about their children or pregnancies, and secondly that people might make triggering comments, the conversation will feel uncomfortable and we will end up feeling hurt. Many of these situations can be alleviated by scripting out potential responses ahead of time for the following areas:

1) News/updates we can share with others: Think about what stories you might like to share regarding your job, recent dates/vacations/day trips, progress on your hobbies, trips or projects you are planning, events you enjoyed or are looking forward to.

2) Questions to ask others/topics to bring up for conversation: Make a list of people you are likely to run into and questions you can ask them that could divert their attention away from you and onto themselves if you're feeling uncomfortable.

3) Script out potential scenarios using the "4 Ts model" - Trigger, Thought, Truth, Try: Using the attached blank template, or your journal, make four columns on your page and label them "Trigger", "Thought", "Truth" and "Try." In the "Trigger" column, make a list of 3-5 triggering scenarios that you are expecting to experience. Alongside these, in the "Thought" column, write how you might think and feel when these happen and why. Next, in the "Truth" column, validate your feelings. Look back at the thoughts you have written down and recognize that these can sometimes be cognitive distortions and not reflect

people's actual intents, thoughts or motivations towards you. Assuming the best of the other people involved and that their intentions are likely positive, jot down the truth of what the actual intent likely is behind their comment or action. In the final column, brainstorm some responses to "Try". Note down a charitable response you could use in the situation if it arises. Determine if the person you are speaking to is one you want in your support circle and whether you want to share more of your heart, or if a simpler response is more appropriate. See the "4 Ts model" page later in this resource for common examples.

★ **Communicate your needs to your loved ones**

Take some time before the event to review your potential scenario list or "4 Ts" chart with your spouse so you are on the same page for responses. Let your spouse know in which situations or conversations you might need back-up support or assistance in changing the subject. You may also want to let your spouse know what reassurances and validations you might need after the social event. In addition, let loved ones who will be at the gathering know the type of interaction you would appreciate *ahead* of time ie: "Samantha, I'm super excited to see you and hear all about your kids and how your pregnancy is going. To be honest we've been struggling a bit because of our infertility journey and it can be hard to talk about in a group but I'm looking forward to telling you all about my recent vacation."

★ **Give others grace - assume the best of others' intentions**

As you prepare for gatherings, keep in mind the majority of people you interact with do not intend to hurt you with their comments and are actually trying to be supportive. Always respond in charity to their *intent*. As (Fr.) Francis Fernandez says in his devotional *In Conversation with God*, "God asks us to be compassionate in all situations in life. When we are called upon to judge our neighbour, we have to do so from the most favourable angle. *Even though you see something very bad about your neighbour*, says St. Bernard, *don't jump to conclusions but rather make excuses for him interiorly. Excuse his intention, if you cannot excuse his action. Think that he may have acted out of ignorance, or by surprise, or accidentally.*"¹ Be charitable towards others and show them the same grace and mercy you would like to receive in the times when you may have unintentionally said something hurtful or didn't know the right thing to say (remembering that each time we pray the Our Father, we say "as we forgive those who trespass against us"). Remember, too, that two of the Church's spiritual works of mercy are "forgiving" and "bearing wrongs patiently" (see CCC 2447). Furthermore, since you recognize the value of motherhood and would love one day to rejoice in it yourself, allow others to celebrate joy in their pregnancies, children or grandchildren in the way you hope to have them do with any future children of yours.

★ **Give yourself grace**

Recognize that you've been through a lot on your infertility journey and it is normal for your heart to be tender and more easily wounded as a result. Take time for a little self-care before the event in order to allow yourself to build up emotional reserves and be in a good place when you arrive at the gathering later. Go for a run, enjoy some time on a nature trail, spend time with a good book - whatever helps you recharge. Set aside time for some self-care after the event too if it was draining for you. Replenish those emotional resources!

¹ In *Conversation with God*, Vol 4 by Francis Fernandez. Quoting St. Bernard from his "Sermon on the Canticle of Canticles".

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Example

Event *Annual Christmas Party*

Date of event *Dec 18, 2021*

Level of anxiety about event 1 2 3 4

Things I am most worried about

Everyone being excited about my cousin Samantha who is pregnant, and seeing her. Family and friends asking us when we are going to have Kids.

My prayer before the gathering

Lord, please be with me at the party next weekend. Comfort my heart and help me to find refuge in you. Give me the wisdom and charity I need to interact with others gracefully. Please help us to have some uplifting conversations. Remind me that I am living out your plan for me and that You have more good things in store for me.

News/updates we can share with others

(1) Summer vacation (2) Upcoming plans for our anniversary trip (3) My new volunteer opportunities (3) Plans for landscaping/gardening next spring

Questions I can ask others/topics I can bring up with them

How will you be celebrating the holidays with your family? How are your parents doing? Any fun activities you have planned for this winter? What books are you reading/shows are you watching? Ask brother-in-law: how is your home reno project going?

Comments I'm worried about hearing

(1) So when are you having Kids? (2) You are so lucky to have free time right now! (3) I don't know why you're having trouble - I got pregnant accidentally twice!

Situations I may run into - use the "4 Ts" (see attached page)

*My parents making comments about their grandkids wanting more.
People making silly/excited comments about Samantha being pregnant.
"Just relax" etc, "How many Kids do you have? When are you having Kids?"
People making negative comments about their Kids.*

Loved ones that would be helpful for me to communicate with before the event

*Hubby - let him know I need back-up with Aunt Monica, need him to help me redirect conversation. Need to hear from him how much he loves our family of two.
Cousin Samantha - let her know I'd love to chat about my new project at work and recent vacation.
My mom - Would be helpful if she could brag on me a bit too!*

Self-care before event *Take a couple hrs to read, do my nails, color*

Self-care after event *Go for a run, work on hobby at home, prayer time or adoration*

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4 Ts model: Example

Trigger	Thought Remember, what we assume are people's motivations/thoughts are perceptions and assumptions, not fact. Underline any comments that are assumptions or feelings and not fact.	Truth	Try
<p>"Do you have any Kids?"</p> <p>"When are you having Kids?"</p>	<p>Reopens the wound. It <u>seems like this is the only thing that matters to other people</u> and I don't have it.</p> <p>When I hear that I feel like I'm <u>not worthwhile without Kids</u> and <u>no one cares about me otherwise</u>.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - People are trying to connect with me, trying to get to know us better and trying to make conversation. - I am worthy. I am loved by God and many family and friends. I have a lot to offer. 	<p>Help them to connect with me. "We would love to have Kids whenever God sends them our way."</p> <p>Then, change the conversation, ask about their vacation.</p>
<p>My parents making comments about loving their grandKids and wanting more grandchildren</p>	<p>Touches a nerve. It <u>seems like this is the only thing that matters to other people</u> and I don't have it.</p> <p>It <u>seems like my mother is so rude, insensitive and doesn't care how I feel.</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - My mom loves being (or would love to be) a grandma. It is OK for her to feel that way. I would love for her to be that excited if/when we do have Kids. - She loves me as I am and cares about me. - I am worthy & loved 	<p>Validate my mom's feelings, let her know what I need.</p> <p>"We wish more than anything we had a grandchild for you too! Our hearts are often so heavy and sad about that. Could we chat about ___? I've been really looking forward to sharing with you about it."</p>
<p>People making silly/excited comments about Samantha being pregnant</p>	<p>It rubs salt in the wound and makes me feel more self-conscious about our infertility. It seems like <u>they are rubbing it in my face.</u></p> <p>It seems like <u>they are being so insensitive and don't care how I feel.</u> It makes me <u>feel invisible.</u></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - They are excited about Samantha being pregnant and about her baby. It is OK for them to feel that way. I would love for them to be that excited if/when we do have Kids. - I know my family loves me, enjoys spending time with me and cares about me. 	<p>Give my family permission to feel joy.</p> <p>In charity, attempt to offer a positive comment in support of Samantha.</p> <p>Redirect the conversation and/or join a conversation in a different room.</p>

Trigger	Thought	Truth	Try
<p>People making negative comments about their kids i.e. "Kids are so exhausting - you'll see!"</p>	<p>I feel jealous. I feel angry that <u>they don't seem to appreciate what they have</u>. I <u>assume they are judging us and don't think we understand or are not up to the challenges of parenthood.</u></p>	<p>- They are exhausted in their current season of childrearing. Their comment is more reflective of how they are feeling than about us. People like to connect over complaints. - They can be appreciative while needing to vent or have a supportive ear. They may just have a bad habit of complaining.</p>	<p>Validate their feelings. Connect with them over their conversation or pick a new topic to connect over. "It sounds like a busy season for you guys. What's been the hardest/best thing about this season with your kids?" "It sounds like a busy season for you guys. Any upcoming plans as a family you are looking forward to?"</p>
<p>"Just relax!"</p>	<p>I feel really <u>misunderstood and alone</u>. It seems like <u>no one really understands how hard this is</u> or what we are going through. I <u>don't feel supported.</u></p>	<p>- They hate to see me stressed and struggling because they love me. - They are trying to have an optimistic outlook and hoping that helps. They are responding to me and supporting me in the best way they know how.</p>	<p>Respond to their intent. Explain and ask for what I need. "I would love to be less stressed. It's actually super overwhelming having multiple tests, appts every month. We're exhausted. Could we plan a double date next month to help take our minds off things?"</p>
<p>"I don't know why you're having so much trouble getting pregnant - it happened to me accidentally twice!"</p>	<p>It reopens the wound. I feel so frustrated and angry that it is so easy for others to get pregnant and so hard for us! It doesn't seem fair! <u>She is being insensitive and doesn't care about my feelings.</u></p>	<p>- She hates to see me stressed and struggling because they love me. - She honestly is as perplexed by the situation as we are and wishes it were easier for us. She is responding to me and supporting me in the best way she knows how.</p>	<p>Respond to her intent. Educate and ask for what I need. "It can feel so heartbreaking and frustrating for us that we are not able to get pregnant as easily as others. Would you pray for us and check in on us next month after our appointment? The support would mean so much."</p>

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Your turn

Event

Date of event

Level of anxiety about event: 1 2 3 4

Things I am most worried about

My prayer before the gathering

News/updates we can share with others

Questions I can ask others/topics I can bring up with them

Comments I'm worried about hearing

Situations I may run into - use the "4 Ts" (see attached page)

Loved ones that would be helpful for me to communicate with before the event

Self-care before event

Self-care after event

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4 Ts model: **Your turn**

Trigger	Thought Remember, what we assume are people's motivations/thoughts are perceptions and assumptions, not fact. Underline any comments that are assumptions or feelings and not fact.	Truth	Try