Who Is to "Blame" for the Childless Marriage?

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Here's an age-old question which a leading doctor says should be changed to—"What can the couple do about it?"

THE CHILDLESS WOMAN has always been held in low repute; indeed, she has often become the subject of scorn. Only in recent years has it been recognized that reasons for childlessness seem to occur as frequently in the husband as in the wife.

"It's her fault," the husband's relatives have long said. "No, it's his fault," the wife's relatives can now reply.

Yet both are wrong. There is no "fault" in that sense, just a physical or psychological bar to childbearing that often can be removed.

In psychological cases, for example, records show that many a childless couple has conceived during a vacation period of relief from the stresses of daily living. Even without a vacation, relief from too much pressure may help to solve the psychological problem.

Take the case of Mr. J., an ambitious junior executive in a large corporation. His life was one long series of conferences, trips, and business lunches. During the rare evenings he was home, he was physically and emotionally exhausted.

After five years of marriage had produced no children, Mr. J.'s physician gave him the choice of changing his way of living or remaining childless. So he switched to another job, slowed his pace, put his ambitions in lower gear—and in two years was rewarded with a son.

A similar result was achieved in the case of a young couple making a start in marriage "on a shoestring." They both worked; he at night, she in the daytime. What little time they had together was worried and rushed. After three childless years, she quit her job and devoted her time to homemaking. In six months, she was pregnant.

As for the physical causes of infertility, these relate to the presence of living ova in the woman and sperm in the man, and the opportunity for union. Serious organic abnormalities are rare; most adults produce living cells, so the trouble is more often found elsewhere.

One of the important tests to determine a man's fertility is the examination for living, active sperm. This is determined by microscopic examination and actual count of sperm cells. If the sperm is absent or abnormal, a general investigation of the man's health and living habits must be made.

Sometimes surgery is necessary to correct abnormalities in the uterus. Following such surgery, pregnancies occur in from 20 to 24 percent of the cases.

In some instances, it becomes necessary to test whether the Fallopian tubes, which carry the egg to the uterus, are open by blowing carbon dioxide gas through them. In other cases, a lowered function of the thyroid gland may have to be treated.

Many childless couples come to the doctor stressing the frequency of sex relations in their effort to start a family. These couples may be defeating their own purpose, however, if the sperm are few or relatively inactive.

People sometimes ask whether diet can have anything to do with lack of fertility. In the ordinary sense of "going on a diet" to have a baby, the answer is "no," but fertility is related to general nutrition. That is, deficiencies in proteins and vitamins may lower fertility sufficiently to prevent conception. An adequate balanced diet of normal foods for both husband and wife is vital to having a child.

The role of alcohol in excess is well established—it injures the germ cells from which the male sperm or female ova develop. Also, it may seem incredible that anyone could drink 26 cups of coffee a day, yet this fact appeared in the history of one man who had no children. When his coffee consumption was reduced to more reasonable proportions, and some other conditions remedied, he eventually became a father.

TO GET an idea of how effective treatment can be, consider this series of 100 pregnancies in previously childless families: 26 occurred with no treatment; 24 after surgery; 18 after inflation of the Fallopian tubes; and 8 with radiation of the pituitary and ovaries. In 77 cases, overlapping the other treatments, hormone or glandular therapy was used.

Statistics, of course, are meaningless to any one couple and, in spite of improved understanding of the problems involved, nobody can guarantee a remedy to the childless husband and wife. Nevertheless, if a couple ignores the age-old tendency to "blame" somebody for childlessness and seeks out the medical and psychological aids that today's science provides, they have a reasonable chance of hearing those wonderful words: "You're going to have a baby."

COVER:

Aren't teen-agers amazing? Even when they're in bed with a bad cold, like the young lady in Mac Conner's painting, they're still the most active members of the family.

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