Foreword

Infertility has no symptoms, it causes no disability, it is invisible. Infertility is not feared except by those who suffer from it, yet with few exceptions, no human experience is as threatening. Whether expressed as a melancholic wistfulness or as a life-consuming rage, its effects on the human psyche—anger, guilt, sadness, isolation, loneliness, frustration, and remorse—are universal. Although infertility is medically unique in that the “patient” is two people, it is particularly unfortunate that men and women experience it in different and often dissonant ways.

Dr. Becker’s research over the last two decades is both remarkable and invaluable because it has focused on three critical elements rarely addressed in the scientific infertility literature. The first is the recognition that the “Infertility Epidemic” is a cultural, not biological phenomenon. The second is that infertility’s unique effects on peoples’ lives are both culturally informed and dominated by gender differences. The third is that the “medicalization” of infertility as witnessed by the extreme technological orientation of modern treatment is itself a major and stressful component of the infertility experience. In this updated edition, Dr. Becker tackles all of these issues.

Couples who have never experienced infertility rarely question the basic cultural expectations of marriage and family building. Infertility, an unwelcome and “unscheduled life transition,” forces an often painful conscious examination of this cultural imperative. The unspoken differences in expectations that men and women bring to marriage and childbearing are exacerbated and exaggerated by the experience of infertility. This discrepancy invites polarization. For most women, even those who had willingly

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and willfully postponed pregnancy, the anxious pall of infertility appears with devastating speed if pregnancy, once intended, is not quickly achieved. Ignoring past career or educational choices or success, women quickly conclude that their very purpose in life is threatened. Although a man may abstractly long for the comfort of roots, marriage, and a stable household, the need to nurture a child is not an urgent aspect of his hormonal or cultural makeup. Men's biological clocks are silent. Beyond an occasional thought about contraception, many men give little, if any, thought to pregnancy and enter adulthood without much anticipation of fatherhood. But for most women, having children is not a hidden agenda, it *is* the agenda.

As a woman becomes preoccupied by the infertility, her husband resents the fact that his partner has become obsessed by this event in their lives and may emotionally withdraw from the turmoil. Disappointed and angry, she questions his commitment to her and his desire for a child. The husband may lament the lack of children, but mostly, he wonders what has happened to his wife. His helplessness and frustration mount as he begins to realize that nothing he says will ease the emotional pain that his partner is experiencing. For both parties, the result is a sense of loneliness and isolation as they suffer through separate struggles.

Healing the Infertile Family is an invaluable tool for patients, physicians, mental health professionals, social scientists, or anyone seeking understanding and insight into the experience of infertility. With a new Introduction that reports on subsequent research, Dr. Becker draws on extensive research-based personal interviews, including new case studies of advanced reproductive technologies. She brings a scholarly but compassionate tone to a skillful exploration of the psychological and cultural meaning of infertility. The medical outcome of infertility treatment is still maddeningly unpredictable, but as a patient of mine told me, "You can't point to infertility as doing either all positive or all negative things. In any relationship that is healthy, things change. That's the way it's been for us with infertility. In the four years now that we've been at it, infertility has done a lot of different things to us. Sometimes it created real barriers between us. Sometimes it's made us feel

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much closer. It's funny that way, because it seems to shift. But what it has done is made us respect our own strength. We've been going through something terrible, but we've been going through it. We haven't killed each other and we haven't gotten divorced. It's hard to believe sometimes, but I think we're going to be all right, no matter what happens." Perhaps the greatest contribution of *Healing the Infertile Family* is that it is truly about healing.

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