

# Yoga's Stress Relief: An Aid for Infertility?



Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

Tracy Toon Spencer teaches yoga to Jessica Tabibnia, left, and Kimberly Soranno, at the N.Y.U. Fertility Center.

By CATHERINE SAINT LOUIS  
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KIMBERLY SORANNO, a 39-year-old Brooklynite undergoing an in vitro fertilization cycle as part of her quest to become pregnant, had gone to her share of [yoga](#) classes, but never one like that held on a recent Tuesday night in a reception area of the [New York University Fertility Center](#). There were no deep twists or headstands; just easy "restorative" poses as the teacher, Tracy Toon Spencer, guided the participants — most of them women struggling to conceive — to let go of their worries.

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Sally Ryan for The New York Times

In Chicago, Beth Heller, left, and Tami Quinn, founders of Pulling Down the Moon.

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"Verbally, she brings you to a relaxation place in your mind," Mrs. Soranno said, adding, "It's great to do the poses, get energy out and feel strong. But the most important part for me was the connection to the other women."

Besides taxing the mind, body and wallet, infertility can be lonely. Support groups have long existed for infertile couples, but in recent years, "yoga for fertility" classes have become increasingly popular. They are the latest in a succession of holistic approaches to fertility treatment that have included acupuncture and [mind-body programs](#) (whose effectiveness for infertility patients is backed by research); massage (which doesn't have specific data to support it); and Chinese herbs (which some say may be detrimental).

No study has proved that yoga has increased pregnancy rates in infertility patients. But students of yoga-for-fertility classes say that the coping skills they learn help reduce stress on and off the mat. For many, it's a support group in motion (or lotus).

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“As important as the yoga postures was the idea that women could come out of the closet with their infertility and be supported in a group,” said Tami Quinn, the founder, with Beth Heller, of [Pulling Down the Moon](#), a company with holistic fertility centers in Chicago and the Washington area. “If you say come to my support group, women going through infertility are like, ‘I don’t need some hokey support group’ or ‘I’m not that bad.’ But with yoga they are getting support and they don’t even realize it.”

Holly Dougherty, 42, didn’t want to talk about her drug-infused slog through fertility treatment that began seven years ago. “I didn’t tell anyone,” said Ms. Dougherty, with the exception of her parents.

This changed after she started going to yoga-for-fertility classes taught by Ms. Spencer at World Yoga Center in Manhattan in 2005. The gentle poses helped take her mind off her setbacks, and each week, she found the community that she hadn’t realized she needed.

“Being able to open up in a safe environment with support and encouragement of others on the journey, everyone became each other’s cheerleader,” said Ms. Dougherty, now a mother of two who still socializes with students from Ms. Spencer’s class. “I learned to become so open about it.”

SMOKING, alcohol, caffeine and some medications can hurt fertility, as can being overweight or underweight, said Dr. William Schoolcraft, a medical director of the [Colorado Center for Reproductive Medicine](#), whose main branch is in Lone Tree. As for improving one’s chances with massage, diet or yoga? “That’s where the data gets murkier,” he said.

“We will never promise that you will get pregnant by doing yoga,” Ms. Quinn said. “We can tell you many women who have done yoga have gotten pregnant. But there’s no clinical data supporting the fact that yoga increases conception rates. The last thing we would want to do is give false hope.”

[Stress](#), however, has been shown to reduce the probability of conception. [Alice Domar](#), who has a Ph.D. in health psychology and is the director of mind-body services at the [Harvard](#)-affiliated center [Boston IVF](#), said of yoga: “It’s a very effective relaxation technique, and a great way to get women in the door to get support. It’s a way to get them to like their bodies again.”

A handful of prominent medical centers have partnered with yoga teachers to offer classes. Pulling Down the Moon now holds its \$210 six-week Yoga for Fertility programs at [Fertility Centers of Illinois](#) in Chicago (since 2002), and [Shady Grove Fertility](#) in the Washington area (since 2008.)

Recently, Dr. Domar, a psychologist whose research has shown that participation in a mind-body program can positively affect fertility, joined with Ms. Quinn and Ms. Heller to take wellness programs, including yoga and acupuncture, to infertility clinics nationwide. They have formed a new company, Integrative Care for Fertility: A Domar Center, and plan to open seven branches this year.

In 2009, the [New York University](#) Fertility Center in Manhattan brought in two yoga instructors to help patients. “We really do push it,” Dr. Frederick Licciardi, a founding partner of the center, said of its wellness programs that include mind-body work and acupuncture along with yoga. “We put it up front. We know they are doing it anyway. We want to show we are supportive that they are doing it.”

Some infertility clinics advise patients not to do vigorous exercise like running for fear of twisting their drug-stimulated enlarged ovaries. (This excruciating condition, called torsion, is rare, but surgery is often required if it happens with the possibility of losing the ovary, said Dr. Brian Kaplan, a partner at the Fertility Centers of Illinois, who advises his patients to limit exercise while taking stimulating drugs.)

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