

Treating Women Ambivalent About Motherhood: Best Practices for Patient-Provider Communication

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A. The Lives and Experiences of Women Who Are Ambivalent/Undecided about Motherhood

Deciding whether to have children, raise children, add more children to her life or live a child-free life is a journey that's unique to each woman making those decisions. No one can tell any 21st Century woman what's right for her, and yet society, her family, and her own assumptions continue to influence these decisions and sometimes even demand a particular choice. Admittedly, some women find that these are non-issues, in that they know what they want, why they want it, and what they're going to do about it. But for many women, the question of whether to become a mother (or add to her family) is the source of tremendous angst, and it can trigger an avalanche of other questions/issues.

We live in a pro-natalist society—one that, through numerous spoken and unspoken signals, continues to assume that women will “naturally” want to become mothers. Meanwhile, women who are ambivalent or undecided about motherhood have few options for safe places where they can go to explore their ambivalence without being judged, shamed, or told what to do. They live in silent torment not knowing what they want. When they can't move forward with their lives because they can't figure out what to do, they come to me, a psychotherapist and [Motherhood Clarity Mentor](#). I lead them through a structured and ordered process where they gain the clarity they're seeking.

Girls who grow up in a pro-natalist culture are raised to believe that when they're adults they will want to become mothers. With this mindset, supported by an entire community, those women who do not want to pursue motherhood, feel inadequate, as if something is wrong with them. And if they're not sure what they want, they often feel more broken; they've been told their whole lives they're supposed to want children.

No one chooses to be undecided “for the fun of it,” and it's a myth that women “just know.” What's likely to be truer is that many women were conditioned not to think about parenthood as a question. They were never encouraged to ask the fundamental question, “Is Motherhood for me?”

Choosing between motherhood and a child-free life is not a pros-and-cons kind of decision; it's about finding *your truth* for your own personal reasons. Women deserve to get the message that motherhood is neither a destiny nor a debate and there is no single right choice. There is a right choice for each woman.

B. Providers Have the Power to Positively Impact Women's Reproductive Decision-Making

As medical professionals, you have the capacity to create enormous change in the lives of women around the world—women who feel ambivalent about their motherhood/parenthood decision. You are on the front lines in a way that no one else is; you are in a unique position to debunk old myths and help women feel safe. Women's trust is granted to you because of your title and position. Furthermore, when you talk to women in private—in circumstances where they are vulnerable as well as want to trust you—the opportunity is profound. In a 5-minute interaction, you can change the course of how a woman thinks about herself and the direction she takes in her next steps toward making one of the most important decisions of her lifetime.

Your primary challenge is that living in a pro-natalist society, as we all do, makes implicit bias unavoidable; it's likely that you and your colleagues, and pretty much everyone we know, *all* have an implicit bias about the motherhood question. Addressing this bias that you and your patients might never have noticed or questioned requires us to uncover the beliefs we hold. Clearly, *aiding your patients in this context requires conscientiousness*.

The power you have to help women feel confident about who they are and understand what choices are available to them is not to be underestimated. Where do you start? First by checking yourself before you talk to your patient and ask, “*Am I assuming anything?*”

Sometimes we hear just the right words at just the right time to put us on a new and healthier path. Once you understand the prevailing myths about motherhood, and what you can say to address those myths, you will embark on a ground-breaking path encouraging women to make conscientious, informed choices. You can be in the vanguard of a movement that creates a *post-pro-natalist* culture.

C. Communicating with Women Who Are Ambivalent about Motherhood

Understanding myths about motherhood and providing resources are critical components of this conversation.

Myths about Motherhood

These myths are all either spoken/unspoken messages or subtexts in today's culture. Understand these myths to avoid conveying them to others either directly or indirectly.

- "Women should want children and have children."
- "There is a feeling that just comes to women that tells them it's time to have children."
- "All women know that they either want children or don't want children."
- "Being a mother means your life will be more fulfilled."
- "If you enjoy children, you should become a parent."
- "If you don't enjoy children, you shouldn't become a parent."
- "If you don't know what you want, you shouldn't have children."

To build safety in the provider-patient relationship, convey any of the following:

- There is *no shame* in not knowing if you want to be a parent. It's okay not to know.
- You're not alone in your ambivalence; many women feel that way. If you want resources, I can offer them.
- There's no "one way" to feel about becoming a mother, adding children to your life, having more children or choosing to be childfree.
- There is no shame in choosing a childfree life.
- It's great that you are clear on what you want because not everyone is clear.
- This is a personal and private decision. I do not have an agenda about what you want or may want.
- Have you thought about what you want in terms of a family?

To build rapport with the patient, you want to do the following:

- Be kind.
- Offer an ear without your opinion.
- Impart that both paths are good, and both are challenging.
- Trust that this woman will find her truth and only she can know her truth.
- Assume she desperately wants clarity.
- Let her know it's ok to ask for professional help and that she is not "broken."
- Remember that no one chooses indecision for the fun of it.
- Reassure her that she is not alone and that many women don't know.

Never say the following:

- You'll change your mind.
- It's natural to want children.
- Being a mom is hard, but it's worth it because there is nothing like it.
- You're running out of time.
- Just do it—you'll love it.

D. Understanding and Internalizing Key Concepts Even If They're Never Spoken Aloud

Desire vs. decision

It's important to remember that a person's *desires* and decisions are not always the same. When women feel stuck and can't decide, often it's because they're trying to figure out what they want (their heart's desire about motherhood) and what they're going to do (make a decision) at the same time. This mental gridlock leaves women feeling broken, tortured, and anxious. Even if you never discuss this concept with your patient/client, understanding it will inform your conversation.

Sometimes what a woman wants is different than what her decision will be or what she'll decide to do. For example:

- She may want to become a mother and decide not to for a variety of reasons.
- She may realize she wanted to have been a mother by now but will choose not to be a mother now.
- Deciding to become a mother may not have been her first choice but will decide conscientiously to become a mother for other reasons.

The invisibility of shame

Even if you believe there is no reason to feel shameful, you cannot know if the woman in front of you is feeling shame. Women will go to great lengths to hide the shame they feel and may not tell you that they're ambivalent or undecided.

The best way to neutralize shame is to address it immediately. You can say, “There is no shame in not knowing—lots of women don’t know.”

Unexplored certainty:

Starting from a very young age, we draw conclusions based on our experiences. Often those conclusions become unexplored beliefs. If those beliefs don’t go unchallenged, they become internalized as if they are true. Even though the conclusions drawn early on were for good reasons, it doesn’t mean it’s all that helpful to maintain those beliefs into adulthood.

When women present certainty about pregnancy or choosing a childfree life, it’s not your job to challenge them. Offer them support by letting them know that it is healthy and empowering to be decisive. Let them know that many women can’t always make a decision. Convey, *“It’s great that you are clear about what you want. Not all women know what they want which is more common than you might know or more common than ever gets discussed.”*

Certainty can sound like:

- “I’ve always known I wanted children.”
- “I’ve always known I don’t want kids.”
- “I’ve never questioned being a mother.”
- “Being a parent isn’t anything I’ve ever wanted.”
- “When we got married, we knew we’d have children (or we knew we wanted a childfree life). It was never a question.”

You don’t know what these statements mean to them or how they feel about it. You do have to take them at their word.

There are people who feel certain about their motherhood decision, and sometimes that certainty is unexplored.

The upside to ambivalence is that it forces one to pause, ponder and explore what their truth is. However, this only occurs when one feels safe to do so.

E. The Motherhood Clarity Course: How I Approach this Work

The women who reach out to me are often struggling with motherhood indecision. I guide them through a 4-month process that helps them identify what they want and why they want it. Teasing apart one’s desire and one’s decision is complex—more complex than one’s external circumstances. I help women understand the unconscious messages contributing to their indecision, and I help them end the cycle of “I don’t know.” Now they can move on with their lives and feel at peace. I want women to know *why they want* what they want for themselves and *why* they are making the decision they are making.

Recommendations for Starting the Conversation

Please consider adding some version of the following questions to your waiting room form. The answers will make your job easier while helping women feel understood and seen.

Not all women know whether they want to become a parent. We’d like to ask about your thoughts/feelings.

- *Would you like to discuss your thoughts about parenthood today?*
- *If you don’t already have children, do you want to have children in the future?*
- *Do you want resources about motherhood indecision?*
- *Is there a question not being asked on this form that you would like to see on the form?*

F. Additional Resources

A Short List of Books that Inform the Conversation:

Motherhood—Is It for Me? Your Step-by-Step Guide to Clarity, Denise L. Carlini and Ann Davidman, 2016.

I encourage you to have a copy on hand to lend to patients if appropriate—or have in your waiting room for those who might want to view it—or buy a copy for your local library.

The Baby Decision: How to Make the Most Important Choice of Your Life, Merle Bombardieri, 2016.

Bombardieri guides you through her own method to help one resolve ambivalence, indecision, and choice.

Living the Life Unexpected: 12 Weeks to Your Plan B for a Meaningful and Fulfilling Future Without Children, Jody Day, 2016.

This book, for women who intently go down the path of desiring motherhood but end up childless for many reasons, gives readers a map to the other side of disappointment and grief.

The Baby Matrix: Why Freeing Our Minds from Outmoded Thinking about Parenthood & Reproduction Will Create a Better World, Laura Carroll, 2012.

Carroll helps women understand where their beliefs may come from and why they feel confused. She does an excellent job of putting pronatalism in context.

Blog Entries on My Website:

[The Advantage of Ambivalence \(and the Downside of Certainty\)](#)

[35 and Undecided](#)

[What NOT to Say to Someone Struggling with Motherhood Indecision](#)

[Putting Aside the External to Discover Your Desire About Motherhood](#)

[Discovering Your Heart's Desire About Motherhood](#)

[And more...](#)

Films/Documentaries that explore ambivalence about motherhood and choosing a childfree life:

Egg, Directed by Marianna Palka.

To Kid or Not To Kid, Directed Maxine Trump

My So-called Selfish Life, Directed by Therese Shechter

Exercises You Can Provide to Your Patients:

These are excerpts from the book, [Motherhood-Is It For Me? Your Step-by-Step Guide to Clarity](#) by Denise L. Carlini and Ann Davidman. Although the book is designed to be read and worked through in the order it is written, patients/clients can benefit from these exercises even if they are completed out of order.

Your first writing assignment is designed to help you identify the fears that you hold. The second is designed to help you access the assumptions you live with about your future... (pages 47-49)

1. It is helpful to recognize fears because they often run the show from behind the scenes when they haven't been identified. The question below is intentionally vague. Interpret it the way you need to. Trust that. There are no appropriate or inappropriate fears. There are only the fears that live inside you for good reason. This is your time to give a voice to what they are and let them out. Write from any point in time in your life. ...

As you face making this decision, what is your biggest fear in deciding?

2a. Finish the next statement from the perspective of any time in your life. You might think about it from several points of time as your views change. Notice what comes to mind first. There is no wrong way to do this.

I always thought that by now my life would look like...

After you've answered 2a, walk away from it. Take anywhere from an hour to a day; then reread what you wrote and go on to 2b.

2b. How does it feel to read what you wrote? The writing prompt in 2a is about your thoughts. Now pay attention to your feelings and write about them.

As I read what I wrote, my feelings about this are...

3. In addition to these exercises, another one that proves helpful is to make the decision yes to motherhood and live with that decision for 5 days. Then make the decision to live a childfree life or decide not to add any more children to your life for 5 days. During those 10 days, write daily about how you feel about the decision you are pretending to have made. Try not to go back and forth. The more that you can buy into the decision being made, the more information you will receive about yourself.

Seriously consider the following questions. Keep in mind that your answers don't commit you to anything.... (page 407)

4. *What would have to happen or change inside me to choose motherhood? What would I have to know or believe about myself to decide to become a mom? What would it take to say YES to motherhood and feel good, satisfied and content about it?*

5. *What would have to happen or change inside me to choose a child-free life? What would I have to know or believe about myself to choose not to have children? What would it take to say YES to a childfree life and feel good, satisfied and content about it?*

Additional resources can be found at my website www.IsParenthoodForMe.com