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Psychologist helps couple cope with conception woes

[By Vincent T. Davis](#)- Express-News Staff Writer

On a Sunday night in late December, James and Melissa Williamson lay in bed ready to sever the last tie to a dream. They had consulted doctors who scanned medical charts and offered clinical solutions. Making love became part of a "to-do list." Calendars, numbers and temperature readings replaced intimacy.

There had never been any physical signs that anything was wrong. But now she had severe cramping, almost an inkling that they may need medical intervention.

"There's something wrong," Melissa Vela-Williamson, said as she woke her husband. "I'm going to have to have surgery."

"OK, we'll get through it," James Williamson said, holding her as she cried.

They believed hard work brings good things. They loved each other, had college degrees, good jobs and a nice house. They had everything they wanted except a child.

She had stopped taking the pill in June 2006 and they tracked when she was ovulating. Two-and-a-half years later they were still trying. They were prepared to see a specialist for a laparoscopy, an operation to look into the abdomen and reproductive organs for possible answers.

They had entered the world of infertility, a condition that affects 7.3 million people in the United States. They began to talk about adoption and in vitro fertilization options. Family and friends tried to empathize, telling them, "When you relax it'll happen." Those were the last words they wanted to hear.

Every month added to the stress. She needed to talk out her feelings. He wanted her to stop worrying. Both needed to learn to cope with their pain.

In October, she talked with her friend Lisa McDaniel, about her problem. McDaniel, 41, suggested she see an infertility psychologist. She didn't want her friend to go through what she had years ago.

After two marriages, miscarriages and 13 years of trying, McDaniel was able to conceive her daughter through in vitro fertilization.

"It's like mourning the loss of the children you never had," McDaniel says of her miscarriages. "It would have benefited me (for someone) to tell me that it's OK to feel that way."

Taking her friend's suggestion, Melissa found Dr. Poonam Sharma, a licensed psychologist who

specializes in fertility counseling, helping couples using third-party reproduction services, such as egg donors, sperm donors or gestational carriers.

They visited Sharma several times from October through December. Vela-Williamson cried through the first session.

"I had never been to a psychologist, I never felt like I needed one," she says. "You break your arm, you go see a doctor; your heart breaks, you don't know where to go. My heart was broken and I didn't know what to do about it."

Sharma says the experience of infertility can be like the death of a dream. Some studies show stress levels in those dealing with infertility are as "high as somebody who has a diagnosis of cancer or HIV."

"I really try to emphasize that it is a big thing and there's nothing wrong with the intensity of the feelings that people are having," Sharma says. Sharma encourages clients to educate themselves and those closest people to them. She says couples spend a lot of time just listening to each other, getting on the same page about how difficult it is for both of them and talking about the different ways they have of coping with it.

"Most men are fixers, we want to fix things right then and there," Williamson, 30, says. "Sometimes I didn't realize that she just wanted to talk, not for me to fix it, but just hear her out."

Vela-Williamson, 28, became angry and questioned her faith.

"Having your sister, mother or father telling you, 'Well, you need to get over this, this is life,' that's painful," Sharma says. "I don't think people are trying to be mean; most of the folks don't know how painful it really is."

"She didn't show pain or pity," Vela-Williamson says, noting that sessions with Sharma were invaluable to her healing.

The night after their decision to seek medical help, James Williamson had a dream. He saw his wife pregnant and happy. Vela-Williamson took one last home-pregnancy test. She had never seen two lines before. She ran to the kitchen, falling to her knees on the floor.

"God, please make this real," she cried. "Please don't let my eyes trick me, please let this be it."

Recently a doctor confirmed she's expecting the baby girl she'd always envisioned.

"At this moment, I'm living in the present and appreciating it for the blessing it is," Vela-Williamson says. "Tomorrow if something were to happen, it wouldn't be my fault or my shame. I just want to enjoy that I am pregnant today."