Pregnancy Is Not Always What You Expect:

Taking care of your mental health while pregnant or planning a pregnancy







best start meilleur départ

by/par health nexus santé

Many women in their child bearing years enjoy good physical and mental health. Mental health affects how you think, feel and react to things. Positive mental health helps you:

- Feel good about yourself.
- Develop positive relationships.
- Make reasonable life decisions.

People once believed that the hormones released during pregnancy protected women and ensured good mental health. That is not always the case. Pregnancy is a time when some women are at greater risk of becoming depressed and/or anxious.

Many people are aware of postpartum depression, but did you know that depression during pregnancy is also a very real condition? Feeling sad, negative, anxious or angry can be paralyzing. If you feel like this, you are not alone. 10 to 19% of pregnant women will have these feelings.



This booklet talks about some strategies to help you:

- Take care of your mental health before and during pregnancy.
- Understand the risk factors that can lead to depression or anxiety during pregnancy.
- Know if you are depressed or anxious during pregnancy.
- Understand how women feel by hearing other women's stories.
- Get help and treatment.
- Find more information.

Taking care of your mental health before and during pregnancy

It is important to take care of yourself throughout your life. This is especially true when you are planning a pregnancy, are pregnant, or have a new baby.

Strategies that promote positive mental health at all times are:

- Taking care of your body by:
 - Eating well.
 - Exercising regularly.
 - Getting enough sleep.
 - Taking a multi-vitamin with iron and folic acid.
 - Building and nourishing a support network of family, friends, neighbours, co-workers and others.
 - Taking time to relax and laugh.
 - Seeing your health care provider regularly.
 - Seeking help and treatment if you feel mentally or physically unwell.



Many people think of pregnancy as a happy and exciting time. While this is true for many women, it is not true for everyone. Pregnancy can stir up many mixed feelings. It is quite normal to have a wide range of different feelings during your pregnancy.

At one time or another during your pregnancy you may feel:

- Excitement and a feeling of accomplishment.
- Unsure about being pregnant, especially if the pregnancy was unplanned.
- A sense that the pregnancy is not real for the first few weeks or months.
- Scared about how your body and life will change.
- Concerned how the pregnancy and later the baby will affect your relationships.
- Happy one minute and crying the next.
- Less or more interest in sex.
- Frightened by dreams and nightmares about the pregnancy or life with a baby.
- Worried that something may be wrong with the baby.
- Absorbed by the pregnancy, making other things less important.
- Uncomfortable with your changing body and weight gain.
- Worried about labour, birth and the baby's arrival.
- Lonely or isolated.
- Tired and uncomfortable.
- A sense of urgency to have everything ready.

These feelings are normal. Pregnancy is a time of enormous change – to your body, hormones, lifestyle, relationships, and your future.

To help you adjust as you move through your pregnancy:

- Talk with your partner or others about your feelings, worries, and changes.
- Use the strategies from page 2 to promote positive mental health.

Pregnancy is a time when you start to develop your relationship with your future baby. Reducing your stress and taking care of your mental health will help as you begin this important relationship.





Understanding the risk factors that can lead to depression or anxiety during pregnancy

While we cannot predict who will and won't develop depression and/or anxiety during pregnancy, there are some key factors that can make it more likely:

- A previous episode of depression or anxiety.
- Depression or anxiety during a previous pregnancy or after birth.
- A family history of depression, anxiety or other mental illness.
- Feeling isolated or not having a good support network.
- Stress prior to or during your pregnancy (for example: loss of a loved one, a new job or recent move, difficulties in important relationships, separation from your partner).
- Emotional, physical or sexual abuse including partner abuse now or in the past.
- Pregnancy complications.
- Difficulties in becoming pregnant.
- Having suffered a miscarriage, stillbirth or trauma during a previous pregnancy or birth.

Knowing the symptoms of depression or anxiety during pregnancy

Some women find that the feelings and changes they experience during pregnancy are troubling, distressing or frightening. As many as **one in five women** will feel depressed and/or anxious during their pregnancy.

Women who have symptoms of depression during pregnancy usually:

- Have less interest or enjoyment in things they used to enjoy.
- Feel sad most of the time.

If you are depressed or anxious...

You may also feel:

- Anxious and worried.
- Guilty and ashamed.
- Alone.
- Panicky.
- Frustrated.
- Angry and irritable.
- Worthless.
- Hopeless.

You may feel like you:

- Have no energy.
- Have lost your appetite or feel like eating all the time.
- Cannot concentrate.
- Cry for no apparent reason.
- Sleep too much or too little.
- Don't want to spend time with your partner, family, friends or co-workers.

It is very important to talk to your health care provider if you have any of these symptoms for more than two weeks or if you answered YES to one of these questions:

- ☐ Are you worrying more than usual?
- ☐ Have you been feeling anxious?
- ☐ Are you less interested in your usual activities?
- ☐ Have you been feeling down, sad, irritable or hopeless?

Towards the end of pregnancy some women may have strange thoughts and pictures that keep coming back.

- These thoughts and pictures are usually negative and disturbing.
- You cannot stop these thoughts from occurring.
- You cannot stop these pictures from coming into your head.

It helps to talk about these thoughts and images. Sometimes they will then go away or happen less often. If you are worried about acting on these thoughts, get help from your health care provider. If you have thoughts of suicide or frightening thoughts of hurting others, see your health care provider right away or go to your local emergency department.

Many health care providers use the Edinburgh Postnatal Depression Scale (EPDS). It is a checklist that checks for symptoms of depression and anxiety during postpartum. It can also be used during pregnancy. You can find the EPDS at www.lifewithnewbaby.ca/resources/EPDS checklist eng.pdf. You can print it, check it off and show the results to your health care provider.

Hearing other women's stories

The following stories from three women tell how they felt during their pregnancies, before they finally got help and support.

CAROL

It was my first pregnancy and I assumed I was just being hormonal. Often I cried over little things. Then I would think, "Oh, I'm just being stupid."

It wasn't unusual for my partner and me to argue, but not to this extent. I put it down to being hormonal and this must be normal during pregnancy.

I felt like I was trapped, my brain wasn't working properly. My partner wasn't understanding and thought I was being unreasonable. I felt like I had nowhere to go, no one to talk to, no one who would understand. I thought everyone would think I was a bad person.

Eight months pregnant, I was yelling at my partner. I wanted him to know and understand how I was feeling, but he couldn't relate and he thought I was being difficult. I was screaming and crying. I was so frustrated and had nowhere to channel the frustration. I got in my car while it was thundering and lightning. I drove to a deserted spot and got out. It was pouring rain and I didn't know what to do. A feeling of helplessness made me think there was something so wrong with me – that it must be me causing all this tension and sadness. It must be my fault.



Towards the end of my second pregnancy I fell and hurt my ankle. I was in a new city with no friends and no transportation. I had to wait for my partner to get home until I could go and get it checked. I was actually more worried about the baby than the ankle. Thankfully, the baby was fine and my ankle felt better in a few days.

From that day on, I have been thinking about falling. I am having these pictures and thoughts of me lying on the ground, unable to reach the phone. My two-year old is



crying and I can't help him. The unborn baby is not moving. Something bad has probably happened to him or her. Every time this comes into my head, I start to sweat, my heart starts pounding and I can't breathe. I start getting pains in my feet, my knees, my hips. I feel so bad now, I don't want to move. I am scared to leave the house. I am scared to walk.

What was I thinking, having another baby? I don't know if I can protect either one of them. I am supposed to be happy. I was happy the last time. Now I am just a mess. What is happening to me?

AMANDA

The car is stifling. Despite the heat, I have the windows up to muffle my cries. I've parked the car randomly across from the local hospital. I cling to my expanded belly and rock back and forth. I rock, not to comfort my unborn child, but to comfort myself.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry." I cannot stop repeating this chant. Moments earlier I had been driving recklessly through the streets of our suburb, fighting the urge to steer into oncoming traffic and erase the pain.

Nine months pregnant, I drove to the emergency department desperate for help, but I can't act. The fear of losing my child- what if children's services take my baby away? - keeps me from going inside.

Throughout my pregnancy there were episodes of uncontrollable sobbing; times spent screaming on the bathroom floor. I had feelings of loneliness, isolation, guilt and shame. I wasn't excited about the birth of my child. I felt numb. Disconnected. It was as if I was trapped between my inner-world and the outside world. I felt as if I was losing my mind and had no idea what was happening to me.



Carol, Jenna and Amanda are describing symptoms of prenatal depression and anxiety. If you are having similar symptoms, remember:

- It is not your fault.
- You are not alone.
- There is help available.

Getting help and treatment

Feelings of shame, guilt and fear prevent many women from talking about their feelings. If you have been feeling depressed or anxious prior to or during pregnancy for more than two weeks, it is time to get help. This is important for your health and your developing baby. Depression or anxiety in pregnancy can affect you, your pregnancy, your partner and your family. The symptoms may continue after you have had your baby, especially if you don't get treatment.

Know you are not alone. It is not your fault. There is help available and with help you will recover.

Here is a list of health care providers who you can call:

- Your family doctor, obstetrician, or midwife
- Your nurse practitioner
- Your local public health unit for programs such as Healthy Babies Healthy Children
- A community mental health service
- The provincial mental health telephone helpline at 1 866-531-2600; they also have chat and email features
- Your local hospital
- 911 (in an emergency)

Remember, your health care provider might not know what you are thinking and feeling. It is best if you talk about your thoughts and feelings – even if they may scare you.

Helpful interventions

There are several options that can improve depression and anxiety during pregnancy. These include:

- Medication
- Counselling
- Support
- Physical activity
- Self-care

Medication

Medications are an effective strategy to treat depression and anxiety during pregnancy. You may feel concerned about taking medications while pregnant. Many medications have shown little or no effect on unborn babies, and can be used by pregnant women. You and your health care provider need to discuss what is best for you and your unborn baby. A few things to consider are:

How are your feelings and symptoms affecting you, your pregnancy and your relationships?



- How severe are your symptoms?
- Have you needed medication to treat these symptoms in the past?
- What have research studies shown about the safety of this medication during pregnancy?
- Are other treatments, such as counselling, available for you?
- Would taking medication help you feel ready for other treatments, such as counselling?

Motherisk is an excellent resource for more information about medications for women who are pregnant or planning a pregnancy. You can find the number and website on page 10.

Counselling

Individual counselling may be the right treatment for you. If you have relationship stress with your partner, couples counselling may also be helpful. Group sessions can provide you with much-needed support.

You may find a counsellor through:

- Your Employee Assistance Provider (EAP), if your workplace provides this service.
- Your health care provider (e.g. obstetrician, midwife, family doctor, nurse practitioner).
- A community mental health program.
- A private counsellor through your yellow pages.
- Your local public health unit they have information about community services that offer mental health counselling. They may also offer a support group.

Support

Women find the support from other women very helpful during this time. Having support from other women and hearing their stories will let you know that you are not alone. Find a community of women who can support you. You may find a group at or with the help of:

- Your public health unit.
- Your local Ontario Early Years Centre.

Your family and friends can also provide a lot of support. Ask them to learn about depression and anxiety in pregnancy. Make sure they are aware of what you are going through.

Physical Activity

Regular physical activity is another excellent strategy for improving mental health during pregnancy. Women who are active have lower rates of depression and anxiety. Women who start mild to moderate exercise such as walking, find they have more energy and improved mood in just a few weeks.

The Society of Obstetricians and Gynecologists recommends that all healthy pregnant women exercise for 30 minutes at a time at a moderate intensity (such as brisk walking) on 4 days of the week. For more information on active living during pregnancy, visit http://parc.ophea.net/resources/active-pregnancy. Even though exercise is safe and beneficial during pregnancy, it is always a good idea to check with your health care provider first, particularly if you have not been active lately.

Self-Care

Regardless of the kind of treatments that you choose, you need to take care of yourself. Use the strategies from page 2 to take care of your mental health.

Finding more information

To find your local public health unit:

1-800-267-8097 or visit www.serviceontario.ca

A public health nurse can help you find the right service in your community. Many services are available at the health unit or other locations in your community. A public health nurse can also give you a lot of personal support.

Motherisk:

416-813-6780 or 1-877-439-2744 or visit www.motherisk.org

You can phone or go online to find information about taking medications during pregnancy.

Mental Health Helpline:

1-866-531-2600 is available 24 hours, 7 days a week or visit www.mentalhealthhelpline.ca

The counsellor who answers the phone can give you brief counselling and tell you about mental health services available in your community. They also provide services by email or web chat.

Some of the following resources may have titles geared to postpartum depression and anxiety, but are just as helpful if you are pregnant or planning a pregnancy.

Websites:

Coping with Depression in Pregnancy

www.heretohelp.bc.ca/skills/coping-depression-pregnancy-postpartum

Life with a New Baby – Prenatal and postpartum mood disorders www.lifewithnewbaby.ca

Maternal Mental Health Fact Sheet – Antenatal and Postpartum Depression www.feelingsinpregnancy.ca/MMH % 20Fact % 20Sheet.pdf

Mother Reach

www.helpformom.ca

Prenatal and Postpartum Depression and Anxiety

www.toronto.ca/health/pregnancy/depression/index.htm

Books:

Beyond the Blues: Understanding and Treating Prenatal and Postpartum Depression and Anxiety. By Shoshanna Bennett PHD and Pec Indman EdD, MFT: Moodswings Rev. 2011.

The Pregnancy Decision Handbook for Women with Depression: 70 Important Ouestions to Consider. By Stephanie S Durruthy, M.D.: Mindsupport: 2005. www.mindsupport.com/Products.html

Pregnancy Blues: What Every Woman Needs to Know about Depression During Pregnancy By Shaila Kulkarni Misri M.D. 2006.

When Baby Brings the Blues. By Dr. Ariel Dalfen: Wiley 2009.



If you have been feeling sad or anxious during your pregnancy, you may want to share the information in this booklet with your partner or other support people in your life. They can better understand what you are experiencing and support your recovery. Sometimes your partner may feel like this, too, and also need help and support from a health care provider.

best start meilleur départ

by/par health nexus santé

www.healthnexus.ca | www.beststart.org

This document has been prepared with funds provided by the Government of Ontario. The information herein reflects the views of the authors and is not officially endorsed by the Government of Ontario.