

## Pregnancy and mental well-being – you matter too!

'Pregnancy and mental well-being'... that's an odd title, isn't it? We're quite used to hearing about pregnancy and physical well-being, how to take care of your body, how your baby is developing week to week, etc. But hearing about how you might feel mentally and emotionally during pregnancy and any changes that can occur to your mental health are not talked about often enough.

It's important to remember that as human beings we're made up of mind, body, soul and spirit, and as such we can't approach something as momentous as having a baby without being aware that those changes will affect the whole of our human experience.

People have different reactions to the news that they are pregnant. Some have longed for this baby and tried to conceive for a long time and are happy and excited about being pregnant. Others have become pregnant unexpectedly. Some are in strong healthy relationships and will cope well with a bit of adjustment. Others are single and wondering how they will manage. Some don't want to be pregnant and are struggling with thoughts over whether they want to keep the baby. This is normal. It's OK to be unsure how you feel about being pregnant. Try to give yourself space to explore your feelings. Talk to friends and family, seek the support of people who are already parents, or speak to a pregnancy advice helpline if you're worried about how you may cope and whether you want to have your baby.

Being pregnant can affect your emotions. You can find that you become tearful more easily. You might have vivid, often scary dreams of losing your baby on a bus or running away. These are common, and they are the mind's way of trying to process what is happening and to get ready for your baby. They don't mean that you're a bad mum!

Huge changes can take place in your identity when you're pregnant. You may place a huge amount of your identity on your job, on the ability to travel, on the ability to be carefree, etc.

Expecting a baby will of course change some of that, although not everything has to stop and you

can still pursue your passions and dreams with thoughtful planning. It's important to think about where your identity comes from, considering your relationships with your partner, wider family, community, and faith, and how you see yourself and your value. These things will be a huge source of strength in the coming months. It's also important to try to keep up some hobbies and interests such as exercise (consult your GP if you have any concerns), music, choir, church groups, or volunteering, as they all influence your well-being and sense of self.

Many people worry about whether taking medication in pregnancy will harm the baby. The general advice is not to stop without seeking professional advice: becoming unwell because you've stopped taking medication can also cause harm. If you have a pre-existing mental health condition, it's important to consult your GP and midwife as soon as possible as she/he will be able to put you on a specific care pathway with additional appointments and support.

Antenatal anxiety, OCD, and depression can develop for some women while they are pregnant. It's important not to be afraid of speaking out if your mental and emotional well-being suddenly changes, if you feel afraid, if you develop phobias, or if you struggle to function as you did before. Antenatal mental illness can be a warning sign of post natal illness for some people, so it's important to reach out early, so you can seek support straight away when your baby is born.

It can be a great idea to sit down with your partner or a friend to make a list of the support services around you, anything from breastfeeding peer support to local toddler groups and emergency contact numbers so that you have a checklist in advance for support any time that you need it in the future. This is particularly important if there is worry surrounding the health of your baby in terms of growth or genetic conditions.

Some physical illness during pregnancy can affect our mental well-being, such as SPD, a painful pelvic condition, or severe morning sickness (hyperemesis gravidarum). This illness can last



throughout the pregnancy and some women need a stay in hospital.

Think about ways in which you can practise 'self-care' during your pregnancy: this could be taking a bath, seeing friends and family, enjoying a film, going for a walk, or having some alone time. Practising self-care will be a useful tool for the whole of your parenting journey. It's not selfish; no one can pour from an empty cup!

Sadly some women can be a victim of domestic violence during this time. If you need help please speak to your midwife. You can pass a note to the receptionist to say you need a private appointment without your partner being present where you can talk openly and come up with a plan for your safety.

Some women find that being pregnant places a strain on their relationships. Understanding how you both deal with stressful situations and spending time working on your communication will be invaluable as you both start out on the incredible journey of parenthood. It's important to address any relationship problems or worries during pregnancy. If you spend some time connecting with each other, talking about matters that perhaps you've previously avoided, coming up with a plan to be united and to approach everything together in a positive way, and seeking outside help if you need it, you can come out of pregnancy as a couple feeling stronger than ever and prepared for the next stage of your parenting journey!

Next time we'll be looking at mental well-being and birth.



Care for the Family's aim is to promote strong family relationships and to help those who face family difficulties.

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