

## **MANAGEMENT OF STRESS DURING GESTATION PERIOD**

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### **Abstract**

*People come across stress and anxiety now and then. Any event or incident that makes you feel frustrated or nervous gives you stress, and found more in women during pregnancy. Women experiences fear, worry and unease that adversely affects the development of the child making the pregnancy unhealthier and unhappy. Likewise, babies born from stressed moms are usually underweight, have asthma problem and lower IQ. So, stress experienced during pregnancy is a serious issue that needs to be dealt with. The study indicates the various causes of stress during pregnancy and measures to overcome it. Further, it also discusses about the postpartum depression and Post traumatic stress and its effects on Pregnancy.*

**Key Words:** *Pregnancy, Stress management, post-traumatic stress disorder, postpartum depression*

### **Stress and Pregnancy: An Overview**

Pregnancy is a start of an incredible journey that is filled with mixed emotions. It is a wonderful time, which is attached with so many hopes, fears and other strange and unknown all bundled into one adventure nine-month journey. It is the best time amongst most of the couples as you and your partner celebrate all of the amazing changes in your growing body. Hence, it has been romanticized and surveyed over decades with science, which always comes with different experiences. A women body goes through several hormonal changes because of different mood

swings she goes through. A woman who has average weight gains 25-30 pounds (11-15kgs) during pregnancy. It is a frustrating fact for almost every woman. Unsurprisingly, the extra weights gained stress the lower back and cause numbness and continuous pain down the leg. Moreover, the baby bump can also get in the way of daily activities. Thus, it is quite normal to feel stress during pregnancy. Excess amount of strain is the reason to have trouble in sleeping, poor headaches, deprived appetite or a tendency to overeat- all of which can have negative effects on you and your developing baby. Morning sickness during the marathon of pregnancy often makes the women feel worn-down and she will throughout the entire journey. Although pregnancy comes with joy and excitement but some found it hard to believe that they felt some anxiety during the early weeks of pregnancy. Unpleasant feelings affect adversely to the early stages of pregnancy. For example, gender disappointment creates anxiety and stress within the women that gives them fear and tension. Life is full of surprises and when it comes to unplanned pregnancy; it comes with more tremendous pressure and tensed apprehensions. To imitate pregnancy for men, a Japanese invention released in 2011 which uses balloons, footballs and water pump to get a feeling of this thrilling pregnancy.

The whole process of childbirth is a time of great change and almost every woman feel stresses at some point of time. This is totally biological and natural and we cannot deny with the fact that woman have to deal with all sorts of responsibilities that was a part of their life before they feel pregnant as well as they prepare themselves, psychologically and physically for a new arrival in their life. Although short term or acute stress may not be that bad for the development of the fetus but in certain situations long-term stress can result in negative health consequences like miscarriage or pre-mature birth. More level of stress can cause high blood pressure, which further increases the chances of having preterm labor or a low-birth-weight infant.

**Stress can be categorized basically into two different types:**

- ✓ **Acute Stress:** The period of this type of stress is very short as it goes away very fast. You feel it when you dash with any vehicle or bang on the brake or a small disagreement with your partner. Any type of stress that stays only for few minutes or hours is acute stress. Every individual might have experienced acute stress at one point of time or other.
- ✓ **Chronic Stress:** The period of this type of stress is very long as it stays for a longer period of time. Some causes that lead to this kind of stress are financial problems, bad marriage, or dissatisfaction with job. In other words, any stress that stays for weeks or months is chronic stress. You adjust to this type of stress that you don't realize it is a problem. So we should try to find out ways to deal with this type of stress otherwise it may lead to serious health issues.

### **Causes of Stress during Pregnancy:**

Every woman experiences some sort of stress during pregnancy. However, the causes of this pre-born baby stress vary from women to women. Various researches came out with causes of stress for pregnant women:

- ✓ A higher source of stress for many pregnant women involves concerns about labor and birth or the new arrival.
- ✓ Sometimes, it is a frustrating fact for women when they start gaining weight for pregnancy or the odd physical changes brings stress among women.
- ✓ The fear of how to take care of your baby needs after the birth give sleepless nights to maximum number of women.
- ✓ Various discomforts of pregnancy like sickness, unsettled stomach, constipation, getting exhausted easily etc. makes your pregnancy unhappy
- ✓ Unplanned or surprise pregnancy is never stress free. This changes your life tremendously because it suddenly gives an unexpected turn to your busy life.
- ✓ When you are employed, the job responsibilities become an extra burden for you and you need to convince your boss for your absence from job.
- ✓ The fear of sudden change of family life with the arrival of a new member to your family is another reason for stress among women.

### **Stress that can cause serious pregnancy problems:**

Regular or normal stress during pregnancy probably do not affect in a bad way but serious stress busters or long term chronic stress may lead to serious pregnancy problems, like:

- ✓ **Negative life events.** Any sudden unfortunate incidents in your life that include divorce, serious health issues or passing away of a family member, or losing a job or home.
- ✓ **Tragic events.** These are things like earthquakes, hurricanes or any attack by terrorist.
- ✓ **Long-lasting stress.** This type of stress can be caused by having financial problems, being physically harmed, having health issues or being disheartened. Depression is a situation where feelings of unhappiness last for longer period of time and do not allow an individual to lead a usual life.
- ✓ **Racial Discrimination.** Some women feel stressed due to racial discrimination during their lives. This is the prime cause why African-American women in the United States usually have premature and low-birth weight babies than women from other racial or ethnic groups.
- ✓ **Pregnancy-related stress.** Some women may feel serious strain concerning pregnancy. They may be worried about miscarriage, the health of their baby or about how they'll

cope with labour and birth or becoming a parent. If you feel in similar manner, you need to consult your health provider and find a solution to it that will relieve you.

### **Does Stress results in Pregnancy Problems?**

It is not an easy task for any common man to understand the effects of stress on a pregnant mom. However, certain stress released hormones results in pregnancy complications. Alteration of your body's own stress management system because of long-standing severe stress triggers and exaggerates an inflammatory response that has deleterious effects on your immunity and the growing unborn baby. A long standing stress may lead to infection of uterus as it results in poor immune system that protects us from such infection. This type of infection may cause premature birth. Your reaction to any event or situation is a result of stress prevailing within you. Some women, to cope with such kind of stressful events, smokes cigarettes, drinks alcohol or takes street drugs that is harmful for the development of the baby. Further it also affects the child after birth. In the later phase, the baby's brain development or immune system gets affected. Thus high level of stress hurt both the mother and the new born baby. According to new research, the early stages of pregnancy i.e. 17 weeks after conception is the crucial phase where the unborn baby gets affected due to prolonged stress experienced by the mom. The study shows, at a very early stage of pregnancy the unborn babies are exposed to their mother's stress hormones. The journal Clinical Endocrinology highlighted that increased amount of stress in would-be mom could adversely affect her offspring in many ways like in the development or growth of the child or lowering its IQ.

Several Researches shows that when the foetus meets cortisol in the maternal blood, and beyond 17 weeks, there is a strong relationship with cortisol of amniotic fluid with that of cortisol in maternal blood. When you are stressed, the activation of a "fight or flight" mode releases a lot of cortisol and other stress hormones that make your heart pump faster and have detrimental consequences on the developing foetus. This is how maternal stress affects the foetus, both during foetal life and through into childhood. It also shows that an unborn child may be open to the elements of maternal stress during the first 17 weeks in development. Thus we can presume that in some cases high level of stress during pregnancy can be unfavourable to the health of the baby. It is certainly important to stay as stress-free as feasible during pregnancy. Nevertheless, this is easier to be said than to be done in actual, because pregnancy itself can aggravate all kinds of feelings- from feeling overwhelmed, joyful and tensed. Pregnancy leads to foremost moving changes in would-be moms, from mood swings to feeling extremely worried, which may lift women's stress levels. It is thus very important that pregnant women are given enough support, relieve and excellent encouragement from their near and dear ones to make

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sure they have a blissful and healthy pregnancy. Other way of alleviating the pregnancy stress is to take Antenatal classes that will provide you with positive feelings about this experience as you can share your experiences with women undergoing the same things as you. Prof. Glover made a study to show the decreased level of intelligence of more than 100 babies and toddlers whose mothers had suffered incredible stress during their pregnancy. The IQ of new born babies from stressed mothers was generally 10 points below average, and that of many had higher than average levels of anxiety and attention deficit problems. The research also revealed that relationship problems with the spouse were the most common reason of stress for any pregnant women. Therefore, the partner should give more attention, support and love to make the pregnancy a happy journey. Dr James McCubbin also found the effects of stress on both mother and the unborn baby. He highlighted that high levels of stress to a mom-to-be leads to low birth weight babies and premature babies. It is usually stressful for being pregnant but too much stress could permanently damage the health of the newborn child. The Journal of Physiology shows a detailed study on what changes occurs within a pregnant woman when she is stressed.

### **Stress busters**

Dr James McCubbin in his study developed a simple relaxation plan that all pregnant women should follow to have a stress-free pregnancy.

- ✓ Find sufficient time from your busy schedule to take rest and relax your body for fitness during pregnancy. Maternal stress can shape your growing baby.
- ✓ Entertainment is important for you and your baby. Allow your baby and yourself to sit and settle down calmly on daily basis.
- ✓ Get happy and feel contented. A quiet room with no disturbances works best. Lie a little at an angle to one side, usually to the left, with your belly (and baby) and use good number of pillows that will give your baby more comfort.
- ✓ Prepare emotionally. Clean your mind from distractions and other disturbances and focus on your relaxation.
- ✓ Concentrate on your breathing. Take deep breaths from your belly and avoid chest breathing and one should breathe slowly, steadily and coolly.
- ✓ Focus your physique. Try to make out pressure in your body's core strength groups.
- ✓ Dream yourself in your much loved soothing place-maybe on the seashore, by a watercourse or on a mountain top.
- ✓ Perform and take pleasure in the enjoyable feelings that you have given to yourself and your baby. Do it at least once a day for 20 to 30 minutes.

The baby charity Tommy's called on family unit, associates and employers of pregnant women to provide support and encouragement to help them lessen stress. Unsurprisingly,

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pregnant women have a lot of things to worry about. Some are worried about their increasing weight while as other women are worried about their diet or impending birth. They are also tensed about all the work they have to do before they start their maternity leave. Few would be moms are also worried about bonding with the unborn baby, breastfeeding and whether you will be able to pacify your crying new born. Hence, it is quite normal to feel apprehensive during pregnancy, and some level of stress seems almost unavoidable. In certain ways women feel blessed when being pregnant. Preterm delivery is associated with prolonged bouts of stress during pregnancy. While some stresses may be inevitable, there are steps you can take to reduce your stress levels throughout the pregnancy.

### **Steps to reduce the stress level during pregnancy**

#### **➤ Relax and Focus on your baby**

Don't hesitate to relax as much as you can because this is the time your changing body demands lots of relaxation for yourself and your unborn. So don't feel guilty about it and take ample rest. Your unborn baby can hear you from about 23 weeks so this is the best time to bond with your baby so chat and sing to your unborn baby. Listen to your body. You need to sleep for longer hours as your body is working hard to feed your unborn growing baby. So go to bed early, whenever you feel tired or exhausted. Make sleep your priority, frequent naps and sleep is recommended to remain stress free, suggests Hibbert.

#### **➤ Talk about it**

If you are apprehensive about your delivery, or baby's happiness or any other matter you should always try to distribute your feelings with your spouse. Don't be hesitant to convey how you are really feeling. You may find that you share parallel worries as your partner does and you were unaware about it. Sharing problems can give relaxation to both. If your concerns don't reduce then admit your worries near other would-be moms who are going through same phase of pregnancy. Perhaps, that may give you little relief.

#### **➤ Eat Well**

Eating good healthy diet is essential for your mind as well as your body. At this point of time ensure you have adequate fatty acids, vitamins and minerals that can boost your mood. Depression can be reduced by consuming omega-3 fatty acids that are found in oily fish and sea foods. Try to have oily fish thrice a week that will boost your mood as well as boost your feelings of well-being. Other than that nuts, seeds are a must to snack on, along with chicken, eggs, yoghurt and cheese as these are the rich sources of an essential amino acid called Tryptophan that is not synthesized in human body. Tryptophan helps in increasing the blood levels of two important brain chemicals namely Serotonin and Melatonin that help you sleep well and boost

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your feelings of well-being. Further you should avoid dehydration by drinking sufficient amount of water daily (at least 1.5 to 2.0 liters/day).

➤ **Exercise gently**

Doing gentle exercises are not unsafe during pregnancy rather they help to improve your mood and control your anxieties and emotions. So try to include exercise in your daily routine and try to take small walks in regular intervals and pop out for some fresh air, no matter if it is only for 10mins it will release your stress and give you relief.

➤ **Prepare for family life**

Take some useful tips from your friends and peers having young babies, from whom you will learn parenthood by spending some quality time with them.

➤ **Prepare for birth**

Visiting your delivery site before hand is a good idea to make you feel more confident and in control. The right support should be taken from the doctor that will help you set your mind at rest. You should take control of your fear and take yourself into the picture fully.

➤ **Money concerns**

The worries of financial crisis create considerable stress. If you are upset about how you are going to afford good baby clothes and toys, then you can always borrow some clothes from friends and family. A baby actually doesn't need too much in the early stages. You probably can buy good quality used items from the local children's centre. Money does matter but getting stressed for money may harm your unborn.

➤ **Treat yourself**

The best way of keeping yourself relaxed is laughter. So, call your friends, go for outing and watch comedy movies that will make you laugh loud. Laughter releases such hormones that lifts your mood and keep you happy. Pregnancy is the perfect time to give yourself the best of things. So gift yourself with all those beauty treatments you usually never think about. You should get pedicure, manicure, or a body massage for the betterment of your health. You can also opt for your own mini spa at home, when you are saving money. But you need to be nice and good to yourself. You deserve it.

➤ **Dealing with commuting**

Commuting gives lots of stress during pregnancy. Avoid rush hours, by taking due permission from your employer. While travelling in public transport, make sure you get a place to sit. Never hesitate to ask for a seat in case you are not offered. Don't feel embarrassed. Pregnant women are entitled to priority seats, people just needed to be reminded.

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**➤ Practice complementary therapies**

Massage in a wonderful way to de-stress yourself. Many salons provide pregnancy massage treatments that are perfectly safe during pregnancy. Meditation and positive visualization techniques are free, and best to keep yourself relaxed and stress free. Meditation helps to lower the level of stress hormone cortisol. If you are unable to do yoga or disinterested for yoga, then you sit in a quiet and calm place and close your eyes. Do this for few minutes. This is a fantastic way to have smooth and uneventful childbirth.

**➤ Feel your feelings**

Hibbert suggested denying or escaping from your own feelings will pile up more stress; hence emotions should be shared or expressed with someone you trust. You should never forget "*Sharing is Caring*". Allow someone who cares for you, be with you, hold your hand, listen and feel it with you. Another best approach she recommended is to channel your emotions into art such as writing, painting, drawing or music, or tapping your legs slowly. Keeping a pregnancy journal is what most of pregnant women do and later they share it with their babies when they get older.

**➤ Comfortable Clothing**

Try to adapt to the attire that pregnant women wears. Purchase few clothes that make you look good and you feel comfortable also during pregnancy. Comfortable Clothing is essential during pregnancy. Wearing comfortable clothing allows you to walk more freely, stay peaceful and thus reduces stress. You should enjoy this amazing time of pregnancy. Remember to pamper yourself and let others pamper you too.

**➤ Sing a Song**

Humming in your head, even if you are not capable of carrying a tune is one of the best ways to de-stress yourself, as music helps control cortisol levels in the body.

**Post-Traumatic Stress Disorders**

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is the troubles faced or experienced by pregnant women after visualizing a dreadful or awful event such as rape, violence, a terrorist attack or a natural calamity or any death of near and dear ones. The various disorders that women experiences are:

- ✓ Extreme Nervousness
  - ✓ Flashbacks of the incident
  - ✓ Nightmares
  - ✓ Physical responses like fast heartbeat rate or serious sweating
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- ✓ Escaping of people and activities once you enjoyed
- ✓ Guilt
- ✓ Negative Mood
- ✓ Disturbed Sleep

Researchers say 8 women among every 100 women which are 8% may have PTSD during pregnancy. Women coming across this kind of problems usually have premature babies or low-weight babies. Further, they show other risky health behaviors, such as increasing drinking or smoking habits or any hidden drugs which results in pregnancy problems. Postpartum depression can adversely affect the bond between the mother and her child. Subsequently, it also affects the development of the child, such as problems of behavior, cognition and emotion. A recent diagnosis found that 35% of pregnant women suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder were more likely to deliver a premature baby than were other pregnant women, this was revealed by a study of more than 16,000 births.

Hence, it is advised to consult to your care provider or any health professional that will show you the ways of coping with PTSD. The baby charity Tommy's called on the family, friends and employers of pregnant women to provide affection, support and reassurance to help them reduce stress.

## **Conclusion**

Life is very complicated and never hassle-free. Stress is unavoidable and inseparable. Many women think they will be relieved once the baby comes, but usually it's the opposite, as stress increases once the baby arrives. However there are ways that any pregnant woman can undertake in coping and dealing with the stress and making their life better. By doing so, the journey of nine months will be a healthier, smoother and happier one. After all this is a great time to "give yourself some love". You should be rather happy that the number of days of meeting your own new baby is reducing. Your wait will be soon over and the baby will be in your arms, this wonderful feeling will reduce your stress and will provide your happiness to deal with yours tress. Don't forget you have a million things to prepare and do before the junior arrives, keeping this excitement alive you can easily deal with your emotional problems. Sooner you are going to meet your baby for the first time, and these little worries you are facing while you are pregnant will seem insignificant. Hence, look forward to the end of your most-awaited nine odd months of long journey called "pregnancy".

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