

Today's Parent Pregnancy, Winter 2011/2012

The Highs and Lows of Pregnancy

When you're expecting, your mood can alternate between the moon and the dumps. Here are tips for dealing with the emotional highs and lows that are part and parcel of a normal pregnancy.

By Lisa Bendall

It was three o'clock in the morning. Anna Dewar, five months pregnant and utterly pooped from a series of sleepless nights, was prowling around her Toronto apartment. "I noticed my kitchen smelled overwhelmingly like chili," she says. She figured the garbage bag was leaking and she'd just lift it out and change it. Surprise! "When I took the bag out, it just exploded all over my kitchen floor," Dewar says. Chili splattered everywhere, and Dewar completely lost it. "I was in hysterics, crying," she recalls. "Normally, I would laugh. But at three in the morning, totally exhausted, I was feeling like I can't function and my life is over. It was a total overreaction."

Although Dewar was beyond thrilled to be expecting her first child, she admits there were times when less welcome emotions like anxiety and discouragement temporarily took over. But mood changes are part and parcel of most pregnancies.

"In one day, a woman can feel happy, hopeful, elated, and then have a moment where she's suddenly sad or worried, or feels very irritable," says Michal Regev, a psychologist and family therapist in Vancouver. "That's fairly normal." It's also fairly simple to put a few strategies in place that can help even out your mood.

Blame it on biology

Pregnancy and hormonal changes go hand in hand, and some women are more sensitive to these fluctuations than others. If you have a history of premenstrual symptoms that make you want to strangle someone, you're probably noticing hormone-induced outbursts during pregnancy as well. You might feel angry or weepy. And it doesn't help that your changing body is exhausted and unrecognizable. "A lot of times I know I'm being snappy and rude. I see it happening, but I don't have control over it," says Brittany Hamilton of Souris, Manitoba, pregnant with her fourth child. "I know that after 10 at night, I'm going to be moody and say something I'll regret, so I just go to bed."

It can also be tough to keep from worrying about the unknown. Will my baby be healthy? Will childbirth be unbearable? Am I ready to be a mother? Will our marriage survive? Are we headed for the poorhouse? "The more you're unsure about what's about to happen, the more anxious and irritable you get," says Karen Nistor, a doula in Regina, Saskatchewan. Women instinctively become extra cautious during pregnancy, but this can worsen the worrying.

And there's another way biology interferes with feeling emotionally stable. Ever hear of the nesting instinct? "This is the tendency of pregnant women to make sure that everything is in order, ready for the baby," says Regev. The instinct gets stronger as the due date approaches, and it can create angst, as it has for Dewar. "I'm suddenly feeling quite anxious that I haven't organized the house or done anything," she says. "I've started having very vivid dreams about the baby being born and having no crib!"

Mood-stabilizing strategies

It can make a difference just to be aware that as your body changes with pregnancy, your emotions do too. It can also help to talk with other women going through a similar experience, or express yourself in a journal. “That social support or journaling will help you see that these are things that come and go, and will also give you an outlet that feels safe,” says Joanne MacDonald, a psychiatrist with the Reproductive Mental Health Service at IWK Health Centre in Halifax.

Relax and ground yourself. That’s what Toronto’s Jenn Chretien, pregnant for the first time, is doing. “I’m starting a prenatal yoga class. Hopefully that will balance my moods out a bit,” she says. A prenatal class also gives you an opportunity to connect with other moms-to-be.

Exercise. Exercises like yoga keep you physically active, an important pick-me-up. You can also take walks, do a few stretches on your office break, or try some core-strengthening exercises like Pilates (check with your health care provider before starting any new activity). “If you’re healthy during pregnancy, there’s no reason why you wouldn’t exercise,” says Regev. “It helps with mood, and keeping fit also helps prepare your body for the birth.”

Stay well rested. Easier said than done, maybe, when you’re constantly waking in the wee hours to go to the bathroom or change positions, but you might try adding a nap to your daily routine, or going to bed an hour earlier than usual.

Deal with stress. Find what works for you: listening to music, lunch with a good friend, talking a walk or doing some deep breathing. “Stress is not good at any time. During pregnancy, it’s even more detrimental to physical and mental health,” Regev notes. Hamilton, who has a history of high-risk pregnancies, says that to deal with worry, “I read a lot — and not necessarily about pregnancy. Or I do cross-stitching, just to keep my mind off it.”

Eat healthy. This will help you physically and emotionally. Have more frequent, smaller well-balanced meals and snacks, and try to include protein, such as cheese or yogurt, every time you eat. This will keep you from experiencing blood sugar spikes, which can affect mood. Put a limit on sugary or caffeinated foods, and pop those prenatal vitamins!

Talk yourself down. When your nesting anxiety gets out of hand, it’s time to regain perspective. “If something seems urgent to you, ask yourself: If it’s not done by the end of the week, what’s the worst thing that will happen?” Nistor suggests. “It’s not the end of the world.” But do yourself a huge favour and don’t plan a kitchen reno in your third trimester – that’s just begging for trouble.

Involve your partner

Admit it, ladies: The most romantic gesture your partner could make right now is to cook you dinner and clean up the dishes. Small, nurturing acts like these will make you feel supported and cared for, so let your partner know what will help, whether it’s a foot rub or just listening while you fret. Partners should also be cautioned to lay off any caustic comments or “wide load coming through” jokes. “It’s not that the partner needs to walk on eggshells, but he needs to become a bit more gentle,” says Regev. Dewar appreciates now, more than ever, her husband’s laid-back sense of humour. “He’s been

really sensitive,” she says. “He hasn’t taken any jabs at me for being a hormonal lunatic. He just tries to bring me out of it with a funny joke.”

Getting your partner more involved in your pregnancy may help him connect to what you’re going through. “My husband came with me to my ultrasound, and he saw the baby moving,” says Chretien. “And as we organize the house and shop together for the baby, I think that will help.”

High on life

Although mood changes are often a heady mix of ups and downs, the ups can be a lot of fun: You’re looking forward to your new family, you’re amazed to be carrying a life, you’re flying on a fantastic hormonal high that you couldn’t buy with money. Or maybe you’re just calmly content, feeling fulfilled and unruffled by the small stuff that used to drive you crazy. Enjoy it. It’s one of the best parts of pregnancy. Just be sure that, no matter how energized you’re feeling, you’re getting the rest you need to continue feeling great.

No one ever said having a baby was a breeze. And when moods are driven by the winds of change, it can be challenging. But for most pregnant women, the overall experience is by far a positive one. “From the first kicks all the way through to my swelling stomach, I’ve found it quite magical,” says Anna Dewar. “It’s a lot cooler than I ever thought it would be.”

When It’s More than Moodiness

If you have a change in mood that’s persistent or getting worse, like anxiety or crying spells that come over you every day that you just can’t shake, it might not be a normal part of pregnancy. You may have physical symptoms of panic, such as pounding heartbeat, sweating palms, trembling and a sense of doom. Even the nesting instinct can get out of control if, for example, you’re obsessively and repeatedly washing the nursery walls. And an elevated mood that prevents you from sleeping or pushes you to unsafe behaviour is cause for concern. These changes could be signs of depression, anxiety or another serious mood disorder, but they’re treatable if you seek help.

“We encourage women to think about what their usual self is,” says Joanne MacDonald, a psychiatrist at Halifax’s IWK Health Centre. “If they find their responses are quite atypical for them, that may be a sign that a larger psychological issue is brewing.” If you’re not sure your emotions are normal, keep a mood diary to track the frequency of what you’re feeling. And talk to your family doctor or OB/GYN, who can refer you to a specialist if it’s needed. Treatment of psychological problems in pregnancy will mean better health for both you and baby after birth.