Stress and pregnancy

While confirmation of a pregnancy is often exciting news, it can also be the beginning of a very stressful period in the lives of the parents-to-be. And, if the pregnancy is unplanned, the problems are often exacerbated. As stress is usually caused when an individual feels out of control or unable to cope, there’s little wonder that this is the case. Pregnancy and parenthood certainly take us out of our ‘comfort zone’.

From the outset, a major concern for both parents is the healthy development of the baby, and in some cultures there may also be anxiety about the child’s gender. However, from there on, the mother and father will often have very different concerns.

While the mother-to-be is reading antenatal books and trying to do the right things, the father-to-be may be worried about the health of his partner or a change in their financial situation. Instead of two salaries there may soon be only one - just when expenditure is about to increase. Fathers-to-be are often stressed by a fear of being unable to support the family, and of their increased responsibility. Additionally - and an almost taboo subject at one time - there’s the issue of sex. Fathers-to-be worry that their partner will become unattractive, ‘go off’ sex, or that if they have sex this will hurt the baby. If not discussed these issues can result in various relationship problems - just at the time when couples need to pull together.

As if these worries weren’t enough, there’s also the fact that men are usually extremely worried about the birth itself. In days gone by this was less of a stressor, but now there is much more anxiety. Additional concerns are now experienced by the partner - as men were not expected to be at the birth. In the end, a stress-free birth does not come from the fact that mums feel they should have a natural birth and will be a ‘failure’ if they choose not to. Stress can, therefore, be reduced by helping mums feel comfortable with their own decisions. In the end, a stress-free birth does not seem to be affected by the length of the labour or method chosen. More important appears to be the fact that choice is given and that the mum remains in control. This also includes the option to change their minds as things progress. And, if emergency procedures have to be undertaken, explanations at the time usually help with later perceptions of the event.

Antenatal classes usually provide this opportunity and it is therefore important for men to attend.

While mothers-to-be also worry about coping and the events involved in labour, the stress is often lessened by the fact that they get far more opportunity to talk about their fears, and are also more in control. So while many will discuss options with their partners, they are usually the ones who make the ultimate decisions - and the more control over the birth a mother-to-be perceives herself as having, the less stressful she will perceive the birth to be.

Stress also affects labour. The stress response has a profound effect on the female hormonal system and can, in some cases, inhibit contractions and prolong the process. Mothers-to-be are taught relaxation techniques such as controlled breathing and visualisation. Not only do these make for a shorter labour, they also help to reduce the pain. The more tense the mother, the more painful the contractions appear to be, which in turn will increase the feeling of tension. Relaxation techniques can reduce this stress, increase the output of endorphins, and therefore help to break this vicious circle.

While choice and control are generally beneficial, today mums are given far more choice than in the past. Natural birth, birthing pools, home, hospital, Entnox, pethidine, epidural, caesarean? All involve decisions to be made, and often this can add to stress. In some cases, extra stress comes from the fact that mums feel they should have a natural birth and will be a ‘failure’ if they choose not to. Stress can, therefore, be reduced by helping mums feel comfortable with their own decisions. In the end, a stress-free birth does not seem to be affected by the length of the labour or method chosen. More important appears to be the fact that choice is given and that the mum remains in control. This also includes the option to change their minds as things progress. And, if emergency procedures have to be undertaken, explanations at the time usually help with later perceptions of the event.

Once the baby is born, causes of stress move to day-to-day parenting issues. No amount of planning can really prepare for this. Why is this so stressful? Again, one reason is lack of control. First comes the realisation that parents are responsible for a new life which is totally dependent on them, and then the uncertainty of what to do when the baby cries. Does the baby need feeding, changing, cuddling? And all of this is in addition to the intense tiredness parents experience from sleepless nights.

While both parents struggle with these issues, the mother may also be feeling guilty at not being able or not wanting to breastfeed, or coping with the discomfort at what appears to be originating from all parts of her body. Added to this may be low self image as she realises her figure has not popped back into shape, and she permanently smells of sour milk and vomit.

At the same time, dad may be trying to keep up a full-time job and be supportive at home. In many cases, the man may start to feel left out - with the mum being perceived as having a special bond with the baby. She in turn may be preoccupied, and with little available time for the father. It’s therefore important at this stage that parents are encouraged to talk about these issues and try to find working solutions before problems develop.

To reduce the effects of stress - from conception right through the pregnancy process - it’s important that couples are prepared as fully as possible, know what to expect, and are encouraged to talk and express their concerns. While opportunities tend to be plentiful for mums, these are less abundant for men. And, as men naturally find it harder to talk about their fears and emotions, they will only do this if they feel extremely comfortable. Good antenatal classes encourage this and are therefore an excellent way of reducing potential stress for both parents.

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