Stress, Pregnancy & the COVID-19 Pandemic: When You Have Anxiety about Having Anxiety

Sometimes we have anxiety about…well, having anxiety. Kristen contacted MotherToBaby and was asking about ways to manage her already extremely high anxiety around pregnancy and birth during the pandemic. Should I even try to get pregnant right now? How will I deal with my anxiety and stress if I do become pregnant? What if almost no one in my family can even come to the hospital when I go into labor? How can I deal with my anxiety during labor and birth? I could tell she had a tremendous amount on her mind.

It is completely normal to feel stressed and anxious, and Kristen is not alone. Many people, regardless of whether they are pregnant during the time of COVID-19 or not, are experiencing higher levels of anxiety. The important thing is to address the anxious feelings and learn ways to manage them. I have some ideas on how to do just that! But one thing I need to emphasize: if your anxiety is excessive, ongoing, difficult to control, and interferes with your daily living, this may be a sign of generalized anxiety disorder and I encourage you to talk to your doctor or a mental health professional.

Managing Anxiety

There are ways to manage anxiety and stress that may be commonly shared, but in case you haven't heard them before below are some tips you can try at home:

- Exercise, even if it is going for a brief walk outside
- Call a friend just to catch up
- Volunteer or donate to a cause you care about – often doing things to help others actually can make you feel good
- Try to eat healthy, nourishing foods
- Journal as a way to express what you are feeling
- Take a break from your screen time on phones, tablets and TV – especially before bed
- If you feel like nothing really helps to address your feelings of anxiety and stress, or if you are feeling really down, make an appointment to talk to your healthcare provider and be honest about how you're feeling

If you do feel like you need to talk to your healthcare provider, how do you do it? Remind yourself that healthcare providers are not only trained to talk about mental health topics with their patients, but that they likely talk to multiple people every day or week about them. Sometimes pregnancy increases anxiety that is already present, and for others it may be that they are experiencing it for the first time. Being pregnant does not mean that you are immune from or that you cannot be treated for mental health issues.

Before you go to see your healthcare provider, you can write down some notes on what you hope to say. Try to be as honest as possible and ask about the variety of options you have to address your anxiety or symptoms, including what you can try at home, who you may be able to see for some form of talk therapy, and if necessary, what medications the provider may recommend trying. Remember, just because you bring up anxiety or mental health, it does not mean

you will be put on a medication. Equally as important, if you need to take a medication to help you manage better, there are several options you can take during your pregnancy.

Working on dealing with your anxiety before becoming pregnant is always a great idea, but you can address it at any point during pregnancy or in the postpartum period. There is never a bad time to improve your mental health (doing so is not only good for you, but also good for your baby) and it is never too late. In addition, I have had women express that admitting they need help makes them feel weak or selfish. In truth, it is the opposite – it takes courage to ask for support when we need it!

COVID-19, Labor and Delivery

The other piece of Kristen's worry was having support in the delivery room. Due to COVID-19 many hospitals and birthing centers may be reducing the number of support people someone can have present during delivery. In addition, no one may be allowed in nearby waiting rooms. Giving birth can be one of the most challenging events for a person and having support during labor and delivery is incredibly important for getting through it with both a healthy mom and a healthy baby. First, you should speak with your planned delivery hospital/center to learn what their most current rules are for time of delivery and ask about any extra precautions they are taking due to COVID-19. Once you have that information, you can figure out what your game plan is. Other things to consider include:

- Does the hospital offer doulas? Would you want to hire your own? If you hire one and s/he is not allowed in the delivery room, can she call in and be there via facetime and text? Can she spend extra time going over pain management techniques with you and your support partner in advance if she is unable to be there herself?
- You can also consider programs like Hypnobirthing or Lamaze classes that really work with women to be confident in managing their experience during labor and delivery. Sometimes the type of prenatal education you choose to receive can help you feel more prepared and aware of what to expect, which alone may help reduce fear of the unknown.

In short, try not to panic with all of the questions you may have about dealing with anxiety. Write down your questions and make sure to ask your healthcare provider and the place you plan to deliver all of them. Prepare for what you can, take care of yourself, ask for help when you need it and trust that you have the strength to get through anything – because you do.

Questions? Call 866.626.6847 | Text 855.999.3525 | Email or Chat at MotherToBaby.org.

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