

Conscious Choices, Blissful Birth

Module 4 - Take it Easy -Prenatal Stress

We know that pregnancy is awesome, but that it can be pretty darn stressful too! Obviously no one wants to be stressed out, so why are we going to such lengths as to make an entire module around its management and avoidance? There are two main reasons, the first being depletion and the lasting negative effects that stress can have on your body; the second is that stress can actually have very serious effects on your growing baby. Long term effects.

Prenatal stress will definitely have some effects on your joy in pregnancy. It will also effect your depletion after birth due to the hormone issues that come from chronic increased stress. We want to have as much energy and hormone control possible after baby, so learning to control and manage stress during pregnancy is huge! For more depth on this, visit our post natal depletion module.

The rest of this module is going to focus on the second reason to assess stress, which is its effect on baby. Stress is an area that has only recently been put in the literature in regards to its effects on fetal development and how that will impact the long term health of that child as it grows, but the body of evidence is increasing.

We now have information that tells us that the fetus starts developing most of its senses very early. For instance hearing is fully functioning by around 16 weeks of gestation. Touch is even sooner! There are also studies showing that a newborn infant has memories of things like songs, rhymes and percussion that were repeated throughout pregnancy, even if only for a month or so.

We need to realize the effects then of things such as arguing, yelling, and rough treatment as these can cause trauma to baby. Not only that but they have now shown that stress hormones and the fight or flight reaction are also transferred to baby. Longer term studies show that babies who are repeatedly exposed to stress in the prenatal period will have different personalities than those who are more often exposed to love, joy and less stressful emotions. Babies exposed to consistent stress often view the world as an unsafe and negative place. They can have greater difficulty sleeping, relaxing, breastfeeding and are more prone to colic/fussiness. Babies that are exposed to less stress tend to explore their world as a safe place, sleep and feed easier and have less health conditions.

So now that we've stressed you out...

The goal here is to recognize that there is an actual NEED to manage your stress, not to feel like you have to stress about stressing. There are tons of small ways that we can work to manage, minimize and eliminate stress once we know that someone else is depending on us to do so.

Minimize or Eliminate

It's time to get less busy. Now, if you're a working mom that already has three kids, we realize that this can be someone what difficult, but it's all about what you can accomplish, not what you can't. Let's say that you have two kiddos and you're working. If you feel stressed about trying to get all the housework done, or the kids to soccer practice or swim team, or that you aren't getting enough sleep, it's time to minimize and eliminate. Or delegate. This is an important time for your partner to realize that they need to take some of the weight off of your shoulders. Have them help out with the house work and getting the kids to bed. See if there is a neighbor or parent your kid could car pool with for sports/activities. Plan simpler meals. Meal prep on Sundays. There are many ways to work on this, but the important part is to realize that even though perhaps you can do it all, you certainly shouldn't do it all.

Evaluate your priorities. Cut out events that aren't really your thing or that might over tax you. This is a time to lovingly say no to those second cousin's birthday parties, or the volunteering, or taking on an extra project. Unless those things bring you joy and not stress.

Disengage. If there are toxic relationships in your life, now is the time to put them on pause. Simply stop replying, taking calls or meeting up with people that only leave you feeling drained and emotional after the fact. It's true that these might be people that you care about, but that doesn't stop them from being who they are, and if who they are stresses you out, you'll just have to politely be less available during this important time. Get off social media. Yup, I said it. I know, I know, it's a fun way to waste time and keep up with people. It's also a volatile place where people are voicing all sorts of opinions from politics to religion, to fake news and more. There is a lot of drama that happens when people feel that they can say whatever they want on the internet. Hardly anyone closes their phone and says "ah, what a breath of fresh air" after they've spent 45 minutes on Facebook. If you must go on, limit your time. Take the time you would use to be on it to employ one of the stress management strategies below.

Conscious Choices Checklist

- Are you able to live your priorities? - do you even know what they are??
- Can you be willing to disengage from stressful things even if they seem entertaining?

Manage

It's time to focus on what brings you joy. Not your hubby, not your kiddos, YOU. Because your growing baby feeds on joy, and needs to know that she can look forward to more of that when they come out on the other side. They need to feel safe and secure, not worried and afraid.

Find, or make, some time for self care. Whether it's a hot bath, a prenatal massage, a weekend away or just being able to take a shower alone or have 30 minutes to read that novel. Doing things that make you happy and recharge you will make you not only more of a blessing to your unborn baby but also your current family members as well.

Be present. Being mindful of what is happening in the current moment can make you less stressed. Enjoying your dinner instead of thinking of what you have to do after, noticing the bird outside the window, or the clouds in the sky. Sound super "floofy"? That's okay, do it anyway. These moments of being present with yourself, your family and nature will help you to turn that fight or flight switch off and get back into rest and relax mode.

Have gratitude. Things won't always go perfectly, as we all know. It has been shown to decrease stress hormones to simply write out in the morning and evening five things that they are grateful for. It could be simply saying "today I'm grateful for", or we also like "today I look forward to" in the morning and "today I was proud of" in the evening. Get two 8X10 picture frames and put a piece of blank white paper where the picture should go. Put one on your and your partners night stands and then every day each of you use a dry erase marker to write a reason that you love our are grateful for the other. Sound cheesy? Do it anyway, your growing nugget will love it!

Be mindful. Mindfulness is somewhat similar to being present, but generally involves the practice of some sort of meditation. Don't feel like you have to get crazy here, just 10-15 minutes per day has been shown to decrease stress levels and stress hormones a lot. You can simply search guided meditations on YouTube, or utilize apps for your devices such as Head Space that can get you started here. This is a great way to reduce the stress hormones caused by some of the things that you simply can't minimize like work stress or an argument that already happened.

Get some sleep. The body produces more stress hormones, and is less able to dump the ones that build up when we are sleep deprived. And lets face it, you won't be getting any more sleep once that baby comes. At least seven hours of quality sleep is what is recommended to help decrease stress and increase bodily repair. Turn off blue lights (cell phones, TVs, tablets) at least 30 minutes before bed. These lights effects the hormones that regulate our sleep cycles. Keep the bedroom cool, temperatures under 70 degrees have been shown to give more optimal sleep. Keep the room dark and quiet. Be sure that your phone is on vibrate, or better yet "do not disturb" mode and is flipped over so that if a notification does come through the light doesn't disrupt your sleep.

Decrease caffeine. Hopefully if you are pregnant you aren't consuming large amounts of caffeine anyway, but having caffeine can increase stress on the adrenal glands which are what is regulating your stress hormones. If they get too fatigued you will be much less likely to be able to deal with stress. Being more jumpy, emotional, or sensitive to light and sound are signs that your adrenals are taxed from too much stress.

Conscious Choices Checklist

- Can you add a mindfulness practice to your day?
- What else could you add or remove to help manage your stress
- Pick at least one FUN or POSITIVE thing you can add that will bring you JOY