

*If you are distressed by anything external, the pain is not due to the thing itself but to your own estimate of it; and this you have the power to revoke at any moment.* -Marcus Aurelius Antoninus

Discovering that one is pregnant is an emotional moment. For some it is the blessing they have waited for; for others, the devastating consequence of an unintended act.

How a woman emotionally experiences the nine months of pregnancy plays a significant role in the health of the baby at birth. Imagine then, the impact of poverty, relationship turmoil, age of mother, environmental stressors and the handful of other possibilities that could lead to depression in the expecting mother.

As a woman progresses through pregnancy, she is faced with numerous challenges. She must come to terms with a changing body; manage normal pregnancy fatigue; undergo lifestyle changes that she may have become accustomed to, such as smoking; manage pressure from family and friends about baby names, decorating choice and whether to bottle or breast feed.

These challenges happen to all women. However, resiliency to stress, coping skills, social support and access to resources can play a large role in determining the degree of stress a woman goes through during these nine months.

So how does stress and/or depression impact a developing fetus? According to the University Medical Center Utrecht, anxiety in mid-pregnancy predicted lower mental and motor developmental scores at the infants eighth month.

Additionally, elevated cortisol levels, used to measure maternal stress/depression, results in elevated fetal activity, delayed prenatal growth, prematurity and low birthrate. Even more concerning is the fact that the biochemical/physiological profile of the baby mirrors that of the mother, including raised cortisol levels, lower serotonin and dopamine levels and greater right frontal EEG activation (side associated with emotional regulation).

Identifying depression in pregnant mothers is obviously important for the welfare of both mom and baby. Friends, family members and physicians play an important role in early detection of depressive symptoms. Depressed mood, irritability, decline of energy and motivation, feelings of hopelessness or worthlessness, changes to sleep and appetite patterns, and thoughts of death are some of the symptoms that may be noted.

It is important that mothers understand the risk of untreated depression during pregnancy. Measures should be taken to prevent or treat depressive symptoms including eating balanced meals, engaging in regular exercise, practicing relaxation techniques such as yoga and meditation and ensuring an adequate and healthy sleep routine. Antidepressant medication can play a valuable role in treatment. Though the medication carries risk, so too does a depressed and anxious womb.

Connecting with social supports is important, as is limiting those that contribute to stress load. Utilizing a therapist during pregnancy can be an avenue of treating or preventing depression. Learning new stress management skills, relaxation techniques and problem solving life challenges can ultimately lead to a healthier baby.