

Three Tips for Helping the Moms-to-Be in Your Life Stay Emotionally Healthy



By Eowyn Gatlin-Nygaard, MSW, LICSW

Everybody loves talking to a pregnant lady—at least that was how it felt last year when I was expecting. When you're pregnant, everyone from the cashier at the grocery store to your closest friends is eager to ask questions, share stories, and give advice or opinions.

As eager as everyone is, research tells us that about 15% of new moms will experience postpartum depression, 9% will be diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder due to trauma that occurred during labor, 9% will experience postpartum anxiety, and 3% will experience postpartum obsessive-compulsive disorder.

But it's not all doom and gloom, because the research also tells us that feeling supported is one of the biggest protective factors against pregnancy-related mental illnesses. So I wanted to share some helpful strategies to support the emotional health of the moms-to-be in our lives.

Remember she is still a person and not just a pregnant lady

As soon as I started my pregnancy, the only things people asked me about were the baby and motherhood. People seemed to forget that I was a person with hobbies, interests, and a job I was passionate about. Many new moms who struggle with depression feel like they have lost their identity, and this often starts in pregnancy.

When you are talking with a mom-to-be, invite her to talk about things other than her pregnancy and ask about other aspects of her life. If she is at the end of her pregnancy, in full-blown nesting mode with a 10-page to-do list, offer to help if you can and encourage her to still make time for the things she enjoys.

Support her medical decisions

Childbirth is one of the most dangerous things a woman will do in her lifetime, and it is alarmingly common in the US—which has the highest maternal death rate in the developed world—for women to have serious long-term injuries after giving birth. Many of these, such as C-sections, severe tearing, and incontinence, are talked about as if they are an unavoidable part of the process. However, the impact they can have on a woman's long-term physical and mental health are often dismissed.

Given the risks all moms-to-be face when giving birth, it isn't surprising that many women strive to be informed about their options and have different views on what is and isn't right for them. When a mom-to-be grants you the privilege of sharing her birth plan with you, please respect her choices. Don't respond with a horror story of your friend whose epidural failed or your cousin who wanted an unmedicated water birth and ended up with a C-section. These types of stories are almost never helpful and can leave women feeling disempowered and invalidated.

Please be mindful of your purpose in sharing a traumatic birth story and ask the mom-to-be if she wants to hear it first.

Instead of pointing out all the things that could go wrong during the birth, encourage her to be her own advocate. Share information in a way that helps her explore her options. Validate that she knows her body and knows what is best for herself and her baby, and encourage her to tell her OBGYN or midwife what she needs.

Help her know it's normal to have mixed feelings about becoming a parent

Pregnant women often feel like they are expected to be euphoric about the transition to motherhood. However, for a lot of women, even those who planned their pregnancies, there are often other feelings, too. It is normal to feel scared or anxious and to question if you made the right choice. A lot of things can contribute to feeling conflicted or even dreading becoming a mom. She may have just learned that the average cost of infant daycare in the Twin Cities Metro is over \$13,000 a year. Her partner may be struggling with their own feelings about becoming a parent. They both may be feeling worried about how a baby will change their relationship.

There are a lot of other reasons for parents to feel less than euphoric about their baby coming, but despite this, moms-to-be (and dads or co-parents, too) often feel guilty about these feelings, which makes talking about them difficult. You can support moms-to-be by normalizing that becoming a parent is a huge transition and showing empathy for how she feels. Try not to be dismissive of her concerns by saying it's just hormones or that she'll feel differently when she holds the baby, and remember that sometimes the best way to support her is to just listen.

Oftentimes, pregnancy revolves around the mom-to-be, and the partner can be left feeling excluded or like there isn't space for them to express concerns or receive support. While I've talked here about supporting moms-to-be, please remember to reach out to the dad-to-be or co-parent-to-be, too. After all, emotional health doesn't occur in a vacuum, and everyone needs support and encouragement from time to time because healthy families begin with healthy parents.

Eowyn Gatlin-Nygaard has been in the mental health field since 2001. She has held several positions with Headway, starting as an intern in the Vision program and has worked in a therapist position since July 2012. As a therapist, she works with children, adolescents, and adults to help them develop insight and overcome obstacles to their personal development. She has experience with Adlerian Play Therapy and has training on incorporating the body into the healing process with trauma, such as using trauma-informed yoga and Yoga Calm. She also has past experience providing services to adults with severe and persistent mental illness (SPMI).