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The Difficult Pregnancy Cheat Sheet



Pregnancy is often idealized in mainstream media as a time of excitement, glowing skin, and effortless joy. But for many women, the reality is far different. Pregnancy can be a time of physical discomfort, emotional overwhelm, and relational strain. If you're feeling disconnected from the widely accepted "joyful" pregnancy narrative, know that you're not alone, and your experience is valid. This resource is grounded in psychological research and offers support for the mental and emotional challenges you may face during this time.

The Emotional and Physical Strain of Pregnancy

Pregnancy is a time of profound change, and many of these changes can result in physical discomfort. However, it's not just the biological aspects of pregnancy that need attention — it's the psychological impact of these discomforts that matter, too. You may experience frustration, isolation, or even sadness about your body's changes, and these emotions are just as real and important as the physical symptoms.

Common Pregnancy Discomforts and Their Psychological Impact:

- **Morning Sickness and Fatigue:** Morning sickness can be debilitating for some, leaving women feeling nauseous, drained, and disconnected from the world around them. This can cause feelings of frustration and helplessness, especially if you feel like you "should" be enjoying pregnancy. Psychologically, these symptoms can create anxiety around the unpredictability of the experience and lead to isolation or shame for not "embracing" pregnancy.
- **Back and Pelvic Pain:** Physical discomfort can affect your ability to perform day-to-day tasks and move freely, which can in turn affect your self-esteem and sense of control. When your body feels like it is "betraying" you, it's easy to slip into negative self-talk or a sense of disempowerment. This can exacerbate feelings of helplessness or discouragement.
- **Swelling and Fluid Retention:** This is one of the more visible changes of pregnancy, and it can affect how you feel about your physical appearance. Pregnancy-related body changes are often equated with beauty and "glow," but many women experience discomfort and frustration with swelling, feeling like their body is changing in ways they cannot control. Psychologically, this can feel alienating and might lead to negative body image.

- **Hormonal Fluctuations and Mood Swings:**
Hormonal shifts during pregnancy often result in emotional highs and lows. This can bring about feelings of sadness, irritability, or even depression. For many women, this emotional rollercoaster can feel like an overwhelming lack of control over their own mind and body.

What You Can Do:

Instead of trying to "fix" these feelings or changes, it's important to validate them. Allow yourself to experience these emotions as they come, without guilt or judgment. You are not "failing" at pregnancy if you don't love every part of it or if you feel physically and emotionally challenged.



Seek support, whether through therapy, talking with friends, consulting your doctor, or journaling your experiences. The more we can integrate psychological awareness into the experience of pregnancy, the more empowered we can feel through the discomfort.

Body Image: Feeling Disconnected from the "Pregnancy Glow"

The expectation that pregnancy will be an inherently positive and glowing period can make women feel even more alienated when they don't share that experience. Negative body image during pregnancy is common but often not discussed. For many, pregnancy marks a time of body changes that are physically uncomfortable, and psychologically, this can feel disorienting or discouraging.

Psychological Effects of Body Changes:

- **Weight Gain:** Research shows that women's perceptions of weight gain during pregnancy are often linked to emotional distress and body dissatisfaction. The fear of not "bouncing back" after birth can heighten this distress. Women may feel pressure to meet societal expectations of beauty, which can contribute to feelings of inadequacy or fear about their post-pregnancy body.

- **Stretch Marks, Swelling, and Skin Changes:** Many women experience stretch marks, changes in skin texture, and swelling during pregnancy, leading to dissatisfaction with their appearance. Studies show that women who experience negative body image during pregnancy are more likely to report higher levels of stress and lower self-esteem.
- **Loss of Control:** The rapid and often uncontrollable physical changes can make women feel as though they have lost agency over their own bodies. This loss of control can contribute to feelings of alienation, especially in a culture that values autonomy and appearance.

What You Can Do:

- **Validate Your Experience:** It's normal to feel disoriented, discouraged, or even alienated from your body during pregnancy. These feelings don't mean you are "doing pregnancy wrong." Instead, honor your emotions and give yourself permission to experience them fully. Talk about how you feel with someone you trust, and recognize that it's okay not to love every part of your body right now.
- **Challenge Unrealistic Expectations:** Let go of societal pressures to embrace pregnancy "perfectly" and try not to compare your experience to others. The pressure to be happy and glowing during pregnancy is often unrealistic and harmful. Acknowledge that you are doing the best you can.

Intimacy: Shifting Connections and Emotional Distance

Pregnancy can cause a significant shift in the way you connect with your partner, particularly when it comes to intimacy. For women, changes in libido, physical discomfort, and mood fluctuations can all alter the dynamic of sexual and emotional intimacy. For men, these changes can sometimes lead to discomfort, disconnection, or even withdrawal. The result is a complex dynamic that needs thoughtful navigation from both partners.

The Mother's Perspective:

- **Changes in Desire:** Pregnancy often alters libido, and many women experience a decrease in sexual desire, especially due to physical discomfort or emotional exhaustion. This is a normal and common experience. It's important to give yourself permission to not want intimacy if you don't feel like it, without feeling "guilty" or "wrong" for it.



- **Body Image and Sexuality:** As discussed, changes to the body can make women feel self-conscious or disconnected from their sexuality. Feeling alienated from your physical self can result in a decreased desire for intimacy, not because of lack of love, but due to self-perception and physical discomfort.
 - **Emotional Distance:** Sometimes, pregnancy brings emotional vulnerability, and some women may not feel like being emotionally close or open in the same ways. This shift can feel unsettling, but it's important to recognize that emotional intimacy will ebb and flow during this time. It's okay to feel distant at times.
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The Partner's Perspective:

- **Emotional Withdrawal:** Many partners, particularly in hetero relationships, feel unsure of how to support their pregnant partner. Pregnancy can be overwhelming for them too, and they may struggle with how to approach intimacy or feel disconnected due to the physical changes they cannot experience. This often leads to what appears to be emotional withdrawal, but it can also come from a place of feeling helpless or confused.
- **Physical Discomfort:** Some partners may feel “weirded out” by the physical changes, including the growing belly or other shifts, which may cause them to pull away from sexual intimacy. This is a natural but sometimes painful reaction that requires open communication to navigate.

What You Can Do:

- **Communicate Openly:** Discussing changes in intimacy with your partner is essential. Both of you are navigating new emotional and physical experiences, and it's important to communicate openly about your needs, boundaries, and feelings. This will help prevent misunderstandings and keep the emotional connection intact.
- **Non-Sexual Intimacy:** Intimacy during pregnancy doesn't always need to be sexual. Focus on other forms of closeness, such as cuddling, deep conversations, or shared experiences. Emotional intimacy can deepen through these non-sexual interactions.

- **Give Yourself Permission:** It's important to recognize that intimacy during pregnancy can look different for each couple. It's okay to not feel the same connection, and it's okay to feel disconnected at times. This doesn't mean you are not doing it right. Your relationship will evolve, and adjusting to these changes is part of the process.
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Stress and Sadness: You Are Not Failing

A significant source of anxiety during pregnancy is the fear that emotional struggles, such as sadness or stress, might negatively impact the baby. This fear can increase feelings of shame and self-blame, but it's essential to acknowledge that emotional well-being during pregnancy is complex. It's normal to feel anxious, sad, or overwhelmed, and these feelings do not indicate failure. That said, continuing to practice long-term stress management strategies is still helpful.

What You Can Do:

- **Self-Compassion:** Practice kindness towards yourself. You do not need to be "happy" or "embracing" pregnancy in every moment. It's okay to feel sad, anxious, or stressed. Acknowledge your emotions without judgment. This self-compassion will help ease emotional burdens.
- **Seek Support:** It's okay to ask for help when you need it. Whether it's leaning on friends, family, or seeking professional counseling, support is key to reducing stress. Consider prenatal therapy or mindfulness-based practices to help manage anxiety.
- **Mindfulness Practices:** Mindfulness exercises, such as deep breathing, meditation, or grounding techniques, can help reduce the impact of stress on your body and mind. These practices are shown to reduce anxiety and increase emotional well-being.

Your experience is valid.

Pregnancy can be a complex and difficult experience. It's important to remember that it's okay not to love every part of pregnancy, and it's okay to experience frustration, sadness, and discomfort. Your emotions and physical discomforts are valid, and the journey is yours to navigate on your terms. Seek support when needed, prioritize self-care, and remember that your emotional health is just as important as your physical health. You're doing the best you can.