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# PARENTHOOD

## A GUIDE FOR FATHERS

**O**F LATE, THERE has been many radical changes related to pregnancy, childbirth and parenthood. Our ancestors would be shocked to learn that abstinence from sex during pregnancy is a myth, or that some fathers choose to witness the

birth of their children. In developed countries fathers modify their working schedule, sometimes preferring a job with less pay so that they can have their turn baby-sitting, and enjoying it! Some countries allow fathers to take paid paternity leave so

that they can help their wives. Indeed, we are living in very exciting times when men are encouraged to manifest their nurturing potentials, a vital quality needed for survival of families and society.

Man has been culturally imposed to acquire strictly male traits such as being *macho*, never to cry, to only display confidence and when it comes to courtin or sex they must be the initiators. Even since they were small, if they so much as show an interest in playing with dolls, playing mother-roles or dressing up like mummy, they are punished for fear they might grow up to be homosexuals.

This article is especially written for fathers-to-be to prepare them for a specific experience. For some, becoming a father or trying to carry out this new role can be difficult as it demands adjustment. But perhaps this shows growth and comparatively better than those who choose to leave it all to their wives.

I have chosen one aspect: the emotional — psychological changes that an expectant mother experiences and how fathers can help.

### EMOTIONAL PREPARATION

Just like any other major changes in one's life, pregnancy is a time of mental and physical adjustment. Your wife's emotional changes are just as important as the physical changes. For instance, she may be given all sorts of free advice sometimes conflicting, so much so that what had originally appeared to be a simple concept has now been transformed



Bring her flowers

into a disillusioning problem.

Pregnancies are very different experiences for different people, in fact a mother with a few children may tell you that no two pregnancies are exactly alike. The first pregnancy can be full of mixed feelings, mostly because it is a totally new experience.

Is yours a 'honeymoon baby'? Was it planned such? If your spouse did not want to conceive early, then this may strain your relationship. A woman who is not prepared to become a mother and who discovers that pregnancy makes her feel unwell, may end up feeling depressed or even considering an abortion. She may



Suggest that she talks to friends

However, if she becomes severely depressed or has habitually miscarried, then she must seek medical help.

Even if your wife is thrilled over her pregnancy, she may still suffer from problems like periods of excessive tiredness, excruciating backache, feeling nauseous or an unaccountable depression or anxiety. You and your wife may have other anxieties: Will our baby be 'normal'? Can we cope financially? Who is going to take care of the baby (assuming your wife wishes to work)? Both of you will need to reassure and support each other.

### SEX DURING PREGNANCY

Many couples feel that there is something morally wrong or physically risky in making love during pregnancy. In the olden days, hunters, fishermen and warriors were expected to abstain from sex before important ventures because pregnant women were perceived as unclear, threatening or sacred. Many sportsmen abstain before important competitions to 'conserve their strength'.

Unless your wife has a record of miscarriages, she can carry on making love as long as she wants. She may feel contractions for a while after an orgasm and if this happens, she needs to rest until it fades away.

Some women are more interested in sex during pregnancy especially since their breasts are extra-sensitive and may be very responsive to their husbands' touch or

caresses. However, some women may be temporarily revolted by sex. If this happens try other ways of expressing your love: cuddling, caressing, humour and passion. Encourage her to share her difficulties, maybe she feels sex is distasteful, she is unable to concentrate or she feels bored. This will prevent any misunderstanding between the two of you.

Making love in the last few months can be awkward and uncomfortable. You need to adapt your sexual technique by a change of position, less deep penetration or entry from behind.

Most experts say that the couple can resume intercourse after birth even before that post natal discharge has ceased which is about three weeks. If your wife has had an episiotomy (incision made in the perineum during labour) or even a Caesarian, then it is best to wait. Some mothers become very child-centred.

If you decide to resume intercourse be sure to also resume contraception. An important point to consider is that if she plans to breastfeed, she should not take oral contraceptives as the hormones may come through the milk.

### IMPORTANCE OF FITNESS

Some women remain fit and happy throughout their pregnancy. Others find that as their figure changes, extra strain is put on some of the joints and muscles. There are many books illustrating how pregnant women can relax and exercise with their husband's help to prepare for childbirth.

You can accompany her for walks on cool mornings or breezy evenings. Be sure her feet are cushioned with the proper shoes. Many women enjoy yoga, swimming or gentle dancing. Water or grass-skiing and horse-riding are definitely out.

To remain healthy, be sure your wife eats balanced, nutritious meals. Avoid sugar, artificial additives which is in abundance in our bottled drinks. If she is a vegetarian, be sure she gets adequate protein from legumes, soya products, cheese or vitamin supplement.

Contrary to popular belief, she is NOT to eat for two! She should eat her usual amount but she needs to DRINK a lot, especially her calcium intake. The old wives tale, a tooth for every pregnancy is also another false myth. Tooth decay is caused by maternal neglect and not by the baby's calcium needs. Be sure your wife brushes her teeth regularly and eat plenty of fruit and vegetables.

A lot more women smoke today and your spouse smokes regularly, try to

discourage the habit. Very simply, what it does is to reduce the size and weight of the baby and therefore its chances of survival. Avoid alcoholic drinks although some literature approve spirits and alcoholic drinks in moderation. The same applies to coffee and tea as these can affect the baby adversely.

Feeling emotionally well can influence your wife to feel physically strong and fitter. Her feelings and attitude in turn may rub off on you, so both of you feel good!

### HOW FATHERS CAN HELP

The last three months are particularly difficult and assuming you don't have a helper, you can help by taking on more of the household chores. For instance, jobs that require her to be standing on her feet for long periods or heavy housework. If there is already another child, try to look after junior as often as possible as this will allow your wife time to relax. Perhaps this is a good opportunity to spend more time with your child and build a closer relationship.

If you are fortunate enough to have a helper around the house, you can still contribute a great deal by giving emotional support. For instance, your mere presence may make her happy, so instead of your game or usual night out with the boys, you can spend the evening at home. Compliment her where possible, perhaps in her cooking or how thoughtful she was to remind you of your mother's birthday. Sometimes you need not say anything, just touch her, squeeze or hold her hand.

### FATHER'S PRESENCE AT BIRTH

The normal practice is that the fathers are excluded from both the physical work and the emotional pleasures of childbirth. Many hospitals will now allow the fathers to be present during labour and birth. You may have mixed feelings about this: you want to help your wife but are not sure whether you can stomach it all! Your presence will certainly prevent your wife from feeling lonely, frightened and perhaps resentful that she had to endure it all alone. Whether or not you will actively help, just being there helps give her moral and emotional support plus deepens the experience of birth for both of you. You may not 'want to look' at everything, but remain by her side.

To help you prepare for this experience, talk to your doctor or a gynaecologist. This will give you an overview on

what to expect.

### BREASTFEEDING

Many husbands do not realise how they can play a tremendous role in encouraging their wives to breastfeed. Although there are advantages to both breastfeeding and bottle-feeding, I am inclined towards the former. In any case, the husband can promote breastfeeding by encouraging the wife. To start with, both of you could get some knowledge on breastfeeding by reading about it. I would recommend *Breast Is Best* by Doctors Penny and Andrew Stanway.

Assuming you both decide on breastfeeding, at least in the initial stage, be sure you know and exercise your rights. Firmly tell your doctor and nurse that your baby will feed strictly on mother's milk. Your wife may encounter the usual problems such as delay in flow, or doubt that her milk is really better or worry about her figure. Again, this is where husbands can play effective roles by listening to them and gently refuting whatever wrong beliefs they may have.

Feeding time, especially at night is another example of how fathers can help. Try and stay up at those times when your wife feeds the baby as your presence will help cheer her up. Even baby may enjoy your familiar smell or face. Perhaps your wife may want to express her milk and store it for those times she may want to go out for a while and you can feed baby without resorting to powdered milk. You may think that this is stretching it a little too far or feel 'hen-pecked', but your wife will appreciate it plus this may help eliminate the post-natal blues. The actual process of being a parent will mean having to sacrifice an activity that you prefer, sometimes, in other words — adjustment.

Remember, it is your wife's attitude and those around her (yourself in particular) that are important during pregnancy and birth.

### CONCLUSION

It has been said that a person who has traits that has been stereotypically associated with both sexes will enjoy a more stable personality and be in a healthier state of mind. For example, a woman who is both independent and confident or a man who is patient and gentle with children. Perhaps this is what feminist, Kate Millet meant by androgyny or a synergy of the better traits from both sexes to enable a person to develop and adapt to today's world. O



Encourage her to eat correctly