

Managing stress associated with unplanned pregnancy & decision making

Facing an unplanned or unwanted pregnancy and the decision making that goes with this can be a stressful experience. Even if this is not your first pregnancy or abortion your feelings and circumstances may be completely different and may raise issues and feelings you haven't experienced before. This may cause you to start doubting your ability to make a good decision for yourself and to trust yourself. A pregnancy decision is not one which you can pass to someone else, or hide from until something happens to solve it, or pretend it doesn't exist. The profoundly personal experience of an unplanned or unwanted pregnancy may mean you experience challenging feelings and emotions.

The physical symptoms of pregnancy associated with hormones, fatigue or nausea/vomiting and bodily changes can contribute to you feeling overwhelmed, unwell and confused. Just when you need the people who are the most important to you, significant people in your life sometimes feel they cannot handle the situation and panic, some may put pressure on you or 'shut down' and distance themselves. Or you may feel that this situation is too private and personal to let others know about. Just when you thought you knew what was going on in your life all of a sudden a significant life event occurs and subsequent decision making situation emerges, that may leave you feeling confused and alone.

Feeling under pressure?

You might feel that the physical, emotional, intellectual social and spiritual aspects of your life may need consideration before you are able to work out what you want to do and then act on that decision.

Being pregnant can mask or alter the usual signs of stress. You may not know whether some of what you are experiencing is related to the symptoms of the pregnancy or to your emotional state, or to both. Even your confusion about the cause of the different emotions might add to the discomfort. Below are some strategies to ease the stress and distress you may be experiencing.

- Allow yourself some pleasant 'time out' activities like watching movies, sport or gardening as it is hard to think clearly about your situation with adequate perspective if you dwell on it all the time.
- Make your own needs a high priority. Say 'no' to requests from others if you are feeling overburdened. Ask for help. Do things that are good for you.
- Try to eat sensibly and regularly, if you are feeling nauseated try to find something you can eat (fruit, toast, dry biscuits, nuts, dried fruits)
- Try to do some regular exercise (e.g. walking, swimming, or cycling). Having someone to exercise with can improve your motivation. Exercise is an excellent way to improve your overall emotional and mental wellbeing and ease symptoms of depression, anxiety, anger and sleep deprivation. Exercise can release body tension, oxygenates the blood and helps 'clear the mind', improves fitness and metabolic rate, can elevate your mood which may assist you in managing your concerns.



- Take 4 or 5 deep breaths consciously a few times throughout the day. People who are tense often breathe in a shallow way. Make sure that when you breathe out you empty your lungs completely, this will help you relax. Deep breathing assists physical and mental relaxation and can ease panic attacks and assist sleep. Meditation can also be useful.
- It might be helpful to write down your feelings, or discuss your fears or concerns with someone you trust, even if you think they are 'silly' or 'trivial'. Chances are that you are not the only woman who has had those feelings or thoughts. Writing things can help you to identify the thoughts that are helpful and those that are not.

Support

It might be helpful to seek support. You have a right to privacy, but you may benefit with talking to other people about your situation. Choose carefully those friends, family or organisations you talk to. Sometimes fear of people's reactions can mean that you avoid telling those who may in fact be most supportive. Partners or parents can sometimes react with shock, anger or panic initially, but can at times prove to be very helpful once they have had time to absorb the information.

It can be useful to have your experience validated and understood. Sometimes other people will want to 'solve the problem' as quickly as possible. They may not feel comfortable, or know how to deal with emotional situations, which arise. Try to ask for what you want and need. For example, tell your partner or family how they can best support you. This may be by giving you a hug, just being there to listen to you, having them share their own feelings about this situation or something similar but not telling you what you should do. They may also be helpful in practical ways like transporting or accompanying you to places where you can get further information.

Counselling

For some women, there is no one in their support network they can or want to tell, in such situations it might be useful to speak with a trained counsellor. If you have consulted a 'helping' professional (e.g. social worker, psychologist, psychiatrist), and have benefited from that contact, it might be useful to consider consulting that person about your current situation.

It may also be useful to speak with a counsellor that is experienced in pregnancy options counselling and can provide non-judgemental, non-biased, evidence based information or support.

Recommended counselling services in relation to unplanned pregnancy:

Pregnancy Advisory Centre 8243 3999 or 1800 673 996 Free call for regional SA

Sexual Health Information Networking and Education- SHine SA:
<http://www.shinesa.org.au/> 1300 794 584

The Pregnancy Birth and Baby Helpline **1800 882 436** is also available 24 hours a day.



Information about pregnancy options

If you are considering continuing the pregnancy the following information may be useful:

For some, an unplanned pregnancy becomes a positive life event once you've taken some time to sort through your feelings and consider the possibilities. If this is the choice you have decided upon it will be important to consider the following as soon as possible.

- Booking antenatal care through a public or private hospital, or Midwife, or Obstetrician or some GP's. You can explore what options are available for antenatal care and choose what suits you.
- Ultrasound scans and initial blood and screening tests occur around 10-12 weeks. Don't worry if your pregnancy is further than this, but book in for antenatal care as soon as practical.
- Giving up or reducing smoking cigarettes.
- Giving up alcohol or other drugs.
- Taking folic acid (a vitamin supplement available from supermarkets /chemists)
- Pregnancy is a time in a woman's life that can take time to adjust to, whether it was unplanned or planned. (Support from partner/family/friends/counsellor may be important)
- For some, ongoing anxiety continues during the pregnancy. If you feel you are not managing emotionally or practically, speaking to your GP/Midwife/Obstetrician /Hospital Social Worker may provide you with extra supports.

If you are considering termination of pregnancy the following might be useful:

- Abortion is the most commonly performed and one of the safest medical procedures in Australia.
- 1 in 3 women choose to have a termination at some point in their lives.
- Women of all ages, cultures, religions, marital status, with or without children choose to have terminations for many varied and similar reasons.
- The most commonly experienced feeling after an abortion is relief. There may also be other, more confusing feelings, which are often mild or transitory.
- The following factors can be associated with longer term emotional difficulties after an abortion: Being pressured into a decision, having limited supports or having strong beliefs against abortion.

If you are considering adoption the following information may be useful:

- Adoption orders cannot be made unless both parents properly consent. Consent cannot be provided until counselling processes have been completed.
- Adoption orders are permanent and final and they mean that the biological parents relinquish their full legal responsibilities towards the child to the adoptive parents.
- Relinquishing parents may be involved in the process of deciding on the best adoptive family for their child.
- Arrangements may be made for contact after the adoption between the child's two families.
- Adoptions can only occur through the Department for Education and Child Development.



Decision making

Some women use a combination of the above information in their decision making, none of them are more 'right' or 'wrong' than the others. Even if you use some of the methods above, you will still bring your own unique skills to the decision making process. Spend a little time thinking about some of the decisions you've made so far in your life – even small decisions. Reflect on how you made your decisions and what skills you used and what was involved in the process. Relying and trusting yourself to make a good decision about what is best for your life is key in regard to decision making, even if this is the first time you have ever had to make a decision for yourself.

Understandably some people often feel better just knowing they are not alone in this experience and that their thoughts, feelings and other aspects of their situation are not 'abnormal'. It is natural to have questions about how your situation compares with others. You might feel better by being aware of the range of women who have had to face a similar situation.

Facts about unplanned pregnancy and abortion

- 50% of pregnancies in Australia are unplanned
- If you are a woman over 30yrs with one or more children and have always associated abortion with teenage sex, you might feel better knowing that of the women attending abortion clinics around Australia more than 1 in 5 are over 30 years of age, over half the women fall into the 20-30year age bracket and more than 1 in 3 have at least one child, and 1 in 5 are younger than 20 years of age.
- If you are raised Roman Catholic and are having some difficulty with values or beliefs in relation to this, you may feel better knowing that Catholic women have abortions at the same rate as non-Catholic women.
- If you are feeling embarrassed or scared because you have had a previous termination or terminations in your life, you may feel more comfortable knowing that 1 in 3 women attending the clinic will have had a previous termination at some stage in her life
- Issues of controlling fertility are not so simple. Women will experience between 30 and 45 fertile years on average, or between 370-530 menstrual cycles, there is currently no contraception available that is 100% effective

Facing this decision could provide you with an opportunity to make new goals, and make decisions about other aspects of your life. Some women have spoken about the positive decisions and changes that have occurred out of an experience of unplanned pregnancy.

Facing a decision about a pregnancy, whether you ultimately decide to continue or to terminate the pregnancy can be a catalyst for you to take more control of your life and recognise what goals you want to work towards. It may help you to find strength in yourself and in your relationships that you did not know was there. Finding courage to face your situation may provide you with an opportunity to see your life and what you want your future to look like more clearly.

Misleading Information

There are services that provide 'counselling services' for unplanned pregnancy that support the 'Pro Life' or Anti Choice perspective. You might find these types of organisations listed in the emergency pages in the front of the telephone book. These organisations advertise and offer phone and face to face counselling services. If you are unhappy or worried about the information you were given you have the right to complain



to the service directly and or **Health and Community Services Complaints Commissioner** on 8226 8666 or online at <http://www.hcsc.sa.gov.au/cgi-bin/wf.pl>. Social workers at the Pregnancy Advisory Centre can support you in making a complaint.

If you decide to have an Abortion

It is natural to feel some apprehension about undergoing a surgical procedure, or medication process no matter how safe it may be. If you are particularly anxious about side effects, risks or process please discuss this with the health worker.

Finding out as much as possible beforehand can result in positive outcomes and lessen the anxiety of the 'unexpected'. The Pregnancy Advisory Centre website <https://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/pregnancyadvisorycentre> can be useful in answering your questions about abortion options and process. Alternatively any of the staff at the Pregnancy Advisory Centre are happy to answer any questions, and the social workers are available to provide additional support.

If you are worried that you might doubt your decision to have an abortion, it might be useful to write down your current feelings and circumstances. If at some stage in the future you start questioning your decision (which we can all be prone to do) you will be able to clearly remind yourself of the thought and care that you put into the decision and that you didn't take the decision lightly.

If you decide to have an abortion, look ahead to the day of the procedure and the few days afterwards and plan how to make this time as comfortable and reassuring as possible. Although most women experience relief and rapid improvement of physical symptoms after an abortion, aim to make the whole experience as easy as possible on yourself. Try to arrange someone you can rely on to bring you to your appointment and drive you home remembering that you may want certain people around you at this time and not others. If transport is an issue please speak to one of the staff.

References:

Originally adapted with permission from Susie Allanson, Clinical Psychologist, Fertility Control Clinic Victoria, 1993 & 2003

Royal Women's Hospital, Melbourne - Pregnancy Advisory Service- "How to make a decision", 2006

Children By Choice, "Unplanned Pregnancy: Prevention, Responses, Options", Conference report Sept 2012

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For More information

Pregnancy Advisory Centre
Central Adelaide Local Health Network
707 Port Road
Woodville Park SA 5011
Telephone: (08) 8243 3999 or Free Call 1800 672 966 (country callers only)

<https://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/pregnancyadvisorycentre>

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