

The Pregnancy Effect - The Physical and Mental Challenges a Pregnant Woman Faces by Shirley Jobson

It is a legitimate fact: pregnancy is not always easy! Just as we are all unique, every experience we face may also be particular to each person. Some women seem to breeze through their pregnancy and birth with minimal side effects. However, it may not always be as rosy for others.

A woman's body goes through many changes when she is expecting. She faces physical issues and exacerbated conditions which can be extremely exhausting. Her mental and emotional wellbeing is also put through the wringer, with intense levels of psychological ups and downs. She may even feel guilt and shame for experiencing depression at a time when she is expected to be celebrating the new life inside her.

I spoke to three Maltese women to explore what they went through during their pregnancies.

In the course of her two pregnancies, at ages 39 and 42, C. experienced various challenges which affected both her physical and mental state.

"I suffer from scoliosis, and my back problems increased during both my pregnancies. I endured an inflammation of the sciatic nerve both times, leading to a constantly painful back which made sitting and lying down extremely tough."

Eating was also a "double-edged sword" for C. "I used to get hungry, of course, but after eating, I would feel very bloated, heavy, and nauseous. I also suffered from heartburn, which was more severe in my second pregnancy. This left me with constant pain in my stomach. As the baby grew, its position increased my discomfort considerably."

Sadly, C.'s first pregnancy resulted in a stillbirth a few weeks before her due date.

"Yes, there were obviously mental struggles. I'm sure these occur in every pregnancy—you don't need to experience a stillbirth. The worry, the sleepless nights, the fear of the unknown. Will the baby be delivered safely? How will I manage to breastfeed?"

"It is obviously quite tough to have another child after experiencing a stillbirth. But I really wanted this child, and we happily got pregnant—and I repeat, happily! Thankfully, our second pregnancy was fruitful!"

S.* fell pregnant at 19 years of age—"and it just shook my world!"

An unplanned pregnancy may bring overwhelming psychological issues, which, along with the physical side effects, can be enormously distressing. Furthermore, a girl still in her teens might not feel fully prepared for such a tremendous change in her life.

"My first pregnancy resulted in a very traumatic birth," explained S.* "I was prepped for a C-section—which never happened! My baby was born via ventouse. I had a million doctors observing me during the birth—for which I was never asked permission. Afterwards, I couldn't even sit down because of all the stitches. It was a nightmare!"

Assisting a birth with a ventouse involves attaching a vacuum cup to the baby's head through suction, a procedure which involves a number of risks for both the mother and the baby. Moreover, S.* felt that no one was explaining anything to her during the process.

"I was so traumatised by the birth of my firstborn, I thought I was going to die."

S.*'s troubles did not stop there, however. "I had problems breastfeeding. I was really struggling and having a hard time mentally. In fact, I had post-natal depression for a year afterwards. The whole experience left me shaken."

In spite of all this, S.* still went on to have two more children in her twenties.

At 42 years of age, J.'s experience "defied science and logic from the start".

"Getting pregnant at 42 was incredible, especially without the basic vitamins needed. Since this was my first pregnancy, however, I had a high chance of miscarrying. We learnt that, scientifically, the mother is simply a carrier and cannot protect from or prevent the worst. The baby is completely on its own to fight for its own life."

"I had a fibroid on the posterior wall of my cervix, meaning a natural birth was impossible. This landed me a couple of times in hospital. I also suffered from carpal tunnel syndrome from the beginning of the second trimester, as well as hypertension (high blood pressure) and gestational diabetes. I was confined to bed rest and ended up giving birth via C-section a week before plan. The procedure per se went well; the aftermath was an event that nearly landed me in the ITU."

It is vital to point out that most physical and mental issues during pregnancy are treatable.

The women I spoke to certainly did not have easy pregnancies. But they all found their own ways to cope.

C. drank milk to help with her heartburn and took tablets to suppress the acid reflux in her stomach. The mental issues were harder to overcome, but C.'s positive approach helped.

"I never allowed the negative thoughts to take over. My attitude was: this child is precious, and an accident which happened in my first pregnancy will not take that away. I was grateful, and the gratitude literally took over. I just felt . . . it will be ok."

S.*, on the other hand, was closed to children in her mind, but she reached out to others.

"My family really helped me during my first pregnancy. And my then boyfriend, who is now my husband, was very supportive. It was not easy—we were young but in a totally different stage of life to our friends. My second pregnancy was the best out of the three. During this time, I attended meetings provided by the perinatal mental health services in hospital. These really helped me overcome my past anxieties."

The major support that J. received from her husband and family was "stellar".

"I also received support from the perinatal mental health services. Due to a genetic predisposition, I immediately accepted their assistance, even at a time when all I felt was

happiness and awe. Thankfully, all tests done on the baby in the womb showed him to be growing in a healthy manner.“

So, is it worth it being pregnant and having babies?

C.'s response was categorical. “In spite of all the issues, it is worth it 101%—if not more! A child is a blessing, a joy, innocent. Children bring out the beauty in humanity. I like to say: humans are children, then they become adults—unfortunately! I find it in myself as well; I’m not always a nice adult,” she added with a smile.

S.* also agreed that the struggles were all worth it. “I would do it again—no doubt about it. Because it’s not about me, it’s about my children. Even with my first pregnancy, it was always about my son. He’s here, so I’m happy about that. Abortion never even crossed my mind. No way—I prefer to die! Giving birth is always stepping into the unknown, but it is so rewarding.”

J. too extolled the awe-inspiring circumstances surrounding pregnancy and child-bearing.

“A pregnancy and a baby, in all their powers, have the strength to defy science from start to finish. The simple fact that we did manage to deliver a healthy baby is in itself a defiance of the odds. Furthermore, this baby never needed the resuscitation room and never experienced any withdrawal symptoms from the medications I was taking. And if you see him today, he is just a joy to be around.”

“My experience as a mother, both mentally and physically, is another trip of choices. I had every excuse to give in to a pity party. This was an opportunity to become a woman more resilient in all my ways. I want to ensure that, whatever negatives come my way in life, I have an option not to transfer any of them to the baby. I learnt, instead, to deal with them as they come—at times with outside help—and develop new skills on how to tackle every situation.”

J. concluded: “This journey was also an opportunity to give birth to self. For a woman, this is a unique and precious time to get to see a better version of herself.”

It is clear that both mental and physical issues during pregnancy are common and may be present even after the baby is born. It is vital that the woman or girl speaks up and reaches out. Mental problems are nothing to be ashamed of, and neither is seeking help for them.

Most women do survive the challenges they face when expecting, and most of these can be remedied. Abortion, however, is *not* a remedy. It is merely a procedure which will bring its own physical and mental problems, rather than solve the situation.

Be inspired by the women who endured and came out stronger than before—as mothers!

And reach out to LifeLine if you are experiencing any kind of predicament during or after your pregnancy at <https://lifelinemalta.eu/>

**First initial was changed to protect anonymity.*