

What To Expect When You Are Expecting: Me, Him, Us
By Christine Belaire, Ph.D.

Have you noticed all the caterpillars everywhere this spring? It happens every spring like clockwork; we are inundated with caterpillars every time we go outside. As I sit outside and annoyingly pick caterpillars off of me every few minutes, I can't help but think that these caterpillars signify the onset of the next stage: the butterflies. Without the infestation of caterpillars, we would not have the upcoming wonder of the butterflies. The metamorphosis of the caterpillar to butterfly is an incredible phenomenon of change and discovery. Pregnancy is a woman's metamorphosis. It's that time in your life when everything is changing: your body, your priorities, your emotions, and even your relationships. Life changes.

There is information galore out there about how your body is changing and what the baby is doing at each stage of development. It's fascinating to read the books and get regular e-mails with pictures about each stage. You can get lost in the process. Because you can easily find so much information about the physical changes, the focus of this article is on your emotional changes. We want to look at what happens emotionally to you, your spouse, and your marital relationship throughout your pregnancy.

From the minute you discover you are pregnant, until the baby is born (and actually for a lifetime) you will be flooded with emotions about this child. It is safe to say that you will probably experience more emotions than you can imagine and some that will surprise and shock you. Similarly, your spouse will experience his own set of emotions some of which you will relate to and some of which you will not understand. The experience of multiple emotions during pregnancy is quite normal, and each person will experience the pregnancy in a unique way. In addition, you may find your experience of subsequent pregnancies to be very different from your first one. Further, your relationship with your spouse will take on a new life. The baby will change how you see each other and how you view your relationship.

For those of you who fear change, that last paragraph is pretty scary. Some of us like to have all our ducks in a row and when we get things the way we like them, we keep it that way. We are afraid of the unknown, of not knowing if we can handle the new changes. Things will change; however, not all change is bad. The emotions of pregnancy prepare you for the changes you are about to incur with a new baby.

As a mother-to-be, you will have a flux of hormones that in some ways will regulate your emotions. You may feel different from one minute to the next and feel confused by the torrent of emotions. Rebecca, mother of one and pregnant with her second, stated, "I find that my emotions are heightened with this pregnancy. If I'm mad, I'm really mad, but if I'm happy, I'm really happy. I'm at either extreme, and never in the middle." Emotions occur early in the process of pregnancy, and the conditions surrounding the pregnancy affect your emotions.

If this is a planned pregnancy, you may be feeling joy, excitement, and happiness. If you have been trying to get pregnant for a while, you may also feel relief and disbelief. Those with medical issues or who have had prior miscarriages often feel apprehensive and unsure about forming an attachment to the baby. Tammy, mother of one, said, “We were nervous about getting to attached again in case we had another miscarriage. It took a while to be comfortable.” Women with unplanned pregnancies may feel the emotions above, but many will experience a wider range of emotions. They may feel scared to embark on a new phase of life or fearful of the unknown changes. Some women may feel angry at the imposition on their life. Further, the quality of the relationship between you and the father may affect your emotions. A solid, stable relationship typically reveals positive feeling towards the baby and the upcoming journey, but a rocky relationship may present ambivalent feelings towards the future. In addition, family factors such as financial stability, number of children, career issues, and levels of support also play into your emotions about the pregnancy. Don’t be surprised by the multiple issues that trigger your emotions about your pregnancy.

Mothers and fathers experience pregnancy differently. Naturally, most women report feeling a connection to the baby earlier in the pregnancy than do men. Men have their own unique experience of pregnancy complete with their own flurry of emotions. Many of the emotions men experience may be similar to those the mother experiences, but may be triggered by different issues. Men’s emotions also tend to run the gamut from elation to fear. Women tend to be more concerned about the baby and relationships, but many men focus on security issues and are concerned about the health of the mother. During pregnancy, men report feelings of apprehension and fear about issues including financially providing for their family, performance as a father, and the changing relationship with their wives. Tom, father of two, stated, “During the whole pregnancy, I was worried about how I was going to provide financial security and take care of my family.”

Men oftentimes report feeling confused about the many changes happening to their wives during pregnancy. Women are more directly involved in the process, which can leave men out of the process. Timmy, father to be, stated, “At first, I felt like I had no part in the pregnancy. I did not know how to be involved, but after we discussed the issue I have found many ways to be included and to share in her pregnancy.” Because the baby is more of an abstract idea than reality during pregnancy for men, many men worry about how the life they know now will change. Some men report anxiety about how their relationship with their wives will differ after the baby. Sean, father of one, stated, “During the pregnancy, I wondered if my wife would love the baby more than me or if the baby would take my place. But, afterwards, I realized that the change in our relationship was better.”

With the upcoming baby, the marriage relationship will change. While the introduction of each additional child impacts the family, the arrival of the first child probably has the most impact on the marriage. It is a transition from two to three and introduces a new entity into the relationship. There will forever be a child between you (sometimes literally and figuratively). During the pregnancy, either partner can experience new

feelings about the changing relationship. Some couples report feeling closer than ever to each other during the pregnancy, but others report feeling a disconnection from each other and feeling unsure about the change. Jonathan, father of two, stated, “At times during her pregnancies, I felt disconnected from my wife. It was as if she didn’t need me.” Suzie and Mike, parents of three, stated, “Our relationship grew closer with each pregnancy. We let the experience bring us together in a new and exciting way.” The important thing to remember is to talk about your feelings with each other. Your feelings are not right or wrong, they just are. Use this time to communicate with each other about your experiences and strengthen your relationship.

The emotional changes you will experience in pregnancy with yourself, your spouse, and your relationship are precursors to the changes after the baby. This is your time to begin to get used to changes and to prepare for the upcoming festivities. The whirlwinds of emotions you experience during pregnancy are just the tip of the iceberg of what you will experience with birth and beyond. Enjoy this time and remember to accept what you are feeling and communicate with those you love.