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# Mental Health & YOGA DURING PREGNANCY

Words: Sally Parkes

**T**he journey of pregnancy is often perceived as a joyous time in a woman's life, with a longed-for baby on the way and the excitement surrounding her pending journey in to motherhood, it really can be a wonderful time. However, this is not always the case and for some women pregnancy can be a very challenging experience, not only physically but also mentally.

Mental health challenges during pregnancy are largely due to the fluctuations in hormone levels and while some women have an increase in feel-good hormones such as oxytocin, endorphins and serotonin, others may not, and can feel anxious and depressed due to an increase in stress hormones. While the latter can largely be due to her predisposition to mental health challenges prior to the mothers' pregnancy, our society, in which being stressed is now a normal way of existing, also plays a huge role in how the mother feels during this time. Furthermore, it has been found that this societal rapid increase in chronic stress, is due to a common combination of sleep deprivation, poor quality food, sedentary lifestyle and long working hours, and are all contributing factors in the increasing prevalence of depression among people generally (Hidaka BH et al.).

As a result, it is thought that prenatal depression is now just as common as postnatal depression with cases increasing all the time. A large study by Pearson R et al of pregnant Western women, actually showed a 51% increase in prenatal depression, when compared to their mothers' experience of pregnancy in the 1990s. Reasons for this were found to be related to the additional stressors placed upon modern day mums such as increased workload, inflexible work arrangements and the feeling that they must 'do it all', all of which are

associated with 'greater depressive symptoms in mothers' (Goodman WB. et al.).

Stress hormones and anxiety and depression are of course inextricably linked, largely because the release of cortisol and adrenaline hinder the release of love hormone oxytocin and happy hormone serotonin, thus creating a chemical imbalance. And the effects of this imbalance can be far reaching for both mother and baby in utero. For example, prolonged periods of increased stress hormones reduce the ability to rest and recover from the day, digest food well, have a clear mind and process information received from the environment in which we exist, to name a few. This then puts the mother, who's bodily systems are already working much more intensely than they would otherwise, under more stress in order to 'keep going', and reduces the release of feel-good hormones further. This means the mothers mind and body's ability to relax is further obstructed, and her potentially joyful experience of pregnancy, birth, and the fourth trimester in particular, is compromised further and so increases the likelihood of her experiencing postnatal depression too.

With this in mind then, the mothers' wellbeing in pregnancy must take precedence, with a focus on decreasing the release of stress hormones so that the happy hormones can flow more freely being at the forefront of her self-care plan. But how do we achieve this? Well, we know that stimulation of Sympathetic Nervous System, our 'fight or flight' division of the nervous system, sends the signal for the endocrine to release cortisol and adrenaline, so it would make

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sense then to focus on decreasing its' stimulation. On a practical level, this can be done by having more quiet time, doing less, replacing negative thoughts with positive, eating well and by practising the right kind of yoga and pranayama practices that aim to restore energy rather than depleting it.

Yoga in general and of course pregnancy yoga can be very effective for allowing the Parasympathetic Nervous System, otherwise known as our 'rest and digest' system, to activate and to get ones' feel-good hormones flowing. This as a result, literally changes the mothers brain chemistry to a more positive state. In a study of thirty pregnant women by Emerson D. et al, 60% of which had a documented history of 'psychological distress', all participant 'identified perceived benefits (of prenatal yoga) as improved relaxation, reduction of psychological distress, improved bonding with their baby in utero, labour preparation, and social connectedness with their peers'. Moreover, a long-term large study of over two thousand pregnant women by Styles A et al, concluded that 'our findings are consistent with other studies that have shown that the symptoms of stress can reduce after eight weeks of weekly yoga practice'. It should also be noted that some women also reported feeling better after just one yoga session.

It is well documented therefore that yoga whilst pregnant can help with lowering the effects of stress and depression on the pregnant mothers' wellbeing. But what yoga postures are the most effective for the pregnant mother when it come to her mental health and over all wellbeing?

In my years of teaching yoga to pregnant people, I have noticed that



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they benefit greatly from standing asana that focus on strength and mobility followed by gentle seated asana and then relaxation, all underpinned with deep and steady

breathing. This way, the mind and body feels safe enough to relax, which then enables the endocrine system to release the three magic hormones; endorphins, serotonin and oxytocin.



# YOGA POSES TO PRACTICE

Here are some suggestions for any pregnant yogini to practice, especially if she is experiencing the effects of stress, depression and/or low mood.

Cat and Cow pose, kneeling on all fours move in and out if Cat/Cow x 5 times.

## ▶ TREE POSE

Raise the foot no higher than just below the knee – Hold for 5-8 breaths



## ▶ TRIANGLE POSE

bend the front knee a little to make it more on the lower back gentle if needed – Hold for 5-8 breaths



## ▶ EAGLE POSE

Hands in prayer position if 'arm wrap' is not accessible - Hold for 5-8 breaths



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## ▶ WARRIOR 2

position feet on a slight diagonal stance for safer pelvic alignment - Hold for 5-8 breaths

### ▲ FORWARD BEND USING A CHAIR

Rest hands on to the back of the chair and step back, keep the knees bent for a more gentle stretch - Hold for 10 breaths.



### ▼ COBBLERS POSE

Place cushions or blocks under the thighs if needed - Hold for 8-12 breaths



### ▲ DOWNWARD DOG

to be replaced with Childs Pose when in third trimester - Hold for 5-8 breaths



### ▼ REVOLVED HEAD TO KNEE POSE

Place lower hand on floor near thigh for extra support if required - Hold for 8-10 breaths







### SUPPORTED RECLINED COBBLERS POSE

Place bolsters and blocks under head and spine so the circulation is not hindered and cushions or blocks under the thighs – Hold for 1-2 minutes.



### SAVASANA

lie on the left side with the top leg bent and forwards, resting on a bolster or similar. Lower leg is straight. Place a cushion underneath the head - Hold for at least 10 minutes.

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