

'Anxious? Me?
Ahahahahaha'

I Want To Feel How She Looks

There's always one – the woman in your antenatal class who's blissing out, while you're stressing out. Take control and you'll be one step closer to calm

Words by LAUREN LIBBERT



WHETHER YOUR BABY was planned and obsessed over, or the surprise result of a loved-up night in, most of us feel a little nervous after the initial euphoria/shock of discovering we're pregnant. Because, aside from the nursery decor and impending cankles, there's so much to think about: what to eat and drink, the scans, the birth... Yep, experiencing anxiety when you're a mum-to-be is perfectly normal, and there's a whole spectrum of stress you can go through. The key is managing it and knowing how to deal. So, here goes...

THE NIGGLING WORRY

These can be small, but constantly annoying. You can be on the train home, in a meeting or doing a shop and you're worrying about whether you drank too much the night before you realised you were pregnant, or whether you just ate the wrong type of cheese. **MANAGE IT** You need to allocate yourself some stress time. This gives you a dedicated slot in your day to worry, allowing you to mentally park your fears. 'Write down concerns as and when you have them, then don't think about them until the allotted time,' says psychologist Louise Watson. 'Later on, set aside 20



Visualisations and breathing can help you stay relaxed



minutes (not just before bed, though) to read your notes.' When looking at each worry, ask yourself: 'Is there anything I can do about this?' If, for example, you're scared something will go wrong during your pregnancy, the answer will be no. 'Next, imagine a visual way of letting this worry go,' says Louise. 'Think of it being tied to a balloon and watching it float into the sky.' If there's something you can do, talk to a midwife or use your worry time to actively seek information or help.

THE TIRED WOBBLE

You need to pee three times a night and have aches in places you didn't even know existed. You feel exhausted, vulnerable and start crying even when the door's slammed too hard.

MANAGE IT Give yourself a break – take time out to have a pregnancy massage or pedicure, or even just a nap, and do what makes *you* happy. Also, choose a few things that help you feel good and put them in a box for when you need a lift. 'For example, pick a favourite photo, some calming lavender oil and a bar of chocolate,' says Louise. Stay hydrated and eat well, too. Fish can be beneficial, thanks to its high levels of omega-3 (which helps maintain brain function). In a recent study, women who never or rarely ate dark or oily fish (such as tuna and salmon) were 53% more likely to have high levels of anxiety in their third trimester, compared with women who ate fish at least once a week*.

THE MENTAL OVERLOAD

Your job was stressful enough without having a bump to worry about, and now your workload and growing list of baby buys are pushing you over the edge. You feel emotionally exhausted by life's demands.

MANAGE IT Put the things you're worrying about in priority order. Hypnotherapist Alison Fuller has a method of doing this called 'plate

juggling'. 'Think about everything you're balancing – whether it's work, sorting out your hospital bag or filling out your free prescription forms. On a piece of paper, draw a circle for each one,' she says. 'Now review it. Do they all need to spin or can one be put on the back-burner, given to someone else or left until another day? Visualising this will really help to show you what does, and doesn't, need to be done and you'll feel lighter as a result.'

You need to allocate yourself some stress time

THE MINOR CRISIS

Things go wrong – whether you're pregnant or not. Redundancies are announced, a house sale falls through, the car breaks down.

It's impossible not to feel disoriented by life's constant hiccups, but the responsibility of pregnancy is making you feel even more overwhelmed.

MANAGE IT Find your switch-off solution. It might be a pregnancy yoga class, or taking time out to go swimming and bond with your bump. This may be the last thing you feel like doing, but bear

in mind that working out helps to bump up your brain's production of feel-good neurotransmitters, called endorphins, which help process stress. So, half an hour of gentle exercise won't just give you a chance to process what's happened, but will actually help with the physiological impact of a stressful event.

For Lisa Bergman, 34, from Manchester, who's 26 weeks pregnant, switching off meant losing herself in a film. 'My partner and I had buyers for our flat, but they pulled out at the last minute. I was so stressed about moving that I started getting heart palpitations,' she says. 'I distracted myself from worrying by watching weepy dramas.' Watching something emotional can help you let it all out. 'You'll have a lot of excess emotion, and crying is a great release for stress,' says Louise.

THE MAJOR STRESS

You're close to your due date and can't sleep for worrying about the birth or are panicking about coping as a mum. Nothing seems to ease the anxiety.

MANAGE IT Create your own support system. Speak to your GP or midwife, and consider trying an alternative therapy. 'Hypnotherapy can help release underlying fears that cause pregnancy anxiety, especially surrounding the birth,' says Alison. 'It can teach you to trust your body and feel in control of the experience.' Also, talk about your fears to other mums or friends, but choose them wisely. 'Speak to "radiators" – people who radiate positivity and reassure you – rather than "drains", who will just make you more anxious,' says Louise.

Stella Hastie, 26, from Taunton, who's mum to Eden, eight weeks, felt comforted when visiting a baby and toddler class. 'All the way through my third trimester, I'd wake up at night anxious about being a terrible mum,' she says. 'I'm quite impatient and, I admit, I hate the sound of babies crying. A friend who'd recently had a baby took me to the class. I held the babies and listened to the other mums talking about their experiences, and I felt so much calmer afterwards.' ■

CHECK YOUR PERSPECTIVE

YOU DON'T NEED TO WORRY ABOUT A LITTLE BIT OF ANXIETY

Most of the scare stories about stress affecting your baby only apply to extreme or chronic cases. Plus, a lot of those studies rely on women describing their own levels, which can be unreliable and subjective.

You're only pregnant for nine months and you'll experience a multitude of emotions, of which stress will only make up a few weeks. The rest will be filled with positive feelings, like excitement.

'Our bodies are designed to deal with anxiety and can cope with it,' says Louise. While the stress hormone cortisol has been shown to pass to your baby, there's no evidence that minor niggles have a negative impact on her.