

Prenatal Exercise as Self-Care: A Gentle Approach for Childbirth Educators

by Kimberlee Bethany Bonura, PhD RYT

The benefits of exercise during pregnancy for both mother and baby are well-established. Most obstetricians, midwives, and prenatal educators provide educational pamphlets to their patients about the benefits of exercise. And most pregnancy magazines, including the ones offered for free in OB-GYN offices, tend to include articles about exercise during pregnancy. And yet, less than one-fourth of pregnant women meet minimum recommendations for exercise during pregnancy (Evenson & Wen, 2010).

Getting information about health practices is easy. Putting it into practice in your life – that’s what’s hard. And feeling guilty that you’re not doing the healthy things you know you should be doing – well, that’s what’s really hard!

Scientists who study human motivation have discovered an interesting phenomenon. Telling people what they should do doesn’t necessarily make them more likely to do it. For instance, when smokers are told about the dangers of smoking, it doesn’t necessarily make them more likely to quit smoking. And for some smokers, learning all about how bad smoking is for them makes them more anxious – which makes them more likely to light up, since smoking is an anxiety-management strategy for many who smoke (Hansen, Winzler, & Topolinksik, 2010).

So here’s my take on exercise during pregnancy. Most pregnant women already know that they should exercise. They know the benefits of exercise to both themselves and their babies. So when their doctor or midwife hands them a pamphlet explaining that they should exercise, rather than motivating them to exercise, it makes them feel guilty that they’re not. Pregnancy is good preparation for motherhood in so many ways, but I don’t think pregnant women and new moms need additional practice feeling guilty that they’re not doing enough for their kids!

I still want you to encourage exercise in pregnancy – I’d just like us, as a group of professionals who support pregnant women, to shift our strategy for how we do it.

For instance, consider a pregnant woman in her first trimester who comes to you with severe constipation. You could try the following sympathetic approach: “Oh, yes, constipation can be particularly difficult during pregnancy! If you go for a 10-minute walk after each meal, it will help move the food through your digestive system and help you go to the bathroom more easily. Here is a list of walking shoes that are particularly comfortable for pregnant women, and here are some safe walking trails in the area that you might enjoy.”

Or consider a pregnant woman in her second trimester, with severe back and hip pain. You could offer a list of swimming pools and teach her that swimming can be a great way to relieve discomfort. I have had many clients find that going for a swim several days per week helps relieve the pain. Or consider a pregnant woman in her third trimester who is suffering from insomnia. You could respond, “It does get more difficult to sleep during the third trimester. Several studies have found that yoga can help people sleep more restfully, even during pregnancy. Here is a list of prenatal yoga classes in the area, these teachers all have experience working safely with pregnant women.”



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Recommend exercise in a personalized, supportive way that focuses on helping the pregnant woman take good, kind care of herself. It’s not about what she should do or what she is supposed to do – but rather, about how she can feel better. You’re still handing out supportive materials, but instead of a generic pamphlet about the benefits of exercise during pregnancy, the materials are focused on specific supportive resources in your local area that address her particular need. It may take you a little more time and effort to do some research and make the right connections in your area (finding swimming pools, walking trails, and prenatal yoga instructors, for instance), but the extra work will support your clients in getting moving, in a way that they feel good about. Gentle exercise achieved through a gently caring approach!

References

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