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Cover Page Footnote

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MINDFULNESS: HOW IT AFFECTS PREGNANCY, LABOR AND DELIVERY

By Olivia Snipes

Pregnancy is a very physically and psychologically demanding experience that leaves many women with feelings of anxiety, depression, and extreme stress. These are complications that can lead to negative effects on the mother and child. Many pregnant women desire to refrain from pharmaceutical approaches to dealing with the health complications that can arise from pregnancy due to the fear of harmful effects on the fetus (Zilcha-Mano, S., 2017). This has led to a rise in alternative, non-medical, effective stress reduction measures. Mindfulness practices have been found to be effective in offsetting and coping with some of the negative mental effects of pregnancy, as well as possibly aiding in the labor and delivery process due its positive effects on the mind-body connection.

Stress and anxiety are common symptoms associated with pregnancy due to a variety of factors including, but not limited to: fear of childbirth, lack of a support system and socioeconomic factors. The imbalance of physiological chemicals and hormones, such as cortisol, as a result of stress can lead to feelings of anxiety and depression. Depression has been found to be the most common mental health disorder affecting between fourteen to twenty-three percent of pregnant women (Matthews, J., Huberty, J., Leiferman, J., McClain, D., & Larkey, L., 2017). As depressed pregnant women are more likely to neglect their health through poor self-care and nutrition, there is the increased risk of harm to the mother and child. For instance, the fetus is at risk of any number of complications such as low birth weight, elevated cortisol levels, and impaired emotional development (Matthews, J., Huberty, J., Leiferman, J., McClain, D., &

Larkey, L., 2017). Similarly, depression increases a carrying mother's risk of preeclampsia and postpartum depression, amongst a variety of other health complications (Matthews, J., Huberty, J., Leiferman, J., McClain, D., & Larkey, L., 2017). Background knowledge of the occurrence of depression is important for physicians and pregnant women to understand, as the negative symptoms that are presented can last beyond the pregnancy period. Fifty to sixty-two percent of women who are not treated for depression during the perinatal period suffer from postpartum depression that jeopardizes the early development of the relationship between mother and child (Matthews, J., Huberty, J., Leiferman, J., McClain, D., & Larkey, L., 2017). Not to be confused with "baby blues," which can occur within three days of delivery and subside within two weeks, postpartum depression can last for weeks or months and has the likelihood to interfere with activities of daily living and develop into a more severe disorder called postpartum psychosis (Julie S. Moldenhauer, MD, 2018).

Mindfulness has the ability to reduce the incidence of postpartum depression, stress and anxiety through the use of mindfulness-based cognitive therapy that decrease cortisol levels and have the ability to ease the anxieties of the carrying women (Bonura, 2018). Due to the synergistic relationship between mother and child, the positive effects that mindfulness has on maternal neuroplasticity has shown to have the potential to improve birth outcomes for women and babies (Van der Riet, P., Francis, L., & Rees, A., 2019). Improved birth outcomes for the baby include increased birth weight, as a result of reduced incidence of intrauterine growth restriction and premature birth (Van der Riet, P., Francis, L., & Rees, A., 2019). In a study of 60 women, randomly assigned to either yoga or a control, the yoga participants experienced less contractions, shorter duration of delivery, and lower percentages of cesarean births (Bonura, 2018). This is due to the pain management component that mindfulness practices, such as yoga,

offer through breathing strategies, awareness, and various movement exercises while working through stress and discomfort (Bonura, 2018). Through breathing strategies increasing awareness, mindfulness has been linked to greater success in managing stressors that accompany motherhood, improved parental self-efficacy, and bonding which contributes to the decreased likelihood of postpartum depression (Van der Riet, P., Francis, L., & Rees, A., 2019).

There are different traditions of mindfulness that focus on varying approaches of being in the present moment each offering similar positive effects when used to help treat some of the negative mental and emotional effects that pregnancy can induce in women, specifically when it comes to anxiety and depression. Eastern hemisphere perspectives of mindfulness promote the act of being aware of a moment without judgement (Zilcha-Mano, S., 2017). This constitutes being open to the experiences and sensations of the body while welcoming them with a peacefulness that offers no judgement, but the realization that every moment in life is like a wave—rising and crashing—offering a new sensation with every breath. Western hemisphere perspectives work in a similar way by promoting an appreciation of the moment but differ in the way that participants are encouraged to see the different perspectives that can be offered with each moment rather than non-judgmentally accepting them (Zilcha-Mano, S., 2017). Both Western and Eastern interventions are for the purpose of recognizing the different moments that form the experience of life and realizing that each passing moment brings a new feeling and perspective. These interventions are useful for the purpose of evaluating one's own feelings and the different perspectives that each moment brings, rather than becoming overwhelmed in thought and contemplating what one believes they should be feeling based on a sensation, which is subjective and relative. Mindfulness programs offer the observer the opportunity to differentiate physical (i.e., pain), mental and emotional sensations that are experienced (Bonura,

2018). For this reason, mindfulness practices have been found beneficial in combating the feelings of tiredness, discontentment, and pain that are often self-fulfilling sensations based on preconceptions that society and the experiences of others teach pregnant women that they should be experiencing (Zilcha-Mano, S., 2017). While mindfulness practices can be incorporated at any point in pregnancy, the prenatal period has been found to be the foundation of health for the perinatal period. Therefore, it can be helpful to incorporate mindfulness practices sooner rather than later, especially if there are preexisting occurrences of high levels of anxiety and stress (Van der Riet, P., Francis, L., & Rees, A., 2019). The implementation of mindfulness practices has been found to enhance feelings of calm, resilience, compassion, empathy and—as found in a number of studies conducted in the United States—have a positive effect on the brain after only eight weeks of meditation for thirty minutes a day (Van der Riet, P., Francis, L., & Rees, A., 2019). In a research experiment conducted by Sigal Zilcha-Mano, licensed clinical psychologist, researcher and lecturer, it was discovered that the integration of mindfulness practices lead to better health in a sample population of pregnant women in comparison to control groups that did not partake in mindfulness techniques (Zilcha-Mano, S., 2017).

As a result of the research conducted and discoveries found, mindfulness practices can be incorporated into the lives of those interested to reduce cortisol levels and feelings of stress amongst a variety of other benefits that help to positively impact the health and overall wellness of carrying mothers. Due to depressive symptoms often going unnoticed, it is vital that measures are taken before the negative effects of stress impact both the mother and unborn child severely (Matthews, J., Huberty, J., Leiferman, J., McClain, D., & Larkey, L., 2017). Mindfulness practices can be utilized to cope with feelings of anxiety, depression and improve the relationship between mother and fetus while creating a more prosperous environment for the

fetus in utero. The combination of a better environment for the fetus in utero and calmer mental space in the mother has been found to aid in a more painless labor and delivery process. With improvements being observed in parental self-efficacy and coping strategies, development of maternal neuroplasticity contributes to a successful pregnancy (Van der Riet, P., Francis, L., & Rees, A., 2019). Through the encouragement of differentiating physical, mental and emotional experiences, mindfulness practices offer the observer an opportunity to learn a greater sense of awareness and in turn have greater control over emotions and increase pain tolerance (Bonura, 2018). Therefore, those interested are encouraged to conduct their own research into the practice of mindfulness and which form would work best, for coping with some of the effects of pregnancy through improvement in the mental state and maternal neuroplasticity.

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