
Pregnancy care in the office

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It had to happen, yet the news announcement caught me by surprise. London's first office midwife service - literally, pregnancy care provided at your desk!

Apparently, female executives were complaining about having to juggle hospital check-ups with business meetings, so an enterprising Australian midwife decided to launch a bespoke, ante-natal service.

To a stress consultant like myself, it sounded quite the wrong way to handle pregnancy, treating it as a workplace agenda item, instead of the slow rhythmic process that nature intended. I had always noticed the downside of the UK's statutory maternity leave - the temptation to work until the onset of labour, to maximise the time off after birth.

Then I realised that this new service is targeted at those few highly-placed businesswomen who can afford their own personal midwife to resolve their anxieties. For most pregnant executives, I can only offer these general conclusions, drawn from many years of workplace counselling.

First, apply the common-sense rules about the kind of tasks to avoid. It is known that strenuous effort, prolonged standing or frequent changes of shift-working can increase the risk of premature and/or low-weight birth. Also avoid toxic environments, extreme heat or cold, loud noise or vibration and jobs that require a lot of balancing or physical torsion.

Then there are the usual problems that need to be allowed-for: Lower-back strain (use a footstool), afternoon fatigue (schedule more work for the mornings), dehydration (keep bottled water handy), nausea (nibble on crackers).

Apart from that, it's really much the same anti-stress measures that I detail regularly in this column - recognising and monitoring all those workplace pressures that can harden into stress unless you actively keep them in check.

With pregnant career women, I may get called in for advice on managing stress but it soon becomes obvious that I am actually in the business of Change Management. For even the most radical changes in a corporate body are nothing compared to the changes in a woman's body - and mind - as pregnancy takes its normal course.

The other year, I was counselling a high-flying Dubai government employee, Nirupa, who was involved in the regulation of retail pharmacies. Meanwhile she had married into a prominent Bahraini family, who told her she was expected to start having children without delay. The trouble was, she wasn't certain she wanted children at all.

However, she soon became pregnant, and initially felt depressed instead of elated - until the birth, that is. Afterwards, I never saw such a change in someone's personality and outlook. To watch Nirupa bustling around as the proud mother reminded me that nature is, after all, the supreme stress manager.

Key points: Work it out

- Pregnant executives are under pressure to work until full-term.
- Your working environment should be adapted for your condition.
- Normal anti-stress measures should be applied with extra care.

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