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## How to deal with negative body image in pregnancy

Pregnancy isn't always the magical time we are often led to believe it is. Not only can symptoms like nausea and backache be difficult to cope with, it's a big life event that can affect your mood and emotions. Even though it's a normal part of pregnancy, seeing your body change as your bump develops can also be challenging too.

### Why pregnancy can affect your body image

Many mums struggle to mentally process the body changes during [pregnancy](#). According to a [survey](#) of more than 1,500 women, just over 41% of women who had been pregnant said they felt more negative about their bodies afterwards. A further 18% felt 'much more negative', while 23% felt 'slightly more negative' about their post-pregnancy bodies.

"Through adolescence and beyond, we can all struggle with fluctuating [body image](#) influenced by a vast array of factors," says Dr Marielle Quint, chartered clinical psychologist at [The Soke](#), a mental health clinic in London.

How we feel about our bodies is a complex issue, often influenced by strict and unrealistic social and cultural beauty ideals. Our personal experiences, such as [bullying](#), [trauma](#), our health and relationships, can all contribute to negative body image too.

[Social media](#) often plays a significant role, as it allows us to compare ourselves to other people and idealised bodies. What we see on [Instagram](#), [TikTok](#) and [Pinterest](#) is rarely a genuine insight into other people's lives, which can lead us to have unrealistic expectations about our own experiences.

### Feeling 'alien'

During [pregnancy](#), existing concerns about [body image](#) can become exacerbated. Even if you've not experienced negative feelings about your body before, you may find yourself struggling with it feeling 'alien' as your body changes during pregnancy.

"These issues can become increasingly complex during pregnancy, as it is naturally a time where [weight](#) gain and changes in our body are inevitable, rapid and largely out of our control," says Quint.

"There is also something about pregnancy that seems to give others often well-intended, but ill-perceived, licence to comment on size and shape," she adds. "Ordinarily, unacceptable comments can feel incredibly difficult for women struggling to inhabit their constantly evolving [pregnant](#) bodies."

### **Reality of pregnancy**

It's also normal to experience a disconnect between what you thought [pregnancy](#) would be like, compared to the reality. You may also find yourself comparing your body and pregnancy experience to other people's on [social media](#), where thinness is often valued above all else.

Negative feelings towards your body can be compounded by other mood problems such as [anxiety](#) or [depression](#). Not only do pregnancy hormones impact [mental health](#), pregnancy and fears over [childbirth](#) and child-rearing can lead us to feel overwhelmed and low. In some cases, women may find themselves mourning their 'old' lives as they navigate the challenges of pregnancy and [new motherhood](#).

"It's OK to have complex feelings about what your body is going through, but you have to keep in mind that it's all part of producing your beautiful baby," says Tina Prendeville, midwife for the pregnancy charity [Tommy's](#).

"Recognise that your body is going through a huge challenge and celebrate the amazing thing it's doing. It's also important to remember that pictures on [social media](#) or in the news are often edited and unrealistic – and even in person, you can't compare yourself to other mums, because there's really no such thing as normal."

# How to feel better about yourself during pregnancy

## Stay active

We tend to associate exercise with [weight loss](#), but it's a great way to boost our [mental health](#). [Physical activity](#) can relieve feelings of [anxiety](#), tension and [stress](#), while enhancing well-being through the release of endorphins.

"Staying [active](#) throughout pregnancy will not only keep you physically fit but can help you feel better psychologically too. There are lots of pregnancy safe exercises, such as swimming, cycling, [running](#), walking and [strength training](#)," says Prendeville.

"Reconnect with your body in a positive way, maybe through pregnancy [massage](#), Pilates or [yoga](#). Whatever you do, try to focus on how you feel rather than how you look. Your health and your baby are far more important."

## Try to be realistic about your weight

It's natural to put on weight during [pregnancy](#). As well as the small human you're growing, other things will be contributing to your weight gain. This includes the placenta, amniotic fluid, extra water in the body and growing breasts.

These changes might feel strange and uncomfortable, but it's important to be realistic about normal and desirable weight gain, says Quint.

Eating a balanced [diet](#) and keeping [active](#) can help you stay at a healthy weight during pregnancy. This includes eating plenty of whole grains and [fibre](#)-rich foods, at least five portions of fruit and veg every day and cutting back on high-fat or high-sugar food and drinks.

## Get rid of the scales

If you're struggling with your appearance, removing scales from your bathroom can help. While it's important to maintain a healthy weight, the urge to weigh yourself every day can be damaging to your [mental health](#).

## Take a break from social media

Social media is flooded with images of glowing, slim pregnant women. However, this isn't necessarily the reality for many women during pregnancy.

Seeing these unrealistic images can lead us to compare our appearance to others, which can negatively impact our mental well-being. Taking a break from Instagram, Pinterest and other apps - or being more [mindful](#) when you go on them - can provide some much needed relief.

### **Get professional help**

If you're struggling with your mental health or experiencing [anxiety](#) or [depression](#) in pregnancy, it's important to speak to your doctor. They may advise [talking therapy](#) - for which you can [self-refer](#) on the NHS - or medication.

Sometimes, poor [body image](#) is linked to negative past experiences. Talking therapy and [counselling](#) can be a good way to explore these feelings and overcome mental health issues.

"If your distress is significantly impacting your life, or it brings up past trauma or exacerbates pre-existing difficulties, it may be that it would be helpful to seek therapeutic support," says Quint. "A qualified professional who can support you through this exciting but emotionally challenging time."

### **Speak to people you trust**

It's important not to keep negative feelings or emotions to yourself. [Speak to trusted friends](#) or family about how you feel and any worries you might have. They may not have answers, but sharing a problem can make it feel less overwhelming.

Speaking to other [pregnant friends](#) can help too. Apps like Peanut connect women with others and there may be local [peer support](#) groups in your area too.

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