

No *fear* FACTOR

Three brave women tell HANNA MARTON how they overcame fears holding them back from their baby dreams

Seeing those two pink lines can be exciting and emotional and is often met with waterworks. But not all new mums experience tears of joy. For some, a positive pregnancy test brings with it shock and fear – and this is completely normal.

“Being pregnant is a time of anxiety for everyone, to some extent,” says Dr Bronwyn Leigh, a perinatal psychologist. “Pregnancy holds a lot of unknowns and this can raise anxiety. Some pregnancy issues are beyond a woman’s control, too, which is particularly difficult for those who are used to having things ordered and under control.”

Even women who are usually more chilled than a Kelvinator can turn into stress heads when a baby’s on the cards. ‘What if I’m not a good parent?’ ‘What if I don’t get enough folate/iodine/vitamin B?’ ‘What if something goes wrong at the birth?’ We hear you.

Dr Leigh advises implementing behavioural strategies for coping, such as regular exercise, yoga and good nutrition, while reflection and putting your fears into perspective can calm the mind. Seek support from positive women who’ve experienced pregnancy first-hand and if you’re feeling overwhelmed, consider seeking professional help from a psychologist.

“Never forget you’re building a new relationship with your baby – and anxiety can get in the way of that enjoyment,” says Dr Leigh. “Despite the unknowns and the loss of some control, it’s an exciting time, so always keep that in perspective.”

Need reassurance? Read on to see how these three ladies did away with their fears...

“I had a *phobia of needles*”



With help from a psychologist, GEMMA CLARK overcame a lifelong fear of needles to fall pregnant.

When I was nine, I got pneumonia and had to spend two weeks in hospital on a drip. Getting the drip in proved difficult: the nurses had trouble finding my vein and getting the needle to go in. I was so upset, my mum says that it was one of the worst things she had to go through as a parent. During a blood test a couple of years later, I cried and nearly fainted. I avoided blood tests for the next 16 years.

One year into my marriage, I wanted kids. But even low-risk pregnancies involve some

needles, so I needed to treat the cause of my anxiety and stress before it impacted on the baby. I’d heard about how hypnotherapy and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) could help in overcoming phobias, so I started seeing a psychologist, Zoey.

In the first session, I discovered I wasn’t alone in having a fear that was holding me back from doing something important. We discussed other pregnancy issues, such as the fear of miscarriage and stillbirth. It was great to be counselled about a massive life decision while dealing with my needle phobia.

At my second appointment, I sat in a comfy armchair with the lights dimmed and relaxing music playing. I closed my eyes and Zoey guided me through a relaxation technique. To test my receptiveness, Zoey asked me to imagine my hand was tied to a helium balloon that would lift it off the armchair. My hand actually levitated. I thought, ‘Is she doing that? Am I doing that? Am I letting her do it to me?’ But I was always conscious; I never felt uneasy. Under hypnosis, Zoey took me back to the event that created the fear. She had the ‘adult me’ go into the hospital room to comfort ‘nine-year-old me’

as the needles were put in. It was vivid and powerful – I had tears rolling down my face. Because the ‘adult me’ was holding on to the fear of a child, I had to put everything into perspective.

It took 10 sessions before I could have blood taken. My first pre-conception test checked my immunity to measles, mumps and rubella. I was nervous, but I closed my eyes, relaxed my muscles and breathed slowly and deeply. I used a mantra: ‘This is for my health; this is for the health of my baby.’ The blood test was quick. As soon as the nurse removed the needle I burst into tears of relief and she gave me a hug.

I slowly became more and more relaxed with each test. I still don’t love them, but I voluntarily had acupuncture towards the end of my pregnancy to prepare for the birth.

During the birth – despite my plan for a drug-free labour – I needed syntocinon (a synthetic form of oxytocin), a saline drip and an epidural. I knew the epidural was a fat needle going into my spinal column, but I calmly accepted that it was necessary. It definitely showed how far I’d come. >

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Pictures Getty Images, iStockphoto, readers' own

“Giving birth *scared me*”



LUCY PERRY, now a Sydney-based doula, childbirth educator and author of *Cheers to Childbirth* (\$29.95, www.cheerstochildbirth.com.au), was terrified of giving birth.

In my 20s I was desperately scared of birth – a fear I certainly didn’t get from my mum, who had had four drug-free births.

I married Bruce when I was 21 and spent the first eight years of our marriage trying to talk him into adoption. I always wanted to be a mother but had been led to believe the pain of birth was like having your legs torn off. That, coupled with handing control of my body over to a bunch of strangers with forceps, *really* scared me.

Bruce said no to adoption, saying, “I want us to have our own babies and I’ll support you all the way. If I could have them, I would, but I can’t. It’ll be okay.” So, at 29, I went with it and we became pregnant in the first month. I was thrilled, but still very fearful of the pain.

The turning point came at 30 weeks at a pregnancy retreat in Byron Bay. I’d already decided on an early epidural and before the retreat I said, “I won’t let those hippies talk me out of pain relief!” I came home four days later with a frangipani tucked behind my ear, talking about water births and doulas.

It was the first time in my life I’d heard positive stories about birth. Not only did it change my attitude, it changed the course of my life! I didn’t need a psychologist, I just

needed to hear someone say “I had the most wonderful birth experience”.

After that I decided to take an active birth course and found a doula. I was still nervous, but felt better prepared. Even though it lasted 24 hours, the labour was much easier than I expected and I did it without drugs – though pushing Hudson, who was 4kg, out was really tough. My next two children, Harlow and Sheba, were born at home.

I loved how Bruce and I went from fear to empowerment and really wanted to help other couples do this. So when Hudson was four months old, I trained to become a doula. The simplest thing I can do to ease women’s anxiety is tell them my story.

Realising men need more support, Bruce and I also launched ‘Beer and Bubs’ (www.beerandbubs.com.au), which provides birth education for men at the pub. If we can send the blokes home confident they can support their partners, it has a really positive effect on expectant mums. After every session I get emails from women saying, “He’s a changed man. He’s so excited. I feel like I can do it!”

“I could pass on a *genetic condition*”



NAOMI PAYNE and husband Greig had no idea they both carried the gene for cystic fibrosis until their son, Christian, now two years old, was born with the condition.

Our first baby, Christian, was born in September 2009 and diagnosed with cystic fibrosis (CF) two weeks later. We were shattered. He was taking enzymes and seeing physios before he was three weeks old.

One in 25 people are carriers of the CF gene, but this only becomes a problem when two carriers have a child together. Not long ago we discovered that, yes, both my husband, Greig, and I are carriers. But no-one in our family actually has CF, so it was a bombshell. We’ve since found out my mum is a carrier as well. With all of our pregnancies there’s a 25 per cent chance bub will have CF, a 25 per cent chance our baby won’t have CF or carry the gene and a 50 per cent chance he or she will turn out to be a carrier.

I never wanted us to be a one-child family, but Greig and I are adamant we can’t have another CF baby. Looking at Christian you wouldn’t know he’s sick, but he takes medication up to 17 times a day. We have

to protect him from people with the flu, and at the first symptoms he’s on antibiotics or in hospital. People liken CF to a life breathing through a straw or drowning on the inside because the lungs fill with sticky mucus. The life expectancy for CF patients is 38 and we won’t choose that for another child.

Because of all this, I’ve been scared of falling pregnant again. I know I couldn’t continue a pregnancy if the embryo had CF, something that can be detected at 11 weeks. But through genetic counselling, we were introduced to IVF.

We said no at first, but in May 2011 we decided to start pursuing it. Using IVF, the doctor is able to control the process and only implants embryos free from CF.

I still fear having a sick baby because neither IVF nor unassisted conception will ever guarantee a healthy child. But that’s all I want, desperately. ✨

Show your support for cystic fibrosis patients at www.cysticfibrosis.org.au