

# The journey to motherhood

## *How holistic massage can help support you emotionally throughout pregnancy, childbirth and beyond*

By Anna Hope BA Hons MTI

Conception, pregnancy and childbirth are an amazing journey in their own right, as well as being only the beginning of the much longer journey that is parenthood. They represent a time of great change in a woman's life, not only physically but also emotionally. This booklet describes the kinds of emotional changes that having a baby can bring up, and how massage can help support mothers and their partners during this very important time.

*"A whole hour dedicated to me! Pure bliss!" – G.*



## What is holistic massage and how can it help?

Holistic massage is a form of therapy that works with the whole person – mind, body and spirit – to give a treatment uniquely tailored to the needs of the individual. It can involve both working with oils directly onto the skin, as well as through clothing, according to the situation. The massage therapist also has an important role in acting as a non-judgemental listening ear and in providing practical ideas for how the client can enhance her own health and wellbeing in between massage sessions – for example by suggesting positive lifestyle changes. This makes it an ideal way of supporting women's emotional wellbeing during and immediately following pregnancy, as these are times of rapid physical and emotional change and these needs must be met through a sensitive and adaptable approach.

*"I found it really great to have the opportunity for a tailor made pregnancy treatment, to feel supported and cared for at this time. It was immensely helpful to receive this level of care and relaxation when your body is changing and going through so much- just to have that 1-1 time with someone listening to your body and giving back to you while your body is giving so much to the baby. Other treatments I received while pregnant didn't feel like they were taking my pregnancy in to account and at times made me feel nauseous and not listened to!" – R.*

*"It was great to think about my body, the baby and our imminent journey and felt nourishing to have your undivided attention for the massage space." – S.*

Receiving regular massage both throughout pregnancy and postnatally has been shown to offer the following benefits in terms of the emotional wellbeing of the mother:

- Emotional support during fertility treatment <sup>i</sup>
- Lower levels of anxiety and depression <sup>ii</sup>

- Improved mood and better sleep <sup>iii</sup>
- Support in making positive lifestyle changes <sup>iv</sup>
- More positive emotional state during labour <sup>v</sup>
- Strengthening the connection between mother and baby <sup>vi</sup>
- Reduced incidence of postnatal depression <sup>vii</sup>

*“All throughout my pregnancy I found [massage] extremely helpful as my emotions were very up and down. In my personal life I was faced with lots of change and complications and at times I felt very alone. Towards the end of our sessions together I was amazed with how much better I’d felt about my pregnancy and this was helped by Anna always encouraging me to share my feelings and not hold these in.” – G.*

## Holistic massage and the mainstream healthcare system

Holistic massage can offer an excellent complement to the care, support and advice that you will receive from your midwife, GP and/or consultant. Regular visits to the community midwife are essential to monitor your own health and that of your baby, and to keep you informed about what decisions you may need to make about your own lifestyle, the birth and care of your new baby. However there are likely to be significant periods during your pregnancy when you will not see your midwife for some time, and this can lead to the expectant mother feeling a lack of support during this time. Regular visits to a suitably qualified therapist can help to counterbalance this, and offers the possibility of developing a trusting relationship over the course of your treatments. This continuity is particularly valuable in situations where the mother may be seeing a different community midwife at each visit. Your massage therapist may also help to reinforce advice that you have already received from your midwife or ante-natal nurse, for example by helping to support you in making positive decisions about adopting a more healthy lifestyle, or demonstrating exercises that can help during labour and birth.

*“The body and pelvic floor exercises that were recommended were really helpful as I often needed prompting to do the right thing!” – H.*

Receiving massage during or following your pregnancy is not dangerous for you or your baby, but you should check whether your therapist has previous experience or training with pregnancy and postnatal massage. A qualified therapist will have a good understanding of the wide range of health issues that pregnancy may present and will be aware of symptoms that may need to be referred to your midwife or GP. Your therapist will begin by taking a detailed case history of your own health before and during your pregnancy and will use this to assess the best course of treatment for you during the first and subsequent massage sessions. Massage sessions may vary considerably in their content and structure, depending on the physical and emotional issues that present themselves at each session, and may include the following:



- A chat about how you are feeling in yourself and about the pregnancy
- Evaluation of the previous session – what worked and what didn’t
- Postural assessment
- Massage through the clothing
- Massage onto the skin with oils
- Demonstration of exercises, stretches and massage techniques for posture and labour
- Advice about taking care of yourself in between sessions

This combination of elements, within a session that is at least an hour long, makes holistic massage an excellent way of supporting your emotional wellbeing both during and after pregnancy. Pregnancy and motherhood can be an emotional rollercoaster with different issues coming up as time progresses.

*“Anna is a friend, but in her capacity as a therapist I confided very personal inner fears and feelings.” – H.*

*“Emotionally the massage gave me the opportunity to be still and reconnect and allow emotions to arise.” – R.*

The following sections highlight specific issues that may arise and how holistic massage can help support you through these challenges.

## Conception

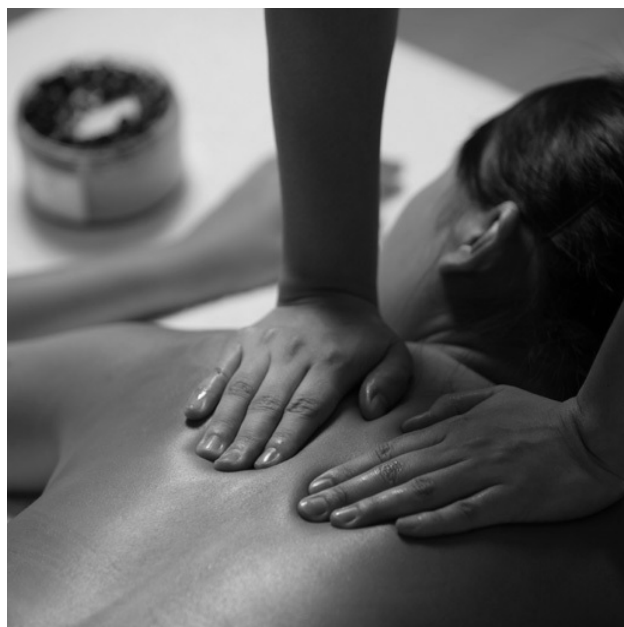


Massage has an important role in relief of stress and anxiety, both of which may have a negative impact on the ability to conceive. Studies of stress levels in women trying to conceive naturally have reported that women experienced “more favourable mood states” during the month of conception than during other months.<sup>viii</sup> This is particularly true of women who are undergoing fertility treatment – higher stress levels during IVF treatment have been partially correlated with lower success rates.<sup>ix</sup> Massage around the time of conception, whether natural or assisted, can therefore offer valuable emotional support, which may help to boost chances of success.

*“The massages I received both immediately before and a few days after my embryo transfer helped to calm my nerves and I believe that they contributed to the successful outcome of the treatment.” – A.*

## The first trimester (0-12 weeks)

The early days of pregnancy can be a time of intense emotions – the excitement, anxiety or uncertainty that may arise at the discovery that you have conceived are likely to be strengthened by the hormonal fluctuations that your body is going through. Sore breasts, nausea, vomiting, dizziness and extreme tiredness are common physical symptoms that may also contribute to emotional distress, especially in situations where the woman feels that it is too early to confide in others and share her feelings and experiences. If there is a history of infertility or miscarriage then there may be significantly greater anxiety about whether the baby will survive.<sup>x</sup>



Pregnancy opens up a whole new set of opportunities and possibilities about the future, and even at this early stage the mother will be thinking about their future life plans. While this process is often an overwhelmingly positive one, it can still often lead to feelings of confusion or disorientation. Their relationship with their partner may be challenged, or they may not be in a stable relationship and contemplating the possibility of bringing up a child on their own.

Women may not be invited to see their community midwife until the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> week of pregnancy, and before this time they may be feeling vulnerable and in need of emotional support. The massage therapist may be able to help by bridging this gap – providing advice and encouragement or simply acting as a sounding board in addition to the comfort that nurturing physical touch can bring.

*“Anna and I talked about different supplements to take during pregnancy, and as a result of our conversation, she recommended taking an iron supplement, Floradix, which I now take regularly. I also attend a birth preparation and yoga class which is a great time for me to meet other mothers to be, learning about birthing stories and practice yoga positions.” – G.*

*“Physical touch is something that I crave as a person as I never had this as a child/adult as my parents were busy dealing with their own issues. This has made me feel very closed as a person at times and unsure how to deal with it, and it’s definitely affected my personal relationships. I found that having time for physical touch via massage has become very important to me over the years as it helps me overcome my fears surrounding touch, and giving, and reminds me how important it is to be open, especially now that I am having my own family.” – G.*

## The second trimester (12-28 weeks)

During the middle part of the pregnancy, many of the initial symptoms ease off and life may become a little more “normal”. Once the mother can start to feel the baby and its movements she can begin to connect to it more easily and this is usually a joyful experience. However as the baby grows the woman’s body will be changing – gaining weight, the baby’s bump will begin to show and the mother’s posture and lifestyle may start to adapt to her new physical condition. Getting used to her new shape and physical limitations may be challenging, and there may also be stress around the need to inform her employer.



Massage during this time can be very helpful in supporting the woman through these changes – physical touch can help her feel comfortable in her “new” body and can also offer her the space she needs to start making a real connection with her baby. Especially for second and subsequent pregnancies, there may be a three-month gap between community midwife appointments and regular massage sessions can provide the opportunity to “check in” with a professional about how things are going.

*“Having time for just ‘me’ was very helpful as I tend to give a lot to others and forget about myself.” – G.*

*“Following a late miscarriage less than a year earlier, I had avoided making an emotional connection with this baby, but when Anna placed her hands on my stomach, it immediately prompted a very strong emotional reaction.” – H.*

## The third trimester (28-40+ weeks)



As the time of birth nears, the mother will be starting to focus more on the realities and practicalities that lie ahead. Excitement about meeting her baby at last may be blended with anxieties about how she will cope with labour and birth, looking after the baby, breastfeeding, lack of sleep and so on. There are some important decisions for the mother and her partner to make about how they would like the birth to be – in hospital or at home, what kinds of medical interventions they may or may not be willing to accept, who they would like to be present... If the mother is still working into the later weeks of pregnancy she may be very tired and having difficulty making time for herself and her baby to rest and connect together before the birth. If she already has other children, finding this special time may be even more challenging. If the baby is overdue then she may be feeling frustrated, impatient, exhausted...

The physical strains of carrying a growing baby around can themselves become an emotional burden. Pelvic pain, achy back, stiff shoulders, heavy breasts, difficulties in moving around or finding a good position to sleep in can all contribute towards feelings of frustration. Deep massage to relieve stiffness and aches, and mobilisations to aid flexibility in joints, can therefore be highly therapeutic on an emotional as well as physical level.

*“Towards the end of the pregnancy when I was still working 8 or 9 hours a day sitting at a desk, I had fairly acute back and shoulder pain that were making the day unbearable, but as I am freelance, I could not cancel my work. When Anna gave me a back and shoulder treatment, it got rid of all the pain, making my working day comfortable and more than bearable.” – H.*

The massage therapist can now also play a valuable role in helping both the woman and her partner prepare for the birth and parenthood, both practically and emotionally. A massage session offers the perfect opportunity for the mother to take time out and connect with her baby, in a safe and nurturing space. Energy balancing techniques used in the massage can help to revitalise and aid sleep. Reminders about posture, breathing and pelvic floor exercises can be especially helpful, as can advice on other techniques or therapies that may complement these – for example hypnobirthing. Your massage therapist should also be able to discuss options for supporting you and your baby after the birth – such as exercises to aid recovery, breastfeeding techniques and positions, baby massage classes and simple massage techniques to relieve tension after the birth. This can help give the mother confidence in her own natural ability to give birth and to care for her new baby.

*“It was lovely to have the opportunity to be ‘pampered’ and have some ‘me time’ and connect to parts of my body I had become unaware of due to all the focus on the pregnancy/baby/bump!” – R.*

*“[I enjoyed] the emotional connection with my baby that the time and space allowed. This felt very important – I am aware that there was so much less of this in my second pregnancy... I loved baby being massaged with me – felt united.” – S.*

*“Anna’s sessions allowed me a small amount of personal space to explore my feelings about the baby... The abdominal touches provided an instant connection – also the baby only ever kicked for Anna, and nobody else, forcing me to acknowledge its individuality and personality where I was trying to keep the unborn person anonymous to keep my emotions from becoming connected.” – H.*

The massage therapist can also provide support to help the woman and her partner to connect with each other and with the baby. A great way of doing this is by teaching the partner some simple massage techniques, including massage of the baby in the womb, as well as breathing and visualisation exercises that they can practise together. These exercises can be an important way of establishing or reinforcing an instinctive and non-verbal communication between mother and partner, which will be valuable during the birth when the partner may need to anticipate the mother's needs and support her in whatever way she needs without being intrusive.



*“Learning to massage the baby helped me feel more involved in the pregnancy and gave me a sense that I can be more supportive during the birth.” – J.*

## Preparation for labour and birth

Thinking about, and planning for, the birth of your baby can bring up all kinds of emotional responses. These may include concerns about coping with pain, whether the birth will go smoothly, how her partner will be able to support her adequately, whether the baby will be born safe and healthy, and so on. Receiving holistic massage during pregnancy can be a good way of helping the mother to adopt a calmer and more confident perspective, by giving her greater trust in her own body and her ability to deal with whatever situation presents itself. Specific techniques such as positions for labour and birth, breathing exercises and visualisations can help boost this confidence.

*“I think overall the massage, yoga and birth preparation I did helped me to cope which what could have been a very stressful time, in a calm way.” – R.*



A qualified massage therapist should also be able to offer birth preparation sessions for both the woman and her birthing partner. As well as being able to suggest techniques for massage and postures throughout labour and birth, these sessions can be helpful by offering a neutral space where both mother and partner can think clearly about the different options and, where necessary, voice any concerns they may have about the process. For example, the mother and her partner may have different views about how they would like the birth to happen, or the mother may be concerned that her partner lacks the skills or sensitivity to support her in the way that she needs. The massage therapist need to be particularly sensitive in these situations, but can play a role in facilitating open and honest discussions and in providing advice on possible ways of dealing with these concerns.

*“The birth preparation session was brilliant for me being able to ask questions I didn't know the answers to about natural birth and for preparing my partner for the realities of dealing with a woman in labour... The partner massage techniques were great but also the discussion helped me most of all.” – H.*

## Postnatal massage

After the birth, much will have changed. During the first few days both mother and partner may be experiencing a myriad of different emotions, which may swing rapidly between euphoria and depression. For the mother, there may be particular challenges as she struggles to come to terms with the physical effects of birth and breastfeeding, as well as dealing with the new responsibilities of motherhood and the exhaustion of sleep deprivation.

As time passes, the mother's body begins to heal and family life will begin to slip into more of a routine. The mother may start to crave some nurturing time for herself – to help her recharge her emotional and physical batteries at a time when she is giving so much to her baby, even more so if she has other children.



*“The postnatal massage was bliss, firstly to lie on my front and have a back massage but also to reconnect physically after the birth – which for me was physically and emotionally traumatic and I still feel my body is recovering. To have the time to feel the enormity of what my body has been through and have the space for some healing away from the intensity of mothering was great.” – R.*

*“...wonderful post natal massage felt healing!”- S.*

New parenthood may not be an easy ride. On average, 10-15% of new mothers in Western societies suffer from postnatal depression of some kind. Massage has been demonstrated to help reduce anxiety in depressed mothers<sup>vii</sup>. Massage therapists are also well placed to complement the role of the health visitor and GP in providing support and advice on issues from physical recovery exercises for the mother through to breastfeeding support and simply guidance as to whether the mother's feelings and experiences are “normal” or whether she should seek further professional help.

## Conclusions

A course of holistic massage treatments, encompassing the pregnancy and post-natal period, can be highly effective in supporting both the mother and her partner throughout the complex emotional changes and challenges they will face at this important time in their lives and their relationship.

My own experience of clients that I have worked with during pregnancy and postnatally suggests the following recommendations:

- It is good to maintain a regular routine of treatments – clients suggested that fortnightly treatments would have been good particularly towards the end of the pregnancy, although in practice cost limitations may mean that once a month is more realistic.

- Clients reported the greatest levels of satisfaction with their massage sessions in terms of dealing with physical symptoms, e.g. release of muscle tension, relief of oedema and pain relief. However I feel this may be reflected in the fact that physical symptoms are generally easier to observe/assess than emotional issues. My clients also reported that relief from physical pain and tension improved their emotional wellbeing, showing that massage can provide emotional support indirectly as well as directly.
- Of the emotional issues that my clients experienced, the greatest improvements were reported in terms of general relaxation, lowering stress levels, feeling prepared for the birth, strengthening the connection with the baby and groundedness.
- My clients found that the most useful elements of the massage sessions were the practical ideas for birth preparation, providing the opportunity to connect with the baby and having somebody to speak to confidentially about their emotional experiences. They also particularly enjoyed massage of the baby/uterus, being in a nurturing space and experiencing stillness.
- My massage sessions contributed to helping my clients make positive lifestyle changes, most notably in terms of practising stretches and exercises and in making more time to nurture themselves.
- Due to the diverse nature of emotional issues experienced, it is difficult to single out specific massage techniques for providing emotional support. Since time, space and a listening ear seemed to be particularly important in giving my clients emotional “breathing space”, slowness, stillness, energy holds and balancing and work with the chakras were all especially useful. The key is for the therapist to be sensitive, open and trusting in their own intuition.



*“The massage sessions were a great help in general relaxation, something I don’t do well or make time for.” – H.*

*“I feel that the sessions have helped me with a personal journey on my own self development and awareness. It has enabled me to feel more grounded as a person, and more relaxed during my pregnancy.” – G.*

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