



Healthy  
**Pregnancy**  
SUMMIT



**Parijat Deshpande,  
MS**

## Reducing Stress During Pregnancy: A Mind-Body Approach

### SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Pregnancy, body, high risk pregnancy, stress, clients, women, nervous system, complications, pregnancy complications, release, blood pressure, feel, approach, experience, absolutely, baby, exercises, preeclampsia, healthy pregnancy, people

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Welcome to our session on the mind body approach to stress reduction during pregnancy. I'm Professor James Adams. And with me today is Parijat Deshpande. She's the best selling author of the pregnancy brain, a mind body approach to stress management during a high risk pregnancy. Parijat. Thanks so much for joining us.

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Thank you so much for having me.

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So can you tell us a little bit more about your background? You have a very interesting one.

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Yeah, absolutely. So I actually

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got into this work due to my personal experience, my professional background and training is in clinical psychology. And it was after I experienced infertility, fertility, treatment loss, and then my



own very high risk pregnancy that I realized, this is an aspect of prenatal care that we do not talk nearly enough about. That has a significant impact on pregnancy, health and pregnancy outcomes. And it was really well And I experienced it for myself that it really a seed was planted. I had, as I mentioned, a very high risk pregnancy. So I developed eight complications during my very short pregnancy and about five complications in I was 22 weeks and four days when I landed in the hospital. And my doctors were completely convinced I was going to deliver my son within the next 72 hours, which would have probably resulted in us losing him. And there was a moment when I thought, there's one more thing I haven't tried because I was connected to the monitors, you could see the contractions coming and going. And I could see that when I released my body of tension, the contraction stopped. And when I had anxiety when my body was tight, the contractions came back and I said, Okay, you all do what you need to do medically, this is my job. I'm going to release that tension from my body and that is my only job and if we get 72 hours and we get 72 hours, if we get more that would be awesome. In doing that, I was able to help extend my pregnancy by 15 days. And so my son was born at 24 weeks and five days, very, very early still, but just late enough to give him a chance at life. And it was that experience right there that I said, if I've got to come back and change my career, and I gotta get, I've got to do something completely different work with high risk women, because this, this works. And in, in doing the research and opening up my practice and doing the and writing the book, I just saw how much research there's out there to support my personal experience of what kids what's possible in a pregnancy that's, that's complicated and has many challenges, and still how much we can influence the outcomes. And I found that to be a very powerful stance that I as a patient was not getting reminded of nearly enough. And so that's how we that's what that's how we're here with the book is there work with clients privately and this is just I feel like my life's mission to just show and really bring women to this place of empowerment even when everything's going really, really challenge is very challenging during the pregnancy.

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Well, thanks for sharing that very personal and very powerful story. It's great to hear that that personal motivation that can lead you to the research that, as you say, shows how important stress can be during any pregnancy and especially during a high risk pregnancies. Could you talk a little bit more about what are some of the primary recommendations that you have on methods for a mind body approach to reduce stress during pregnancy?

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Absolutely. The place where I start, is it has nothing to do with what's happening in your head. So we the way I guide my clients, and what we we talk about is, the experience is so visceral and it's so physical, that what we want to do is actually get back into the body. Instead of Coming disconnected from the body and focusing on our thoughts which are ephemeral and



ever changing. And so my approach is a very body based somatic approach we get back into experiencing body sensations, experiencing the felt sense of emotions, and really being fully embodied with the experience both physically and emotionally during the pregnancy. Now, when I say that sometimes women go but that feels awful, I don't want to feel all these things. And, and I get I get it, I totally get it. And the the intention behind this is we want to maintain that connection. It is with that disconnection that we see the nervous system dysregulation maintain throughout the pregnancy, we see the cascading effect of that in other aspects of health, that ultimately play into the development of pregnancy complications and shortening the gestation. What we want instead is to actually release that tension that is being built up in the body because of these experiences, and the only way to release it is to truly feel at first.

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That's a great point that you really need to understand what's going on in your body before you can really try to address those problems. Absolutely. So if you can talk a little bit about why stress is a problem during pregnancy, and especially during high risk pregnancies.

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Yeah, absolutely. So I like to describe it like, like, imagine a three legged stool. And what we have is we've got the nervous system that becomes dysregulated. When we well let me back up and say what happens with our nervous system is we identify a threat, a sense of danger, and our entire body goes into fight flight or freeze right it goes into survival mode. Our bodies are beautifully capable of handling that in small, tiny spurts. It is when those spurts become extended to several minutes, to hours, to days and sometimes weeks, which is often what we find in Risk pregnancies that we start to see health complications. And in that three legged stool example, pregnancy is a delicate balance between our nervous system, our endocrine system and our immune system. There's a shift that happens to all three of those systems and from our baseline in order to sustain a healthy pregnancy. And when we have that sense of danger, we're in survival mode. Imagine one of those legs changing, maybe they shorten or lengthen or so it's not in that balance anymore, the impact of which cascades into the endocrine system and the immune system both of which are essential for a healthy pregnancy to be in balance with our nervous system. When that is out of balance. We see the increased risk and development of pregnancy complications, the biggest one of which is shorter gestation and preterm delivery.

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Those are certainly very important problems. So roughly 10% of women having preterm pregnancies have a lot of health complications long term sometimes for many years because of that. So how common is significant stress during pregnancy? Do you think many women experienced that?



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I do. I do. I don't have an exact number. I wish we could find that number. But I think we would be very disconcerted to see how high it is. I think within the amount of pressure that we have work, stress, family stress pressures from society, financial, there's so many reasons. And then you add on to that any health complications that arise for mom or baby and I think we're going to find that very, very high percentage of women are experiencing some type of physiological stress reaction during pregnancy. And I would even go so far as to say that's part of the reason why we see the preterm birth rates as high as we do in this country where we have access to so much medical advancement to help women stay pregnant have healthy pregnancies, and still the preterm birth rate is so high and continues to work. I strongly believe this is one very important piece of that puzzle.

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Sure, I think with many people having stressful lives to begin with, and I think having during pregnancy that can often just add to that. Absolutely. If there are any health complications.

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Absolutely. Can you

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explain a little bit more about your mind body approach? What are some of the recommendations that you have for women to try to reduce stress?

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Yeah, absolutely. So going back to what we were talking about earlier, it's so it's so much of it is about releasing. So I like to call it stress release, I want you to feel that release actually coming out from your body. Because until we are doing that, what we're doing is putting bandaids on it and band aids and more and more band aids on top of things. And what I want instead for you is for you to actually experience the release of that tension and that that tightness. What happens when we identify a threat or danger is our body actually dumps energy into the nervous system dumps energy into the body for us to actually fight or run from the threat When we don't have the opportunity to actually fight or run, in the case of pregnancy, there isn't actually something to fight or run from. That energy gets stored and it stays in your body. It's which is what causes these cascade effects that we were talking about to the other our body systems and ultimately the complications that arise from that. And so so much of it is identifying where is that energy? And what do I need to do? How do I need to move my body? What do I need to do to release that energy that I would have released had I run away from something that was chasing me, since there's nothing chasing me, I still need to go through that



physiological process in order to release that, which will then kick off the parasympathetic nervous system and allow for my body to repair and recharge, and that's where we want us to be most of the time.

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So what do you think are some good ways to try to release that energy thinking more stretching primarily for Other types of exercise are what? What do you think works best?

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Yeah, that's a great

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question. That's it. And it's also a tough question to answer because I think it's so different for everybody. So what I encourage my clients to do is to identify what type of movement does your body feel like doing. And the interesting thing about doing this work with pregnant women is, as I was myself, sometimes you are on modified activity restrictions or on bedrest. And so even if your body wants to move a certain way, you may not be allowed to, for the last 15 days of my pregnancy, I was on strict hospital bed rest, I didn't stand up once. And so that in itself makes it really challenging on how to actually release some of this energy. And so that's why it's so important to get really creative about it. My body, my body wants to run but I'm not allowed to run. So what can I do to mimic some of that? Can you get a massage on your feet? Can you you know, roll your ankles a little bit Can you do what kind of movements can you do to get as close to that as possible? That's still safe for you and for baby during your pregnancy. That's kind of a general rule of thumb that we work by. And and then we just allow ourselves to get really creative about ways of achieving the same result through multiple avenues.

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So for some people it might be particularly yoga poses for some people that may be stretching. Yeah. And you're saying, really just try different things depending on where the stress is in your body. And what feels best to you as a way to try to reduce that stress.

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Exactly. It reminds me as you said, that I was thinking of a client of mine who felt this really strong urge to yell. You know, if you think about it makes sense. If you if you're being chased by a bear, it's possible at some time, you may want to be screaming your head off, and we don't get the opportunity to do that. And, and just to reiterate, for everybody who's listening that this is a primal experience. This is something that's happening outside of conscious awareness. It's not a choice. It's genuine. It's really happening at the very base level. Are our nervous system.



And so sometimes it's something like that where you just feel like you need to get that energy out somehow, when you do you will feel your body completely relax. It's not to say it won't come up again, certainly it will, especially when you're in a situation that's long term like Iris pregnancy or pregnancy. In general, there is an endpoint, but it's not necessarily five minutes from now. And so we have to allow ourselves to be flexible to say, Okay, this is the one wave, we handled it, we release that energy. And now when it comes again, I know what to do next time too.

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So for people are able to reduce their stress through different motions through yoga. What are some of the main benefits of the mind body approach that you think?

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I think the biggest benefit is you start to experience your body in a far more powerful way. And I can really speak to that as from the patient perspective, too, is when you have when you're pregnant, it kind of feels like your body is not your own anymore, and then you add on complication To them, it feels like all these things are happening to you and you lose a sense of agency and control and predictability. And in doing this, we kind of restore some of that back, worth noticing that, hey, I can intervene with my body in some way. And it responds quite quickly to my effects, and to the efforts that I'm making. And that restores a tremendous amount of power. And what I see with my clients is that then encourages them to learn to trust their bodies, and to trust the signals and the symptoms that are coming up with their bodies. And so that translates to knowing when I'm feeling anxious versus when there's something really wrong and I need to get my doctor's attention. And when and if the doctor doesn't give the attention, they're much more able to confidently be vocal and say, No, no, no, you need to listen or I'm going to find somebody else something is wrong. And we see an improvement in the prenatal care that they're receiving, which I think is fantastic. So there A cascading effect on this side as well, it's so much more than just feeling better. It really does change your relationship with your body. And I think the other side of it related to that is then we get to see how our body responds to these efforts as well. So contractions stop, blood pressure comes down, blood glucose levels, even out. And when we see the effects of that, suddenly the pregnancy complications seem much more manageable. And there is something to be said about the power of hope to say, Okay, I can do something about this. I might still deliver preterm, I might still have to have the C section, but I have now done everything I can to get to that point. And what that leaves them with is self confidence. Whenever babies born, they do everything I could, as opposed to a sense of doubt and regret and the what ifs. What if I hadn't won if I hadn't that aspect of it. It's just Quarter going into the rest of life and into motherhood. That piece of it is then addressed as well ahead of time, which I think was really amazing.



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Oh, I think you are muted.

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Mmm, I actually can't hear you. I think you're on mute.

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Oh, as you were saying that also if you are able to reduce that stress, and I think you'll also be able to reduce the risk of hypertension, which could lead to preeclampsia very serious health problem. And then also too, if you're able to reduce those, your stress, I think you'll just feel happier and less chance of anxiety or depression, and I think just overall make for a much happier pregnancy.

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Yeah, absolutely. And you also protect yourself from experiencing birth trauma, even if baby comes early, which I think is really powerful as well.

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So what are some of the research on the importance of stress management during pregnancy?

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Well, we have, there's over about 70 years of research, which is shocking to me when I started doing my research into this to write the book, that that there is a robust history of showing the implications of this nervous system dysregulation that comes from stress, and how it impacts the endocrine system and the immune system to lead to so many different complications, including with, as you said, gestational hypertension, gestational diabetes, preeclampsia, preterm delivery, we have a large body of research that's showing it affects blood flow to the baby, which there's tremendous research that kind of shows that babies born to women who have experienced a high level of stress tend to be smaller. For gestational age, a higher risk of iugr, intrauterine growth restriction and so many more complications like that. And so we're really looking at a real a big risk factor for maternal and neonatal outcomes that can be improved when we teach women these skills during pregnancy on how to reregulate their nervous system.

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And do you think that there are particular amounts of time that you would recommend women to try these approaches a few minutes a day, several times a day? What do you feel works best? or What does research suggest?



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Yeah, the amazing thing is we you don't have to go on a two hour retreat or a two week Silent Retreat to see the benefits of this. You actually the exercises I teach my clients that many of which are in the in the book, Pregnancy brain hardly take five minutes at a time. And as long as you do them consistently throughout the day. You will see the benefits of it and I think that makes it also very accessible that despite craziness in the business of life, and we can tif that in to our day to day as well.

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And some of these exercises are things that you could do just when you're sitting in a chair or sitting at a desk, and just take a few minutes to try to relax. Is that right?

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Absolutely. Yep. Many of them you can even do in the car while you're driving without it affecting your ability to concentrate on the road. There are very simple exercises to do. It's just a matter of re adjusting the way we understand our bodies. And trusting that it's not in doing it once but in doing it and making it a habit like brushing your teeth, that we see impact in the long term benefit

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for sure. Can you give some examples of some woman you've worked with?

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Yeah, sure. I actually just finished up working with a woman who was at risk for gestational hypertension after a previous pregnancy will severe hypertension and preeclampsia who will were, you know, she came into our work together having experienced trauma from her previous delivery, grief from losing the babies prior to our work together, complete distrust in her body, not believing that she could carry a pregnancy and deliver a healthy baby but having the deep desire to want to have another child. And through our work together, we were not only able to release that grief in that trauma, but help her actually keep her blood pressure down to the point where her medical team could see the effects of it. At the appointment itself, when she would go there, she'd be nervous and her blood pressure would be so high and she was already flagged as somebody who, okay we're going to intervene very quickly because of your history. And she would I love these messages from her. She said no, no, wait, let me try something and she would be one of our exercises. And 5/10 minutes later, her blood pressure was completely, completely normal. And her entire medical team was just shocked to see such quick around with her blood pressure and thankful that we didn't need to intervene any more than that, in order to for her to carry her her next baby who she did beautifully back to meet her virtually over email two days ago. It's amazing.



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I think that's very powerful story again, high blood pressure is a serious problem for many women. And to point out that, yes, it is very possible through exercise and to stress management, as you suggest, that can have a big impact and be very helpful. It's very safe. Exactly, exactly. Are there any other particular highlights of your book that you'd like to share?

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I think the other piece of it that we hadn't gotten into is the stress that comes from medical care. There's an entire chapter of the book, Chapter Two on how to make sure you build a team that you trust but also very intimately trusts you. A lot of the clients that I work with come from a background of knowing something was wrong. In this case, the client that I shared with earlier, she knew her blood pressure was creeping up and feel right and she wasn't taken seriously. And a lot of the women that I work with have that experience of being waved off, oh, you're just being anxious go relax, everything's fine when she knows something is wrong. And that removes the trust in her body and it removes the trust in her care. And so the next time that she's pregnant, appointments are terrifying. And you know, the clients that I work with all require Western medicine medicalized care, I don't work with clients necessarily who would be low risk or you know, deliver at home and can work with a midwife or alone and that would be enough. And so it's critical for my clients to be able to trust the medical system. Again, know, if I say something, you're going to take me seriously. And I'm going to get the best care possible for myself and for my child. And so there's a huge piece of that puzzle of being able to trust your instincts if the care you're receiving is not good enough to be able to go and get a second opinion or to switch medical providers, even mid pregnancy and how important that is not just for your sanity, but it actually impacts pregnancy health as well. And so that chapter really goes into how that happens. And what a profound effect even that care team can have on pregnancy outcomes outside of its medical intervention.

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And I think as you say, if this if your approach is able to help people with high risk pregnancies who may be in very stressful situations, and very strong evidence that will help people with lesser, less stressful situations as well.

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Absolutely.

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Well, thank you so much for joining us. Again. Parijat Deshpande is the best selling author of pregnancy brain, a mind body approach to stress management during high risk pregnancy. Thanks so much for joining us. Would you like to share your website with everyone?



23:02

Yeah, sure. Thank you for having me. My website is my full name.com. It's parijatdeshpande.com And from there, you can learn a little bit about what I do as well as get a link to the book as well.

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Great. Thanks so much.

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Thank you.

