

The agony of anticipation

At 37 weeks, a baby is considered full term. At 37 weeks, that baby's mother is usually done with being pregnant. I took a survey of my friends on Facebook and determined that most women agree that the last few weeks of pregnancy are agonizing. The question I posed was this: "Not sure what's more perplexing - the first 16 weeks of pregnancy or the last three or four. Let's take a poll, moms: Reply "A" if first trimester's sworn secrecy, despite ever-present nausea frustrated you more or "B" if the uncomfortable waiting game of the final stretch (including the marks of the same name) was tougher to take." Of the twenty-two women who responded, fourteen voted "B." Two of the women who chose "A" had premature babies, who thank God, are now happy and healthy at home, just like the children of the other women.

So, what is it that makes those last few weeks so difficult?

First, it's the physical discomfort. At 37 weeks, I looked, felt, and moved like the Stay-Puft marshmallow man from Ghostbusters. Ever expanding and fluffier than a banana cream pie, I found it taking longer and longer each day to waddle from my classroom to the bathroom during the five minute break between our one hour classes. My feet had disappeared, which meant I could splurge on a pedicure and, like a Greek goddess, received daily assistance fastening my sandals. The baby's feet had settled into my ribcage, the head into the lower part of my spine, as the elbows danced across my belly. I consumed strange combinations (Papa John's breadsticks, Sprite, and Swedish Fish) and quantities (an entire large order of Five Guy's fries) of food, knowing full well my gluttony would only lead to indigestion. I was averaging an hour of sleep each night.

The sleep loss had little to do with the acrobatics occurring in my womb or heartburn. It was worry. What if something is wrong with the baby? What if I don't make it to the hospital on time? What if my water breaks in front of my classroom? What if I never have this baby, and I'm pregnant FOREVER? Despite this being my second child, I spent a tremendous amount of time in the hospital and doctor's office in the three weeks before I had the baby.

The baby's movements had slowed, so we had to ensure there was enough amniotic fluid.

My first baby was nearly 10pounds, so we needed to check the size of this one with a sonogram.

Braxton Hicks contractions made me think I was in labor - I wasn't.

I thought my water broke - it didn't.

The more I agonized over the wait, the longer it seemed to take.

When a mother is waiting to have her baby, though, she isn't the only one who is anxious. If she's lucky like me, the father of the child is ready to drop everything when the baby decides to arrive, even if it's just another false alarm. Grandparents, family and friends also can't wait to meet the new little one. "Baby yet?" text messages and emails crowd inboxes. Upon arrival at work, co-workers exclaim, "You still haven't had that baby!" as though you were unaware. As a teacher, my students offered their own commentary, such as, "You look like a hippo." Total strangers dispense labor-inducing tips or say, "You must be due any day now. You look like you're about to pop!" Worst of all are the horrific play-by-plays of other people's birth experiences or unsolicited parenting advice from people who would not ordinarily speak to you if it weren't for your giant belly. Most people mean well when they express their musings about the impending birth, but for many pregnant women, comments about their appearance or the fact that they are still pregnant only add to their frustration. When I see a woman who appears to be nearing the end of her pregnancy, I smile at her and I tell her with my eyes, "Everything will be okay."

Perhaps the most perplexing aspect of late pregnancy is not knowing when your child will arrive. As hard as it is to accept, babies will arrive when they need to arrive, be it early, late, or when a mother and doctor mutually decide that medical intervention is best to ensure a safe delivery. Some women schedule C-sections or inductions, but even those situations don't always work out as planned. I was induced the first time, since the baby was overdue, and was scheduled to be induced the second time since another big baby was anticipated. Instead, my second child

decided to show up a few days before the scheduled induction. As you can imagine, that was fine with me.

Like everything good and bad in life, the anxiety of the last few weeks of pregnancy are part of God's plan. Some women love being pregnant. For the most part, I did. But, it's an experience that must end, even when it feels like it never will. The discomfort we feel in those last few weeks cues our bodies and minds to detach ourselves from being pregnant and prepare for birth and motherhood. Mothers become so desperate to see their unborn children that they will suffer anything to arrive at that point of first contact and will continue to make sacrifices for their children throughout their lives. It's God's way of allowing us to transition from caring for a life within us to caring for a life outside of us.

Do I miss being pregnant? A little. Most women do miss having that big, round belly and the feeling that a life is growing inside of them. The smiles from strangers and ability to cut to the front of just about any bathroom line were nice perks, too. But, when I think back to those agonizing last few weeks of anticipation and look at the beautiful baby in my arms, I'm in a much happier place.