

Enhancing a Woman's Motivation to Change

Factors affecting a pregnant woman's motivation

- **Women want what is best for their baby**
- **Women may be embarrassed or afraid to acknowledge their use of substances during pregnancy or the extent of their use.** Shame, guilt, fear they will lose custody of their children and/or be subject to other legal consequences may prevent women from acknowledging their use.
- **Failure to stop or reduce her substance use is an indicator of the severity of a woman's addiction** – not a lack of concern regarding her unborn child.
- **A woman may feel hopeless and/or have little confidence in her ability to change!** It's likely that she has already tried to reduce or stop her use and may feel discouraged.
- **Pregnant substance using women often have multiple problems.** Many women who abuse substances have a history of childhood physical/sexual/emotional abuse and may also have a mental health disorder such as depression or anxiety. They are also more likely to have financial, legal and interpersonal problems; to have poor nutrition and self care habits; and may engage in other risky behaviors which put them at risk to experience violence or injury and/or acquire HIV and other STDs. Because of the multiple stressors they are experiencing, it may be even more difficult for them to change risky behaviors.
- **Risks associated with maternal substance use continue beyond delivery.** Parents of young children need to be alert, available, use good judgment and be able to respond quickly in an emergency. A woman's ability to perform these tasks is compromised if she is under the influence. Use prior to pregnancy is often an indicator of what to expect postpartum. Most women resume their use within 3 months after childbirth.

Techniques to enhance her motivation to change

1. **Communicate respect for her.** Society places considerable stigma on women who use – especially those who use during pregnancy. In all likelihood, she already feels ashamed & may be reluctant or fearful to acknowledge her use. **LISTEN rather than TELL her what to do. AVOID LECTURING, SHAMING or THREATENING.**
2. **Help her perceive a discrepancy between where she is and where she wants to be.** Provide factual information regarding optimal prenatal care and behaviors that contribute towards positive birth outcomes. Help women identify those behaviors they need to change as well as what help and support they need in order to do so.
3. **Avoid argumentation; it can lead to resistance.** Resistance is an individual's reaction to what they perceive to be a threatening interpersonal interaction. You can evoke resistance by being disrespectful or threatening an individual's self esteem. Women who use substances often have low self esteem and may be sensitive to real or perceived slights. A non-judgmental approach that conveys acceptance reduces the likelihood of resistance; however, be prepared to experience some degree of resistance from your patients regardless of what approach you adopt.
4. **Openly discuss ambivalence.** No matter how motivated a woman is to stop her use, there is always some degree of ambivalence about doing so. Even if she is determined to stop she may be ambivalent about making other changes that are necessary for her to do so – for example, ending a relationship with a partner who uses or leaving her children to enter treatment. Substance use may be a means of coping that provides relief or the promise of relief from emotional difficulties. Individual's perceptions shift gradually - women who do not initially perceive their use as problematic need time to shift their perceptions.
5. **Enhance her feelings of self efficacy.** Individuals move towards change only when they feel they have a **chance of success.** Help women develop confidence that they can change – it's likely she may have already tried and now feels discouraged. Encourage and support her efforts to care for herself and her unborn child. Appreciate incremental treatment goals but continue to encourage recovery. Let her know that, to provide optimal parenting and child care, it is critical she remain abstinent after delivery.