



What would *you* do in an
unintended pregnancy?



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The Stress Test

If ever there was a topic of conversation that would divide opinion or draw an awkward silence, this is probably it:

Abortion.

There, we've said it.

How does it make you feel?

Or would you rather we changed the subject?

This is the reason why there is a large gap in our understanding of important issues that will potentially have a dramatic impact on our lives and relationships. Especially the issue of unintended pregnancy. The Stress Test is a 45-minute seminar designed to fill this gap. We aim to stress test people's beliefs about what they would want if they were in an unintended pregnancy and provide knowledge and a useful framework for thinking it all through. There is a quick quiz, short video presentations and guided group discussions.

Have you ever wondered how you would handle the situation?

We are not a campaign against abortion and do not want to see it made illegal. The seminar has been designed by the team behind The Post Abortion Course who, for 25 years, have been supporting women after having abortions. In our groups, we speak about the issues that we do not see reflected anywhere else. Many on our courses have said that if they had known more about these issues, they might have handled their situations better. Or may not even have become pregnant in the first place.

The Stress Test has therefore been designed to reveal these issues and educate participants about the causes and effects of unintended pregnancy with the aim of helping them lessen the chances of it in their own lives. As it is so taboo, there is a lot of false information out there, so we thought we would start with a quiz.

START THE QUIZ! 

The Stress Test Quiz

1. What percentage of pregnancies are unintended?

- A. 10%
 - B. 45%
 - C. 25%
 - D. 5%
-

2. What percentage of births are as a result of an unintended pregnancy?

- A. 33%
 - B. 15%
 - C. 5%
 - D. 20%
-

3. What percentage of women will have an abortion in their lifetime?

- A. 10%
 - B. 42%
 - C. 34%
 - D. 22%
-

4. What percentage of abortions are due to medical reasons such as disability or foetal abnormality?

- A. 60%
- B. 45%
- C. 15%
- D. 2%

5. What is the most common cause of contraceptive failure?

- A. Wrong pill prescribed by medical professional
 - B. Health issue interfered with pill's effectiveness (such as taking antibiotics)
 - C. Human error
 - D. Faulty manufacture
-

6. Overall, how effective is the contraceptive pill?

- A. 91% effective
 - B. 76% effective
 - C. 99% effective
 - D. 100% effective
-

7. Overall, how effective are condoms as a contraceptive?

- A. 54% effective
 - B. 75% effective
 - C. 99% effective
 - D. 82% effective
-

8. What percentage of couples undergoing IVF succeed in giving birth?

- A. 30%
- B. 70%
- C. 50%
- D. 15%

The Answers

All statistics used in the Stress Test come from well-established sources such as the Office for National Statistics and the National Health Service, or other institutions and academic studies. See Endnotes for references.

Q1. What percentage of pregnancies are unintended?

Answer: 45%.¹

Q2. What percent of births are as a result of an unintended pregnancy?

Answer: 33%.²

One third of all children born in hospital are the result of an unintended pregnancy.

Q3. What percent of women will have an abortion in their lifetime?

Answer: 34%.³

One in three women will have an abortion in their lifetime.

Q4. What percent of abortions are due to medical reasons such as disability or foetal abnormality?

Answer: 2%.⁴

Many people think in terms of disability or rape, but actually these situations only account for a small number of abortions.

Q5. What is the most common cause of contraceptive failure?

Answer: Human Error.⁵

Q6. Overall, how effective is the contraceptive pill?

Answer: 91% effective.⁶

Q7. Overall, how effective are condoms as a contraceptive?

Answer: 82% effective.⁷

Q8. What percentage of couples undergoing IVF succeed in giving birth?

Answer: 30%.^{8,9}

What did you find the most surprising?

Most say:

45%



of all pregnancies are unintended. This will happen to nearly half of you reading this. If you are a man, nearly half of you might have a partner who at some point comes to you and says she is pregnant. This is for you as well.

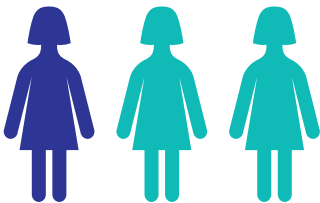
ALSO

Contraception is not as effective as we think it is. According to the NHS:

The Pill is only **91%** effective

Meaning: If 100 women take oral contraceptives over the course of one year, 9 will fall pregnant.

ALSO



1/3

will have an abortion

What is to me the most mind-boggling statistic is that half (48%) of women aged 15-44 in the US have had an unintended pregnancy. So when you walk down the street in New York, half of the women you see will have had an unintended pregnancy.¹⁰

Professor James Trussell, Professor of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University and past director of the Office of Population Research.

PART 1

THINKING CLEARLY

It's easier to think more clearly about a situation when you are not in that situation.

As we've seen from the figures in the quiz, nearly half of you reading this will experience an unintended pregnancy at some point, either yourself or you might have a partner come to you and say, "I'm pregnant, what should we do?"

Most of the people we meet were in complete shock when they found out they were pregnant. They never thought they'd be in that position. They also say that if they'd known more beforehand, and been better prepared, they might not have got pregnant in the first place.

That's why we created the Stress Test, and why we think it's beneficial to openly discuss these issues. Let's start by looking at some of the issues that always come up in our groups.

"How did this happen..."

1. Most people thought they were using effective contraception

The first one – head and shoulders above the rest – is "how did this happen?". This may appear obvious, but the reason why the women we meet were in shock is because most thought that they were using effective contraception, so they just couldn't understand how it happened. This sense of shock made it hard for the women to think clearly about what they really wanted to do. What made it even harder was the conflicting feelings that can suddenly appear.

The first point that we'd like to get across is that, unfortunately, contraception isn't nearly as effective as we'd like it to be. If we lived in a controlled setting, or in a laboratory, some methods of contraception would be nearly 100% effective. But we don't live in a lab, and life gets in the way.

Contraception does give us partial control over what we want to happen, but it doesn't give us *total* control, because we are all vulnerable to human error.

91%
effective

If 100 women take oral contraceptives over the course of one year, 9 will fall pregnant.

82%
effective

If 100 women use condoms as the main method for a year, 18 will fall pregnant.

2. An unexpected desire to protect the pregnancy

Another issue that always comes up on the course is an unexpected desire to protect the pregnancy. Many women tell us they felt an unexpected, strong connection to the pregnancy, as soon as they found out. This can make them want to seriously consider giving birth, even if they had always assumed that they'd have an abortion.

For example, women tell us how they'd do things like make an appointment at the abortion clinic, but at the same time, give up drinking to protect the foetus.

This doesn't happen for all women – some don't make this connection, and have no problem with their decision, but many do. As a result they can be left feeling unsure of what to do next. Many women report that they couldn't find anyone objective to help them talk it all through. This lack of support and encouragement left them feeling boxed in, with little choice other than abortion. Not quite the free choice they'd assumed it would be. Many say they felt they had no choice at all.

3. What do I believe for my own life?

People often struggle, because they'd always thought about abortion as a theoretical 'issue' to hold a view on, rather than something that might actually happen to them personally. So it's helpful to think:

"What do I believe for my own life?"

It's easy to go through life thinking either: "Me? I would never have an abortion" or "I'd be perfectly happy having an abortion", but then feel totally different when you are in the situation. Also, people often think more about extreme situations like rape, disability or a foetal abnormality. But actually, those extremes only represent a small proportion of cases.

It's more helpful to think about the **most likely** scenario, which is getting pregnant without planning to, because contraception fails. Therefore a more helpful question to consider is:

What would I want to do if I find myself pregnant because of contraceptive failure?

This is the question we want to focus on in the Stress Test. We want to create a space for you to figure out what you believe, before you're potentially in a situation where you're being pressured by other people's views, and also by the pressure of time. We want to give you some strategies on how best to ensure you feel you **do** have a genuine choice should you find yourself in an unintended pregnancy.

Why do so many become pregnant?

The majority of people in an unintended pregnancy believed they were using contraception effectively. One survey showed that at the time of unintended pregnancy 62% of women reported using a contraceptive method.¹¹ Other statistics show that nearly 100% of people aged 18+ have knowledge of, and access to, contraception.¹² So why do so many experience an unintended pregnancy?

The truth is that we are all not as rational or controlled as we would like to think. People often say that the pregnancy "happened" to them by "circumstances beyond their control", or they "fell pregnant". For some there can be a desire to take a gamble with their fertility, just to see if a pregnancy results (both women and men can do this). Sometimes there can be conscious (or subconscious) desire to see if pregnancy might resolve relationship or life issue such as job or career. We have heard many seemingly impulsive accounts from otherwise highly controlled and methodical individuals.

Also, no method of contraception is 100% effective. Failure rates, even under perfect conditions, can be higher than we realise.

A useful point to make here is that this can happen to anyone. It is not a small number, or a certain type of person at risk – it can happen to anyone no matter how clever, well-educated, or methodical. We are all subject to human error – it is part of being human.

4. The role of men



Over the years, we've heard about one particular issue which causes the most pain to the women on our course, and that's the reaction of their partners when they first told them about the pregnancy. The partners often seem to withdraw, try to avoid the subject, or assume she'll have an abortion without any room for discussion.

In this next section, we're going to look at the role of men in an unintended pregnancy. Unfortunately, this is an area where things often go badly wrong, particularly in that first conversation. Part of the reason can be shock and poor communication.

Some women will go and have an abortion without talking with their partner. But in the majority of cases, what usually happens is this:

She says: **"I'm pregnant, what do you think WE should do?"**

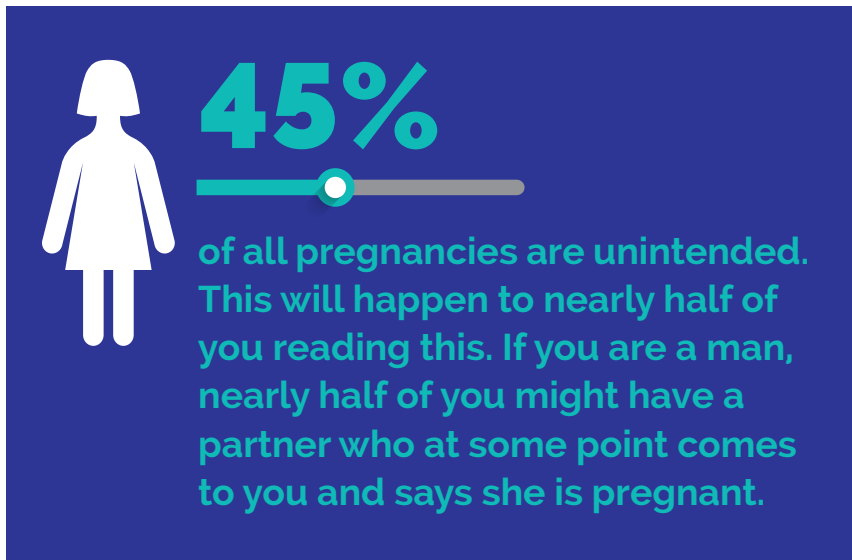
He replies: **"I will do whatever YOU want to do."**

At face value, this sounds kind of supportive. In reality, it's occupying a neutral ground that avoids responsibility either way. As the women reflect later on, they come to see the response as a withdrawal from the relationship, and clearly, on one level it is – it can feel like they're saying "I don't want a child with you". This lack of support leaves them feeling that they have no option other than an abortion.

So, what is the role of men when they're faced with a pregnancy they weren't expecting? What do they actually want and how could they be supportive? This is important because it's often the biggest factor in the woman's decision. Here are a few things to remember if you ever find yourself having this conversation:

A. Talk twice or more

When a woman breaks the news, in some ways she's at an advantage, because she's already had some time to process it. This is important, because we find that women often view their partners first reaction as the most important one, whereas men often need some time to get their heads around it and may change their minds with time.



We appreciate that for men the pregnancy is a massive shock, so they're not going to be thinking clearly when they first react. For her, it is not about promising to stay together for ever, it is more about knowing whether he'd want to be involved if they gave birth.

Therefore, it is important not to take a first reaction as a final one. Talk twice or more before making a decision.

B. Think about where you are in life and what you really want

It's helpful to think about all your feelings, about the pregnancy, for a few days, even the ones that conflict with one another. It can also help to write them down. Many people we speak with, both men and women, were surprised by their automatic expectation to want a termination. At the time, they viewed it as their only choice, and they later regretted not giving more consideration to giving birth.

Perhaps this view of abortion was embedded during earlier years at school and not updated to take into account how they were actually feeling, or their greater resilience as adults. For example, you normally have a lot more options as an adult, in relation to things like jobs, money and relationships, than you do in your teens.

C. Talking together about what both would want

It is important to talk together about what you **both** would want. In our culture, abortion is presented as a woman's right to choose. Legally it's entirely her decision - the man has no say other than what she will agree to. This cultural and legal emphasis can leave men feeling estranged from the entire experience, not surprisingly, and also leave them feeling that any emotions or views they do have are somehow not valid. It is also true that, for many men, there is an unspoken assumption that she will automatically have an abortion.

If you find yourself in this situation one day, as a man, you don't want to have any regrets. We'd recommend expressing how you feel, rather than staying silent or withdrawing.

How to talk about what is important to you

It is not about making a pact to have an abortion if she gets pregnant. It's about the woman having a genuine choice, between **both** options, and being supported by her partner, **whatever** she chooses to do. This conversation, about what you would both want, is a lot easier to have before anyone is actually pregnant. That is why we believe it's helpful to talk this through with a partner, ahead of time.

What could this look like in real life? Here is how we might imagine a better response than 'whatever you want':

She says: 'I'm pregnant, what do you think we should do?'

He replies (after getting over the shock):

'Don't worry, we'll figure this out somehow. How are you feeling about it? What are you thinking? Do you want to keep the baby, or do you want a termination? Look, I'll be there whatever we end up doing. Let's think about our options and find a way through this together'.

With this answer, it doesn't follow that the woman would necessarily continue with the pregnancy, but at least she might feel it could be a genuine option.

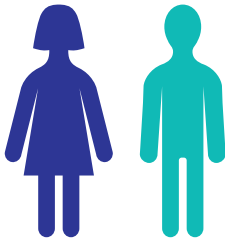
How realistic would it be for a man to respond like this? We've found that men are often supportive of the **concept** of a woman's 'right to choose', in the legal sense, but not always supportive if that choice includes continuing with a pregnancy they weren't expecting. So, if a woman does want that option, she'll need to negotiate this in advance.

If you're a man, how would you respond if it happens to you?

If you're a woman, what would you want him to answer? Or would you regard it as your decision alone?

5. Planning for the future, understanding fertility

Have I thought about when I would like to have children, and built this into my life plan? Have I registered that fertility, especially a woman's, declines drastically faster than is commonly realised, and would I be willing to use this information to help me decide when I would like to commit to a long-term relationship?



Our culture tends to focus on when we do **not** want to have children, which can leave little room for thinking about when we **do** want to have children.

Also, there can be a big difference in the way that men and women think about this. We've noticed, talking with the men in our groups, that they tend to delay thinking about commitment and families until their mid-30's, not fully appreciating, that this is the age when a woman might not be able to conceive easily.

For example, at 35 years old, a woman is considerably less fertile than at 25.

Men can also be less fertile than they think as they get older. Studies have shown that there's a 30% reduction in men's fertility after the age of 40.

So it is helpful to ask a question, something like this:

“Have I thought about if I would like to have children, and built this into my life plan? Have I registered that fertility, especially a woman’s, declines drastically from the mid-thirties and if I want to have children, would I be willing to use this information to help me decide when I would like to commit to a long-term relationship?”

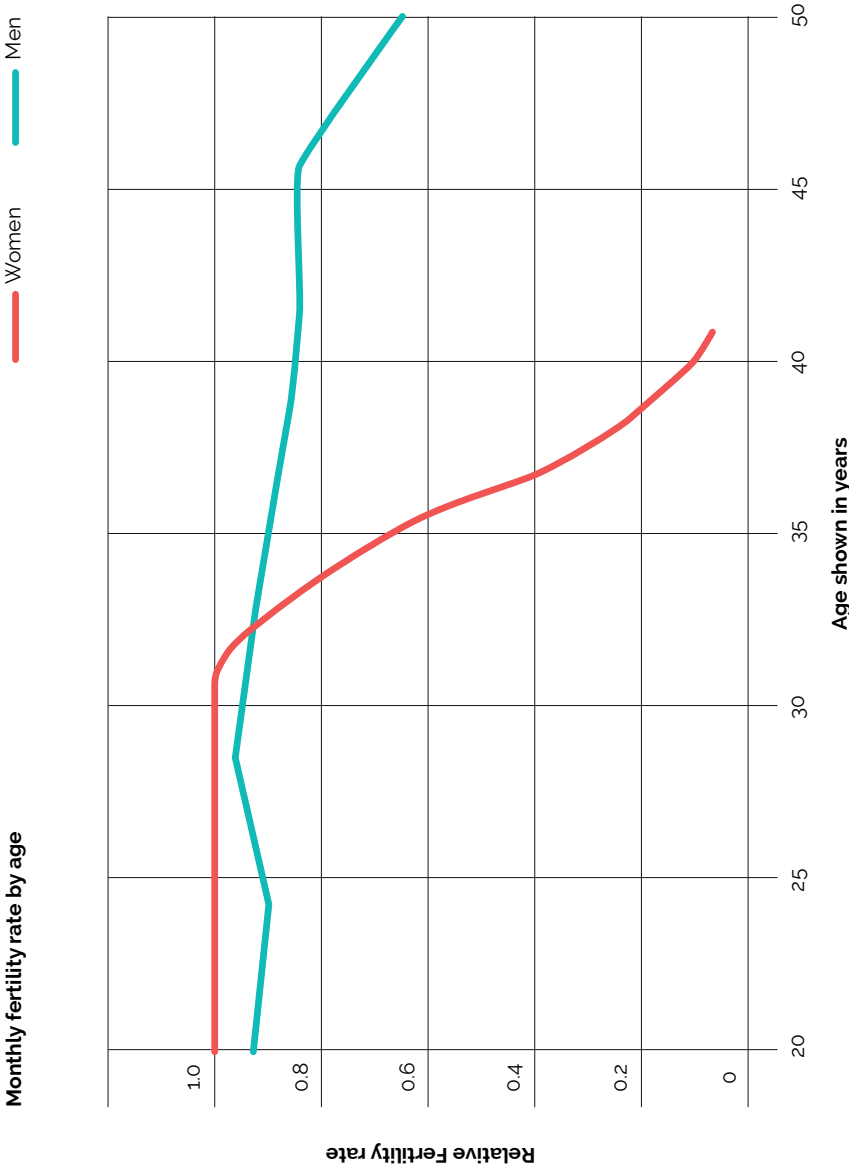
In our groups, we've noticed that both women and men can be surprisingly ill-informed about this. Many either, don't appear to understand how their fertility will change, or just don't want to think about it.

Perhaps people assume that IVF, or other fertility treatments, will provide options later in life, but the medical reality is that these treatments fail for 70% of couples.

Having seen first-hand the heartache that this can cause in later life, we believe it's important not to ignore this issue, and instead plan to have children, if you want them, at an age when the whole process is normally easier.

Our hope is that each of you will have the number of children you want, when you want them, even if your decision is not to have any. But, given the sheer likelihood of facing a pregnancy you hadn't planned for, it's helpful to engage with some of these issues so you're prepared if this happens to you.

Male and female fertility ^{13 14}



PART 2

COMMUNICATING WELL

Talking together as a couple

If we discovered tomorrow that we were pregnant, how would we react?

Given the sheer likelihood of facing a pregnancy you hadn't planned, it's helpful to engage with some of these issues, so you're prepared if it happened.

We'd also encourage everyone to have the courage to raise these subjects with one another, and not base your beliefs on one conversation. If you go through life thinking this would **never** happen to you, you could end up in a situation where an abortion feels like the only option.

It can be better to think: "If I get pregnant, I'd want the option to choose between giving birth and having an abortion", and then talking this through with your partner before the situation arises.

For some people, starting this sort of conversation might feel awkward. The topics might touch on areas of your relationship you have not explored before, so we have set out some questions below to help you.

The key question to discuss as a couple is:

“If we discovered tomorrow that we were pregnant, how would we react?”

You might find it easier to begin the conversation with some of these other questions:

- What are our **expectations** for our relationship?
- How are we **feeling** about the contraceptive measures we are taking? Do our current plans for contraception provide us with the best chance in avoiding an unintended pregnancy?
- What are our **assumptions** if we faced an unintended pregnancy?
- What are our **thoughts and feelings** around having children, or starting a family?
- What are my **expectations** of myself if we found out we were pregnant?
- What would be your **assumptions** about me if we found out we were pregnant?
- What if I **felt differently** when it comes to facing an unintended pregnancy (to the way I assumed I would feel) and want to consider options other than a termination?
- What if you **felt differently** to the way you assumed?
- How could we continue our relationship and reach an **agreed choice** in the matter?

And then you might want to also ask yourselves:

- What are our **values** with regard to having children?
- At what **age** would we have children?
- Would we place a baby for **adoption**? Are we willing to explore what this option means and how it will impact upon our future?
- If we found in the future that we were unable to conceive a child, would we consider adopting?

Summary

It is important to emphasise that from a man's perspective having these discussions does not mean he is agreeing to have a baby whenever his partner wants.

From a woman's perspective having this discussion does not mean that she is agreeing to have an abortion.

The aim is to agree that in an unintended pregnancy they would both have a conversation about their best plan of action and at that point the woman would take into account what the man says. This is about giving a woman the right to have that genuine choice, and about men being supportive and sharing responsibility for contraception and the consequences of a pregnancy. Asking these probing questions helps you to understand your personal values, your expectations and assumptions within your relationship. If you explore these issues together, you will be better equipped to think clearly and communicate well if you ever faced this dilemma.

Thinking like this may limit your choices in the future:

If I became pregnant I would want an abortion.



Creating more options:



If I became pregnant I would want to choose between abortion and giving birth.



I would support which ever choice you would wish to make including if you wished to give birth.

PART 3

PARENTAL/CAREGIVER DISCUSSIONS

It's easier to think more clearly about a situation when you are not in that situation.

What would you do?



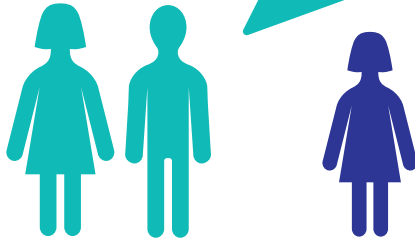
Mum (or dad) I'm pregnant.

The statistics that we gave in the quiz at the beginning of this booklet show that this is a relevant conversation to have with both teens and young adults. But where to start? This is not about trying to get your teenager to avoid sex or 'be careful' about contraception. It is about acknowledging the possibility of unintended pregnancy at some point in their lives, and working out what you would want and what support you would be prepared to offer in the situation.

Work out what you would want first

We appreciate that this can feel like an awkward subject, so as a first step we would recommend parents/caregivers discuss this issue between themselves without their teenage/young adult children present. A single parent/caregiver may find it useful to discuss the issue with another parent or trusted friend.

We love you and won't reject you, whatever happens, including if you find yourself dealing with an unintended pregnancy.



The following questions may be useful to consider:

- How would you react if your young daughter told you she was pregnant? Would you want her to have an abortion?
- How would you react if your young son told you his girlfriend was pregnant?
- What are your expectations, assumptions and even prejudices about this situation?
- Would you be able/willing to offer your support if your daughter wanted to give birth? Might you be willing to say you would adopt the child and raise them as one of your own? Options like this would increase the choices available to your child.
- Would placing the child forward for adoption be an option?

Avoidance of the subject often leaves teens or young adults isolated. Not wishing to upset their parents or fearing their criticism or control, they may feel panicked into having a secret abortion. Enabling an open discussion might help them reach a decision with the support they need and value.

So many of the people on our courses who had an abortion when they were teenagers or young adults said they felt they had no one to turn to, and no choice other than an abortion. If parents offer their acceptance and support,

no matter what the circumstance, they are in effect opening choices for their child. At the very least they are creating a safe space where they could come in an emergency to make a decision in a supportive environment.

A supportive statement might sound like this:

"Life is difficult and things may happen that cause you confusion, doubt, and lead you to panic. Please know that we are here to help you, whatever it is you are experiencing. We want to encourage you to come to us even if that situation is to do with your sex life and includes an unintended pregnancy. This may be difficult for you to hear but we want you to know that you can talk things through with us."

You may also add if you have agreed this in advance:

We would support whatever choice you wanted to make at the time. If you wanted to give birth we would help and support you.

Parents can be fearful of an open discussion around the issue of pregnancy, perhaps fearing that talking about this might encourage a child to be sexually active. We believe that talking about pregnancy and abortion is unlikely to promote sexual activity - at the very least, this discussion might create options and choices in the future. It would be an opportunity for parents to impart knowledge, show support and help a teenager or young adult verbalise their own expectations, and gain skills in expressing these both to themselves and others.

We understand that an unintended pregnancy, if it ever happened, would be a difficult life-changing situation for all concerned. The challenge we have for parents is to work out what they would like to communicate to their children. Conversations such as these will help all concerned to make an informed choice with an assurance of support.

The Good News

The good news is that teenage pregnancy is not as common as it used to be or that we sometimes think it is. However, the highest risk of unintended pregnancy is amongst young adults (20-25), so having this conversation might help your child in the future as they grow into adulthood.

Endnotes

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7. NHS Choices, 2020. *How effective is contraception at preventing pregnancy?* [online] Available at: <<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/contraception/how-effective-contraception/>> Perfect use: 98% effective. This means that 2 in 100 women whose partners use a condom will get pregnant in a year. Typical use: around 82% effective. This means around 18 in 100 women will get pregnant in a year. [Accessed 5 June 2021].
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Pregnancy is a fact of life. Whether you're sexually active now or intend to wait till you're in a permanent or more committed relationship, you are very likely to have to think about what happens next when someone becomes pregnant – even if it's simply because your best friend or your sister or brother are in that situation. The Stress Test will get you thinking in advance, so that you're ready for it!

For more information please see:

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