

10 Ways to Support Her When She is Unexpectedly Expecting

I had been brought up to believe that life is always a gift, but it certainly didn't feel like one when I gazed in shock at a positive pregnancy test. As a mom who had my first baby in college, I know that an unexpected pregnancy can sometimes bring fear, shame, and doubt.

However, I also know that an unexpected pregnancy can bring joy, excitement, awe, gratitude, and deeper love than I knew was possible—not to mention the little bundle who inspires these sentiments! About nine months after looking at that pregnancy test, I received the very best gift I have ever been given: my daughter, Maria*.

An unexpected pregnancy might be confusing along the way, but life—though at times difficult—is ultimately beautiful. Perhaps one of your friends has become pregnant unexpectedly. As someone who has been there, I encourage you to support your friend in her new journey of being a mother.

Not sure how to help or what to say? Here are ten tips:

1. Be available.

An unexpected pregnancy can send a woman into crisis mode. If your friend just found out she is pregnant, she may not be thinking clearly, and she may feel she has no control over anything at the moment.

Be aware of how she is responding to you. Listen to her and let her know you love her and are there for her any time she needs you. Don't pass judgment on her either interiorly or through words or body language.

2. Respond positively.

When a woman experiencing challenging circumstances confides she is pregnant, the reaction of the first person she tells tends to set the tone for her decision-making. Avoid responding with shock or alarm, and be calm and understanding. Let her know you're there for her and that it's going to be okay. Pay close attention to her emotional state, and act accordingly.

Depending on where she is emotionally, it may or may not be helpful to congratulate her at that time. However, it is always important to affirm that every person's life—including her child's and her own—is precious and beautiful no matter the circumstances.

3. Be honest.

The journey through an unexpected pregnancy is not easy, and it's okay if you don't know the perfect words to say. Just be honest. Let her know you are there for her, and ask her how she is feeling and how you can support her.

It's a good way to open the door to communicate, and she may be grateful for the opportunity to talk freely with someone. She might become emotional at times, but be patient—let's not forget hormones; the struggle is real.

4. Offer specific help.

Don't be afraid to ask her if she needs help with anything or to make specific offers to help. For example, you might offer to help with cleaning, finding a good doctor, or running to the store to pick up the one food that won't make her feel sick. But remember to read her cues, and make sure you're not being overbearing.

5. Set up a support system.

In addition to the standard baby registry, you can help her get other kinds of support by lining up much-needed, practical help. Think outside the box. Food = love, so take advantage of websites that allow friends and family to sign up to make meals, send food deliveries, or simply donate money. Some websites can even help organize other assistance like rides to the doctor, babysitting other children she may have, or help around the house. You can also look into what programs and assistance may be sponsored by your local diocesan pastoral care or Respect Life offices.

6. Tell her she is beautiful.

She may be feeling physically, spiritually, and emotionally drained with this pregnancy. Take the time to reassure her of her beauty, both inside and out, especially when morning sickness might make her feel otherwise.

7. Help her recharge and relax.

First-time mothers may have difficulty crossing that threshold into their new life as a mother. Your friend may be fearful that her life is "over," so help her see it's okay—good, actually—to still focus on herself sometimes. Even though she is a mother, she will still continue to be a woman, so affirm that it's healthy and important to take care of herself—not only physically, but emotionally, as well. Help her to do things she really enjoys. Take her out for a nice meal, a movie, or a day of pampering.

8. Reassure her it's okay (and good) to be happy.

It can be hard to be happy about a pregnancy that many people see as unfortunate timing at best and totally irresponsible at worst. Even if your friend wants to be happy about her bundle of joy, she may not feel she “deserves” to show that happiness. Get excited about her pregnancy in front of her, and she may just feel comfortable enough to share her own excitement with you.

Also, continue to show your interest and excitement throughout her pregnancy. Ask questions about her developing child. What is she learning at her doctor appointments? What names is she considering? Ask her what she thinks her baby looks like. Does she think they will have her eyes?

9. Encourage her.

Society tends to focus on ways that an unexpected pregnancy can be challenging. Help your friend to think of the benefits. Remind her of the fluttering kicks, somersaults, and maybe even dance moves her son or daughter will be rocking once they grow a little more. With moms' groups and opportunities for play dates, there's a whole new social world to explore. And there are plenty of benefits to being a young mom—like having more energy to chase her kids around.

10. Point out some real-life role models.

Many amazing young mothers and birthmothers have experienced unexpected pregnancies and still followed their dreams. Other women have discovered that, even when unable to follow their lives as planned, something beautiful and good came out of the twists in the road, bringing opportunities, growth, and joy they hadn't imagined.

Point your friend to some of the many websites, blogs, and social media accounts dedicated to supporting young mothers. And let's not forget Mary, whose “yes” to bearing Jesus affected the course of history. The Blessed Mother is a great person to pour her heart out to, and she's a powerhouse of intercessory prayer.

An unexpected pregnancy can be a difficult and frightening time, and it's important that your friend knows you are thinking of her and supporting her. Although the tips mentioned can be helpful, don't forget the most important thing is to pray. Even if it's just a quick two-second prayer, prayer is the most effective way we can help. Pray for her, for her child, and for guidance in how you can give her the best possible support.

Also, pay attention to how your friend feels most loved. One person might appreciate encouraging words, while another might feel more supported if you wash the dishes. Simple things—letting her know that you care and are always ready to listen, that you are

10 Ways to Support Her When She is Unexpectedly Expecting

available to help her, that you are praying for her—can give hope and courage when she might otherwise feel alone. Your support might be the only support she receives. Even if we never know how, the smallest things we do can change someone's life. You can make a difference in her life. Will you?

The author is now a married mother of four who works as an advocate for young mothers facing unexpected pregnancies. She had her first baby in college and is a proud Catholic who supports life in every circumstance and at every stage.

Heartbeat International provides a directory of pregnancy services, which is accessible at www.heartbeatinternational.org/worldwide-directory. You can learn about setting up parish-based support for women who are pregnant and need assistance by visiting the websites for The Gabriel Project (www.gabrielproject.us) and Elizabeth Ministry (www.elizabethministry.com), which have chapters across the country. For more information about how you can help, or for information about help that may be available, such as pregnancy care centers, maternity homes, and other assistance, contact your local diocesan Respect Life office. A list of diocesan Respect Life Ministry offices can be found at www.usccb.org/about/pro-life-activities/diocesan-pro-life-offices.cfm.

*Name changed for privacy.

Copyright © 2015, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington, D.C.