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Pregnancy Violations: Don't Be a Victim

Scary labor stories, probing questions, unsolicited belly-rubbing: How can a mom-to-be handle these pregnancy etiquette violations gracefully?

By [Colette Bouchez](#)
WebMD Feature

If you've ever been pregnant, these scenarios will probably sound familiar to you.

You're waiting for the train, when suddenly you feel a hand reach out and rub your belly -- and it doesn't belong to anyone you know! Or you're in a room full of co-workers waiting for your boss to arrive, when suddenly a colleague looks in your direction and announces loudly, "Do you have to go pee before the meeting starts?"

Indeed, as rude and invasive as all of these pregnancy "etiquette violations" are, you've probably encountered them -- and more.

"I'm convinced that somehow all of the things most people would never think of doing or saying to a stranger, or even a co-worker, immediately pop into their mind when they see a pregnant woman. It's like their social editing button is stuck in the 'off' position," says Gabrielle Brennan, now six months pregnant with her second child.

Indeed, Brennan became so incensed about the unsolicited touching and commentary she received during her first pregnancy -- and later, after her baby was born -- she created GabbyBaby.com, a line of baby, and soon, maternity clothing with slogans designed to circumvent some of these very pregnancy stresses.

"I just took all the snappy come-backs I wished I thought of at the moment, and put them on T-shirts and tops. It makes people stop and think before they open their mouth or reach over and touch you or your baby," says Brennan.

Unwanted Questions

While wearing a T-shirt with a snappy comeback is one answer, San Francisco pregnancy psychologist and author Shoshana Bennett, PhD, says the first step in stopping unwanted behavior is to recognize that you don't have to accept it.

"I think women in general, but pregnant women in particular, feel a certain sense of vulnerability that makes us think that just because someone asks us a question, no matter how inappropriate it is, we have an obligation to answer it. But in fact, this just isn't true," says Bennett, author of the book *Postpartum Depression for Dummies*.

Moreover, she says if you do choose to answer -- and it is your choice -- you don't have to give the play-by-play version; you can say as little as you like.

"The most important thing to realize is that you do not have to answer these questions in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable or leaves you feeling that you said more than you wanted to. Keep remembering you are under no obligation to share your pregnancy specifics, even with family members, unless you want to," says Bennett.

If it feels awkward not to say anything, Bennett suggests giving a positive, but vague, reply. So, for example, if someone asks if your conception was "natural," if you're going to have a C-section, if you plan on breastfeeding, try responding with, "We're just so thrilled we're going to be parents; now what's new in your life?"

"The point is to politely get around the question and then redirect attention back to the other person," says Bennett.

Brennan says her favorite technique is to answer a question with a question. "I like to turn the tables immediately and respond with, 'That's an interesting question -- why do you want to know?' They usually get the message," she says, adding that chances are they won't ask you anything personal again.

Labor Room War Stories

For some of us, it's definitely the "nosy" pregnancy questions that are most annoying. But for others, it's the unsolicited advice that drives us to distraction, particularly the legions of labor horror stories that seem to be on the tip of everyone's tongue the minute your pregnancy becomes apparent.

Brennan says from the moment she opened GabbyBaby.com, she was flooded with letters from women asking for advice on how to put a cease-fire on those labor room war stories.

"Somehow, I think that every woman who sees a pregnant woman feels it's her obligation to pass along the world's most scary labor and delivery stories. Even if it's not their own experience, they still have to let you know everything that could possibly go wrong," says Brennan.

Bennett says the answer is to muster up your courage, be bold, and turn down the unsolicited advice post haste!

"You don't have to be nasty or mean. You can simply interrupt the story and say, 'I know you are a wealth of information about pregnancy, and if I ever have a question you will definitely be the person I call. But every pregnancy is different and every delivery is different, so I'd kind of like to be surprised by what nature has in store for me,'" Brennan notes.

Brennan says she takes a slightly more aggressive approach. "Mothers really need to just say, 'I've heard enough. Thank you so much, but I don't want to hear anymore.' Say it nicely, but say it like you mean it," she says.

The Invasion of the Belly Touchers

While remarks, comments, and unsolicited advice on eating sushi can be irritating, it's not nearly as stressful as the hands-on, touchy-feely familiarity that seems to run rampant during pregnancy.

"It seems as if the moment your pregnancy starts to show, everyone wants to have a feel at you. It's not so bad when it's family or a friend -- but a stranger? Come on. A pregnant woman has to draw the line somewhere, and it should be here," says Stacy Quarty, author of *Frankly Pregnant: A Candid, Week-by-Week Guide to the Unexpected Joys, Raging Hormones, and Common Experiences of Pregnancy*.

Brennan agrees. "During my first pregnancy, I was in Grand Central Station and a total stranger grabbed my stomach, so I grabbed hers back! She said, 'What are you doing?' I replied, 'What are you doing?' I'm happy to say she got the point and walked away, though I think you have to be a bit careful when you do something like that, since you never know how the other person is going to react."

And that's precisely why Bennett says the best approach to this pregnancy stress is to put both a physical and mental distance between yourself and strangers.

"First, you have to realize that because of your size, you may be in closer physical proximity to strangers than you realize, your head may be a respectable distance away, but your stomach may be closer than you think, so you'll probably have to overcompensate by intentionally putting more physical distance between you and other people," says Bennett.

But equally important, she says, is to arm yourself with attitude -- and plenty of it!

"If you're feeling vulnerable and think of your life as an open book that everyone is entitled to read, then you're going to have a hard time keeping hands off your belly," says Bennett. But at the same time, if your attitude, your body language, and your posture all come together to say "I have a right to guard my privacy," then, says Bennett, you also put out a vibe that tells people you are not an object for public display or touching.

"Of course, some will ignore that vibe, either because they are not sensitive to your body cues, or because they just choose to ignore them. But for the most part, it should help reduce a good deal of the inappropriate touching," says Bennett.

Just Say No!

While using clever psychology can help, Brennan reminds us that, be it touching or commentary, it's also appropriate to express your displeasure with how you are being treated.

"It's really OK if sometimes you just have to say, 'Please don't do that, it makes me uncomfortable,'" says Brennan. This, she says, can be a particularly helpful tactic with people you see every day, like co-workers.

Indeed, the most stressful pregnancy situations often occur not with strangers, but with colleagues. It can be hard for a pregnant woman to maintain her privacy without insulting the people she interacts with on a daily basis.

Rachel Weingarten, author of *Corporate and Career Cool*, says maintaining a professional attitude is another smart way to cope.

"You can say no without having to say it, if you simply maintain a strong sense of corporate 'cool' and professionalism," says Weingarten. By maintaining your own sense of professional decorum, she says, you can help co-workers continue to view you as a colleague, and not a pregnant colleague, which in turn can circumvent some of the inappropriate behavior.

Though this won't stop some people from becoming overly familiar, she says, "The more professional your attitude, the more professional decorum they are likely to observe around you."

Bennett agrees but adds this final piece of advice: "It's also important to remember that you don't have to give up the perks of pregnancy, like working from home two days of the week, just to maintain your decorum; just this once, you really are entitled to have it both ways!"

Colette Bouchez is the author of *Your Perfectly Pampered Pregnancy: Health, Beauty and Lifestyle Advice for the Modern Mother-to-Be* and founder and director of www.PamperingMom.com.

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