A Guy's Perspective

by Jerry Hansen

Let me give you the story of a bed rest pregnancy experience from a husband's perspective. When we decided to have our first baby I was in my fourth year of graduate school and my wife was the principal moneymaker in the family while I was concentrating on school and earning a token sum of money as a teaching assistant. We were blessed with having an easy pregnancy and my wife was really enjoying the process and the idea of it all. As with all pregnancies, there was a surge of hormones and the addition of books about pregnancy and childbirth that freaked both of us out a bit and the scary unknown!

Well, the scary unknown became the hellish nightmare reality in one fell swoop on Super Bowl Sunday 1995 (four months into my wife's pregnancy). My wife caught a cold. I sort of groaned about it as she had been sensitive about the impact of the common cold and cold medicines on our unborn child- I attributed the paranoia to those damn pregnancy books. I must admit that I was reluctant to leave the hype preceding the Big Game, but my wife was truly miserable so I said, "Let's go to the walk-in clinic and get you checked out." I knew in my heart that the doctor would prescribe some medicine that would worry my wife as much, if not more than the actual cold. Well, the doctor took my wife's blood pressure and said, "The cold is not the issue that I am concerned about, it is your blood pressure. You had better make an appointment with your OB for tomorrow." Well, you can just imagine how reassuring that felt!

Flash to the next day. After a sleepless night of reading the pregnancy books on high blood pressure and doing some rudimentary research at the University library, we went into the OB's office. I, being the eternal optimist, kept reassuring my wife that it was really no big deal. "I am sure it was just a bum reading because of your cold. You'll be fine in no time." Well the OB took her blood pressure a couple of times and said, "You better call in to your office and let them know that you are done working for a while." "What? What do you mean by a while?"
"I'd say at least two weeks until we can see what is going on here. In the meantime I have a specialist that I am going to refer you to that specializes in high-risk pregnancies."

In that short time period I went from the blissful state of being an armchair quarterback for the Super Bowl to a freaked out husband with a basket case of a wife. We were certain that it was all some horrible mistake and that things would return to normal. Well, in our case it never did return to normal. My wife went from a nice job earning a lot of money to getting about $200 a month in disability pay. We had to set up a bed rest home. And, we had to change our outlook about a lot of things.

It was really fortunate for us that I was in graduate school at the time. My hours were exceptionally flexible at that point in our lives. We lived a lot on the kindness of a few very good friends that really proved their importance in our lives. One came over several times a week just to sit and talk with my wife bringing sandwiches or bagels and broad shoulders on which my wife could lean (providing the sanity that my wife needed by being there just to talk in a way that I couldn't). Another friend gave us a TV to use in the bedroom and went and got a ton of videos for my wife from the library. I had a guy friend that came over to talk from time to time and was more or less a male chauvinist pig and helped drive my wife's blood pressure up (but made me look much better to my wife in comparison!).

The lying on the left side and going to the hospital for twice a week fetal diagnostic outings was our routine for three and a half months. At that point my wife's blood pressure became so unstable that the specialist decided that it was time to stay at the hospital full time until the baby was ready to appear (for three weeks). Our baby was induced and came into the world a month early, but healthy.

The hell that we went through made me a bit hyper-protective of that baby and my wife for a little while after the arrival. You do not realize how much stress you are suffering with sometimes until after the fact. I was sort of the emotional rock through all the pregnancy complications. You become the reassuring voice. The cheerleader saying "It is going to be all right - don't believe everything you read in those books". I was the guy taking the calls where people would say, "Whatever you do, do not let your wife watch E.R. There is a lady that dies from the same thing that your wife has!" At the same time,
your wife, partner, and future mother of your unborn child is frustrated that she is not having the 'June Cleaver' pregnancy. She is unable to go out in the world and revel in her pregnant status. She is not able to go to the Baby Warehouse and set up "the nursery" that she has dreamed of creating since she was a child. Worst of all, she has no outlet for this rage and frustration but guess who? You get an early dose of the "you did this to me!" attitude . . . and you get to deal with that too while waiting for the arrival of your bundle of joy.

On top of the additional stresses brought on by the fear of danger to your wife and unborn child, you are now given the sudden promotion to full-time homemaker and entertainment coordinator. Sure, you helped with the dirty dishes, did your share of cooking and laundry, ran to the store every so often, etc. Well, the whole deal becomes yours once your wife goes on bed rest and it really stinks. The focus is rightfully on your wife and how she is doing. You too are being beaten down by stress, worry and anxiety but can't show it in the same way. On top of all that, you are still expected to be at work and perform the basics. There is no baby yet. Most people think that your wife is just at home lying about and eating bonbons. They do not realize how much anxiety is going on in your life. You get to endure the remarks like "I wish that I got to lie around at home all day. Just think what I could get done."

Here are some things I did to cope with a lot of the junk that bed rest threw my way:

1. I got a TV/DVD setup going with lots of free DVD’s from the public library. Comedies and light fare.
2. I got a cooler of food and snacks set up for my wife to get her through the day. She was on a very restricted form of bed rest, which only allowed her to get up and go to the bathroom.
3. I encouraged her friends to come by and visit. We invited her dad to come down and watch O.J. Simpson’s murder trial with her for a few days (that whole deal ended the name 'Nicole' for us, by the way).
4. I tried to find books for her to read that did not deal with pregnancy.
5. We did not have access to email or the internet at the time, but I imagine that it would have been a big help for us had we had that option.
6. I tried to do things for myself too: the occasional night of poker with the boys, a movie by myself.
7. Get a restaurant delivery place to bring in a nice meal from a fancy place. Do the candle and flower thing. I did not do that at the time, but I know in retrospect that it would have helped a lot and made me look like a romantic hero. I repeat that I did not do that at the time - learn from my mistakes. Do it.

8. Another thing that I did not do, but should have - take some time to get a nice post-delivery gift for your wife. You get caught up in the day-to-day stuff and start thinking of your wife as a patient rather than as a partner and lover. Indulge that side too. She is still there; she is just feeling really scared and alone in the world. It really does mess with their head and in turn goofs you up too.

9. Ragu and angel hair pasta. A meal in five minutes!

10. Let those dishes pile up for a while. No one is there to see them if your wife is being good about bed rest (heck you are still a guy, right?). Plus, perhaps a neighbor or friend will see them piling up and do them for you as a nice gesture.

11. Take advantage of your friends. You never know who your real friends are until you go through something like this. You’d be surprised who steps up to the plate and who heads for the hills.

12. Know too that the experience does not end once that baby is born. The struggle impacts your marriage and your delight in that child. Your wife may have been working and intending to go back to work. You may have taken on different career goals, stuff like that. It is all up for reconsideration after a tough pregnancy like this. We did a flip-flop.

My wife is a full-time mom and I am the worker bee. I enjoy seeing how contented my daughter is and know that she is a very special gift. I was also fine with having one child and stopping there. My wife was not ready to give up on a larger family though. She got a bad case of 'baby-itis' again two years ago and we had our second child in January of 1999. She had to go through two and a half months of bed rest with this last pregnancy, but it seemed like duck soup compared to that first experience. We had lived through that first experience and saw the positive results. Granted it was a real drag going through it all again with a three year old in the house this time and with me at work full time, but it was a relative breeze emotionally.

My wife looks at me and asks "One more?" I say that I am ready for the vet! Snip snip! We'll see what happens.