Summary of Results

Plain English summary of RELAX Study

Anxiety is common during and after pregnancy. It can make people feel unhappy and become unwell, affecting the health of mothers, birthing people, babies and the wider family. Around 1 in 5 pregnant women and birthing people experience anxiety disorders. Worry in pregnancy involves thinking about what may go wrong, such as "Will my baby be healthy?"

Past research, called LENS (Learning Effective New Strategies), showed that online training to teach positive ways of thinking reduced worry, anxiety and depression in adults. LENS training involved listening to short stories about everyday events and learning to answer questions to make each story end well. This could be a positive ending, or a neutral ending that did not cause worry.

Our study used this research to make a training specifically for pregnant women and birthing people. We called the new training RELAX (REducing Levels of AnXiety). The study was run from King's College London by a team of psychology researchers. They worked with healthcare staff and people who had had anxiety during pregnancy to design the study. Our public advisers also included people from networks and charities working for parents, for Black women, and for a good start in life for babies. Public involvement was important. It made sure that all parts of the study met pregnant women and birthing people's needs. This included the study website, the stories in the training, and the social media for the study. The public advice came from women from a range of ethnic backgrounds, a trans birthing person and a father, and they were from different areas of England. This group also advised on how to share the RELAX results.

The RELAX study tested if adding RELAX training to usual maternity care led to lower levels of anxiety before and after birth. 268 pregnant women and birthing people who had low to moderate levels of anxiety joined the study. They were recruited from NHS maternity services, social media and word of mouth. They had to be between 16-28 weeks pregnant. First, pregnant women and birthing people got information about the

study and researchers assessed their levels of worry and anxiety. Then people were asked to consent to take part. They could stop at any time. Half (134) had RELAX training as well as their usual maternity care; the other half just had usual maternity care. A computer programme said who got RELAX training. This was based on chance, like throwing dice for odd and even numbers. This meant that no-one could affect who was in which group or bias the findings.

Those in the RELAX training group had 12 online sessions (each lasting about 17 minutes), on a laptop, PC or tablet, to be taken over four weeks. Anxiety was measured at the start of the study and after the training (four weeks later). It was measured again at eight weeks after joining (while still pregnant) and 36 weeks after joining (when most had a baby of around 12 to 24 weeks old).

We wanted to find out if RELAX could reduce anxiety in pregnancy and after birth, which can be highly stressful times.

The findings

Over 81% of women and birthing people completed at least 10 of the 12 RELAX training sessions. Over 90% answered all the questions we asked in the research. These are high levels of engagement for a study like this and it made us feel confident about the results.

People who completed RELAX training had lower anxiety eight weeks after joining the study (before birth), and 3-6 months after birth (36-weeks after joining the study). Women and birthing people in the study who did not get RELAX training (called the control group) also had lower anxiety, but not as low as those offered RELAX training.

Anxiety can increase during stressful times. We wanted to know if RELAX could prevent anxiety going up in pregnancy. We found that anxiety in the control group was over five times more likely to increase than anxiety in the RELAX group. This suggests that RELAX training can also prevent anxiety from increasing.

RELAX training also led to reductions in depression during pregnancy and after birth. They also felt they worried less and found more positive ways of thinking, using what they had practised during the training. Most people who were offered RELAX said they found it easy to do the training and to fit it into their lives.

Thank you

Thank you to everyone who took part in the study, and to the four NHS sites that helped us recruit. We are also grateful to the public advisers who made the study easier to join and grounded in people's lives and real experiences.

Future plans

Women and birthing people told us that they would like other people to be able to take the RELAX training. In future, we hope the NHS, family centres, and other places will offer RELAX training and we are actively working towards making this happen.

End of lay summary