

Self-hypnosis: how it can help with a better birth

Midwife Lou Pouget explains the benefits of using self-hypnosis techniques during labour

Since 2009, I've been teaching pregnant women how to use self-hypnosis during labour. I use the Mongan method, which draws on the philosophy of Grantly Dick Read, who pioneered natural birthing techniques in the 1920s.

Self-hypnosis during labour enables a woman to enter a state of deep relaxation, while remaining fully aware of what is going on. Because the woman is relaxed, the body is able to do what it wants to do, and the outcome is a safer and more comfortable birth.

When I decided to train as a self-hypnosis practitioner, I was already working as part of a team who believe strongly in normal birth. At the Cotswold Maternity Unit in Chipping Norton, a midwifery-led unit, there are seven midwives, and we also mentor midwifery students from Oxford Brookes University. We have a team of maternity support workers to assist the midwives and offer breastfeeding guidance to the mothers. Our caseload consists of approximately 600 women, all of whom are offered, where appropriate, a home birth, a birth at the unit or a birth at the nearest consultant-led unit.

Those of us who work at the unit have faith in women's bodies to birth their babies. We offer one-to-one support with a known midwife during labour, and provide a safe and supportive environment, employing simple strategies to keep birth normal. The unit has also received the Baby Friendly Unicef Award for Excellence in Breastfeeding Rates.

I became interested in self-hypnosis a few years ago, when a colleague became a practitioner. I completed a four-day course, and qualified as a practitioner in 2009. We now have three trained practitioners at our unit.

A gentle birth

Women and their birth companions join the self-hypnosis course at 28 weeks of pregnancy. The course consists of one 2 ½ hour session a week for six weeks, and it's important that women practise in-between sessions. The course explains how a mother's mental and emotional state affects the baby and why labour does not have to hurt. If a woman believes birth will hurt, then she will become fearful and anxious, which in turn will make the labour painful. We show films of women using self-hypnosis techniques during labour and experiencing a gentle birth, free of the fear-tension-pain triad that often characterises labour.

Our approach is reflected in the language we use to talk about giving birth. We do not refer to waters breaking, as that sounds harsh and painful; instead we say 'membranes have released'. Rather than use the word 'contractions', we refer to 'surges'.

'The words and music help them to become relaxed and comfortable.'

The principal techniques we teach are breathing, relaxation and visualisation. There are three types of breathing:

- The sleep breath (breathing in gently to the count of four, and breathing out to the count of eight).
- The slow breath (breathing in to the count of 20 while imagining the abdomen as an inflating balloon).
- The J breath or birth breath, which women can use in the second stage of labour. Instead of pushing the baby out, the mother breathes down, directing the energy of the breath down through the body and behind the baby.

The main visualisation we use is the 'opening blossom' – a simple picture of an opening rose. Women are asked to imagine the

perineum unfolding like the gentle unfolding of rose petals. They take the picture into the birthing room and put it in a place where it's easy to see.

We also teach a method called 'rainbow relaxation'. The women are given a CD that they listen to every day. The words and music help them to become relaxed and comfortable, creating a calm and peaceful environment for birthing their baby.

About 20% of women who give birth at our unit do so using self-hypnosis, and I have now observed hundreds of women giving birth using the technique. Most parents who take my course contact me with their birth stories, and I've never had any negative feedback. Self-hypnosis fits in well with our belief at the birth centre in the importance of continuity of care and teaching women about normal birth: our women labour silently and beautifully.

What parents say

'Thank you so much for our recent course – we loved it and made some good friends to boot! You gave us the confidence to have a homebirth – something that had been frowned upon by our doctor! We hired a pool – we had a 7 hour labour – and used our breathing techniques throughout. I loved rainbow relaxation – I even fell asleep for an hour!'

'We had a little girl, born in the birthing pool at our local unit with my own midwife. It was bliss. We used self-hypnosis throughout the labour – J breathing worked a treat for me – I had a 20-minute second stage! Ed was blown away by the birth (and you know he had his doubts to start with and reluctantly came along to the course!!) – he is now shouting about self hypnosis from the rooftops – anyone that listens gets an hour's lecture on it!'