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Shiatsu and birth support?

AIMS Journal, 2014, Vol 26 No 4

Suzanne Yates introduces the principles of what shiatsu can bring to pregnancy and birth

Often people think of shiatsu (meaning 'finger pressure') as simply a physical touch type of massage technique which uses the meridians and points of acupuncture. Well, it is that, but the way of touching and accessing these points involves having an awareness of the whole body, both of the person giving and of the person receiving.

This means that during birth it can give to both the mother and her birth supporters (partner or midwife):

- Tools to aid physical symptoms, such as pain relief, back ache and, tiredness
- A connection to the process of birth including an awareness of the baby
- An awareness of breathing and posture
- A sense of being supported through touch or through a relaxed physical presence
- A greater connection with the physical body and the emotions
- A greater awareness of one's relationship to the birth environment in a way which can be supportive

In order to give the static pressure, which is one of the main tools of shiatsu, there needs to be a leaning from the physical and energetic centre of the body, the pelvis, which the Japanese (who developed shiatsu) called the Hara. In order to use the body in this way, the person giving shiatsu needs to be relaxed. This involves first connecting with the centre through breathing and then allowing the rest of the body to relax around this centre. Shiatsu is not done from the shoulders, which tend to put people into their head and upper body and away from their centre. Working from the Hara encourages a more 'whole' and penetrating way of touching.

To connect with her Hara, the mother can place her hands on her abdomen and breathe out and feel her hands being drawn in. She can feel how much pressure to give and how long to stay. Her breathing tends to slow and of course she tends to become more aware of her baby. The baby often moves in response to this touch. Once the mother has a sense of how much pressure feels good for her and her baby to receive, she tends to become very aware of her baby. Her attention shifts inwards. Some women become aware of the physical position of their baby, others even start to become more aware of their baby's emotional response.

The partner can then place their hands over the mother's Hara and be guided to give appropriate pressure. This is a great tool to support antenatal bonding, but once women use this regularly, during

labour they can use it to tune in to what is going on for their baby. During birth this can help the mother and her partner to be aware of how the baby is experiencing labour, and this focus on their baby and his/her journey, rather than focusing on pain or on contractions, can be helpful and help tune to what they need to do. It can also be a useful support for relaxed breathing.



If the mother then leans over her partner, they can experience how giving is actually receiving. It is a mutual relationship and both benefit! This is a way of encouraging whole body communication between the mother and partner, as well as being relaxing for them both. The partner can then learn to apply this leaning to specific techniques such as sacral pressure.

As we know, if the woman experiences physical intensity or discomfort in labour, it is often in the sacral area. Pressure here tends to relieve this. It also supports the baby to move, the birth supporter to relax and the mother to breathe more deeply and have focus. The mother is encouraged to shift position as and when she feels but this shifting comes from an internal awareness of what needs to happen both for her and for her baby.

Basic principles of shiatsu:

- Breathing from the Hara (centre),
- Relaxation
- Whole body leaning

Once these basic principles are learnt, specific points can be shown. Points can aid both physical and emotional release. There are points that can help settle the emotions, have a direct effect on the uterus and help regulate contractions. Although shiatsu uses points, it is about the whole body. When the mother connects to both her body and her baby, she is more able to experience fully the birth of a new

life.

Suzanne is a shiatsu practitioner and teacher who has been specialising in shiatsu and maternity care since 1990. She has written Beautiful Birth and co-written Shiatsu for Midwives which have lots of practical shiatsu techniques for birth support.
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