AIMS For a better birth...

Hypnobirthing

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Katharine Graves shows the power of deep relaxation and positive thought in birth

Hypnobirthing is based on simple and profound logic. It provides women with the tool to have a good birth and I have not seen anything else make such a profound difference to birth for women and babies.

That said, let us look at what it is not. Hypnobirthing is NOT a method of pain relief in labour. This may sound strange, as it is often included in the pain relief session of NHS antenatal classes, but to think of it as a method of pain relief in labour is fundamentally to miss the point, although women who come to a hypnobirthing class do usually have a much more comfortable labour.

Hypnobirthing works on the premise that it is unnatural for pain to be there in the first place. This may seem an outrageous statement to people who have acquired their view of birth from dramas on television or the movies, or to midwives who have seen many women in extreme agony and for whom a large part of their work is relieving pain. But we have all heard stories from time to time of a woman who has given birth completely comfortably, and all midwives will have seen this from time to time. We often hear of it in what we wrongly call a primitive culture. A pregnant woman is working in the fields, goes off for an hour to have her baby, returns with her baby strapped to her back and continues working. And we say, '*Isn't that amazing*?'

So if one woman can do it, a woman's body must be made in such a way that it can be done. So, given normal circumstances, any woman could do it, and the real question should be, '*What has gone wrong with our society that birth is generally considered to be an uncomfortable, if not a painful experience*?'

A hypnobirthing course will explain the logic of this claim, with reference to how the muscles of the uterus work in harmony with the mind and the hormones, and it provides tools to facilitate this process. Working on the premise that a woman's body is created to give birth efficiently and comfortably, hypnobirthing provides tools to achieve this.

What happens in a hypnobirthing course?

Most women come to hypnobirthing classes expecting to learn a great many techniques to help them to raise her pain threshold, go into some spaced out state so the pain just wafts over her, not notice the pain, etc. A hypnobirthing course certainly includes breathing andvisualisation techniques, and relaxations, but these have been around for years and, though they are undoubtedly good and useful, they don't make the difference that hypnobirthing makes, so what is the difference? There are three things:

- Work to release fear and build confidence. However much a woman is looking forward to having her baby, everyone 'knows' that birth is painful. Every movie we see and every book we read portrays a woman screaming and writhing around in agony as she gives birth. As this is the underlying reality in our subconscious, the work to release fear is a fundamentally important part of hypnobirthing.
- Takes a woman into a very deep state of relaxation, much deeper than a short relaxation that she might do at the end of an antenatal class.
- Provides a structured practice routine. This only takes about 15 minutes a day, but rather than being sent away from a class and told to practise, the woman is given a definite routine to do. And 15 minutes a day is not long for something as important as having a baby.

In fact, rather than being a process of adding on, hypnobirthing is more a process of letting go. Usually, when we have something important in our lives like an exam, we add on more and more. We learn lots of facts and add more and more. We do a trial run to see how well we are doing. Then the night before the exam we brew up endless supplies of black coffee and cram in all we can. And then we produce it on the day.

Hypnobirthing is exactly the opposite: it is a process of letting go of our stresses, of releasing our fears, so that by the time we give birth, the perfect system – which is already in place, hidden at the moment below all the layers of stress and fear – can shine forth and work in the way it is designed to do.

How does hypnobirthing work?

In only 10 years, hypnobirthing has become so well known that every midwife has heard of it and many NHS hospitals are adopting it. Initially there is widespread suspicion of the word 'hypno'. People expect to come to see tree-hugging hippies sitting cross-legged on beanbags and chanting. Nothing could be further from the truth. Parents are presented simple and irrefutable logic. Originally a few mothers came because their fear of birth was so great that anything was worth a try. They did the class, thought it was wonderful and, when they had their babies, it worked! It worked so well that they told their friends about it, so more women came to the course, and it worked for them too. And that is how it grew. It is apowerful grass-roots movement which started with mothers and, when midwives saw how hypnobirthing affected a birth, they were amazed at the difference. Time and time again, a midwife will exclaim after her first hypnobirthing birth: '*I couldn't believe how calm she was!*'

What brings a couple to hypnobirthing is the birth repor ts from other hypnobirthing couples. The

fathers, in particular, arrive sceptical and leave the staunchest advocates, and it is reports from other fathers which often bring them to classes. As well as the work that is done in class, the practice that a couple does at home is extremely important. It is a little like learning to play a musical instrument. You can go to the lessons and make progress, but if you do the practice in between you will really progress well. All the best and most enthusiastic birth reports from hypnobirthing mothers will say, '*… and I practised lots.*'

Hypnobirthing works because, by helping us to let go of our fears, it enables the body to work in the way it is evolved to do, efficiently and comfortably. The principle is very simple, and the result is very profound. Birth is the most formative experience of our lives and, if a mother is calm and drug-free, her baby will also be calm and drug-free. Instead of birth being a difficult or traumatic experience for both mother and baby, it will usually be a gentle, natural experience with few interventions, which mothers describe as the most wonderful and empowering experience of their lives. The baby will arrive in the world to be greeted by a mother who is calm and alert and ready to receive it. This is how it forms its first relationship in this world, which is the blueprint for every other relationship throughout its life, and will have an effect on it throughout its life and indeed on everyone it meets. Time and time again, people observe that hypnobirthing babies are different from the majority of babies. It is difficult to define, but there is a calmness and an alertness about them. They have been observed to start to put on weight straightaway, whilst many babies lose weight for a few days while they recover from the difficult experience of birth, before beginning to put on weight. There are often reports that hypnobirthing babies are very calm babies who sleep through the night sooner. As the children grow up, they seem to take life in their stride and remain calm and happy.

Though women come to hypnobirthing for a more comfortable birth, which time and time again it has been shown to deliver, in the long run the benefits for the baby are even greater, and the significance of this cannot be over-estimated.

Useful websites
www.kghypnobirthing.com
www.thehypnobirthingassociation.com
www.hypnobirthing.co.uk
www.natalhypnotherapy.co.uk
www.thewisehippo.com