AIMS For a better birth...

Yoga: A time for me and a time for my baby

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By Cathy Welch

While I was ruminating about what to write for this article, a text popped up on my phone with a baby announcement from one of the women who recently attended my Yoga for Pregnancy (YfP) classes over a number of months, initially in person and then online. Her final sentence read:

> *"It was such a positive experience and all your coaching with breathing and moving through contractions helped enormously so thank you so much."*

Campbell and Nolan[1] have explored reasons for women attending yoga classes during their pregnancies and a high priority for the women who participated in their study was to gain confidence in their ability to manage the sensations of labour. This small study found that improved self-efficacy was considered to have played a leading role. It gave me pause for thought as I reflected on why I teach Yoga for Pregnancy classes and whether the feedback from women before and after their babies are born is congruent with my aspirations for their experiences.

I have to admit that teaching these classes is a highlight in my week – sitting in a circle of women (literally, or currently metaphorically), each with their own story, sharing their hopes and dreams, their needs and

desires, and feeling that I can create a safe and supportive environment that will enhance their well-being, feels like an honour and a privilege, much more than just a job teaching yoga. This supportive social space is considered one of the key contributory factors to improved mental health in pregnant women[2,3], alongside the specific yoga practices of breathing, physical movements and meditation/relaxation[4]. Evidence continues to grow that yoga has a positive effect on the hypothalamic-pituitary adrenal axis through stimulation of the vagus nerve, which reduces cortisol levels and thus, by implication, potentially improves women's health and that of their unborn babies[5]. But do the women who attend Yoga for Pregnancy classes know this? I doubt it. Most women are there because they have been to yoga classes in a previous pregnancy, because a friend has recommended it or because their midwife may have suggested it as a way to combat anxiety.

I sometimes start a session by asking women to share what they get from the classes and without fail their reasons feel perhaps nebulous and intangible. They include: time for the mother; time to think about her pregnancy; time for her to relax and switch off; helping her to sleep; improving her comfort and easing her niggles. Once their babies have been born, women may share feedback on social media or via evaluation forms and similar themes arise:

> *"Yoga classes gave me time to focus on me and my growing bump and postnatal yoga allowed quality time to bond with my baby."*
>
> *"It was such a nice me time."*
>
> *"Mum and baby yoga was a lot of fun, me and my daughter got a lot out of it."*
>
> *"I found the yoga really helped with my SPD, and was the one chance each week for me to relax and concentrate on myself and my bump."*
>
> "*The yoga exercises were great for helping to keep my body supple during pregnancy."*
>
> *"...benefit of sharing experiences with other local women."*

Sometimes we share tears, often we share laughter. Women experience loss, heartbreak, joy and elation. They love the opportunity to be with other women in order to share stories and learn about themselves. They carry what they learn into their daily lives – adapting to their ever-changing bodies and, "Preparing for something I can't prepare for"[6 (p76)].

For many women their yoga class is the 'drug of choice'. At a time when they may be deciding to avoid most medications, certain foods and alcohol, and curtailing their normal exercise routines, yoga becomes something women feel ready to embrace. It gives them confidence in their ability to cope and, when labour begins, it is another tool in their kit for working with whatever happens:

> "*It helped me during a long labour to stay calm."*
>
> *"'Breathing techniques learnt in yoga definitely helped get me through the stress of labour and making some tricky decisions."*
>
> *"The breathing exercises really helped with my homebirths."*
>
> *"'I used several of the breathing techniques during my labour which helped me to control the pain and achieve the delivery that I wanted."*

In reality, however the labour and birth progress on the day, whether it is a planned caesarean or a birth at home, and whatever challenges the recovery presents and regardless of the reality of caring for a newborn baby (or two!), time and time again the women talk about how the breathing they learnt in yoga has helped them through the perinatal period. They highlight the sharing with other women, the gentle caring and consideration they receive in classes, and the growing understanding and knowledge about their own bodies that they gather along the way.

So, while acknowledging that not every woman who attends classes falls in love with their Yoga for Pregnancy sessions, many do – and consequently many women feel stronger, more confident and filled with self-belief. There is nothing more rewarding than welcoming them back with their babies for 'mum and baby' yoga sessions, for their next pregnancy and even after their child-bearing time is over, when yoga becomes their way to maintain health and well-being for many years to come.

> *"*(The) *knowledgeable and gentle approach made me feel like I was in safe hands, and the group was very welcoming. At the class we discussed lots of different aspects of pregnancy, labour, delivery and motherhood in a safe environment which gave me the confidence to choose my own path. Several of the women were attending the classes for their second or third time, and I'll certainly plan to go again if I have another baby."*

Aims for the Yoga for Pregnancy sessions

- To build women's confidence and trust in their innate ability to give birth to their babies resulting in an increased number of straightforward vaginal births where women can work with their bodies in a way that leaves them feeling empowered and fulfilled.
- To give women a wide range of practical yoga-based skills to help them adapt to pregnancy, to work with their bodies during labour and birth and to aid recovery after their babies are born.
- To give women an opportunity to share ideas, experiences, views, feelings and concerns within a safe and comfortable environment.
- To give women the space and time to just 'be' with their babies and with themselves
- To create a time when women can connect with their breath, their body, their emotions and their minds through yoga practice.
- To inspire women to want to continue yoga practice after their babies have been born.

Author Bio: Cathy has been a childbirth educator for over 25 years. She is passionate about supporting women's health and well-being through yoga and homeopathy in Wiltshire.

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