



Hypnobirthing

An alternative way of labour is touted to help ease mothers' frazzled nerves and even enable them to enjoy the birthing process. Yip Min-ting reports.



WOMEN IN LABOUR ARE ALWAYS PICTURED SCREAMING their lungs out and gasping like dying fish, faces twisted in pain. Is it any wonder that so many women are anxious about giving birth and some mothers put off having more children?

When it came to Zurina Bryant's turn, however, the scenario was very different. Her gynaecologist, Dr Ann Tan of the Women and Fetal Centre at Mount Elizabeth Medical Centre, was amazed at her patient's ability to be as calm as still water throughout her seven-hour labour. The director and performance coach of Self Leadership International was certainly the most composed patient Dr Tan had encountered.

Recounting the incident, she says of Zurina, "it really worked well for us because she was very calm and in control. She had no painkillers or epidural but she wasn't screaming in pain or anything."

An extraordinarily stoic woman with an almost inhuman tolerance to pain? Well, not exactly, she was following a practice called hypnobirthing, a philosophy and technique involving hypnosis to help calm and relieve a mother's pain during labour. A month before her labour, she and her husband, Andrew, a trainer in neurosemantics, a field of study of which hypnosis is a part, started practising hypnobirthing in preparation for the big day.

"I filled her mind with positive images of pregnancy and brought her mentally to the birthing suite. I also put an image of me beside her and used my tone of voice to constantly remind her to be relaxed. I wanted her to focus internally, to concentrate on giving birth and tune out the external chaos, nurses running around, and feel relaxed," Andrew reveals. According to Dr Di Bustamante, a certified hypnotherapist and hypnobirthing practitioner, a quiet, safe environment is the ideal condition for a mother to give birth naturally and comfortably. However, that is mostly not the case as the hospital environment is often jarred with people, tensions and noisy distractions. Hypnosis thus helps to ease the patient's nerves by getting them to focus internally and enable calm and control to settle into her mind. A well-prepared patient could make a welcome word of difference to the doctor, who can then concentrate on getting the baby out safely or if there is a need for a Caesarean, the doctor can focus on the operation instead of having his or her attention diverted by the frantic mother-to-be.

"Giving birth triggers the same hormones as when having an orgasm, so it is not natural for women to experience such severe pain and distress from labour. It shouldn't be a dreadful process, but in fact a pleasant one if the patient is properly prepared," Dr Di states.

Besides the unsettled environment contributing to the mother's anxiety, other causes of panic are her safety and that of the baby and especially when a Caesarean has to be done and the mother is wheeled to the emergency room, panic hits the roof.

"I had also built in the possibility in her mind that should anything go wrong and a natural birth could not take place, she would still remain relaxed and in control," says Andrew.

As it happened, during her first labour, the baby's heartbeat slowed after Zurina was in labour for about six hours. What happened then really impressed Dr Tan as Zurina remained calm despite being sent into the emergency room for a C-section. Andrew accompanied his wife into the operating theatre, talking soothingly to her all the time, continuing her hypnotic state. Her firstborn, Tasha, was delivered after a smooth operation.

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Happy Family. Andrew and Zurina with their little ones Tasha and Nathan



Zurina with Tasha, born in November 2005



Zurina with Nathan, born in June 2007

Dr Di Bustamante runs five, two-and-a-half hour sessions to train mothers and their partners in hypnobirthing. Here's what the curriculum looks like:

- How and why birthing is now considered a painful traumatic event requiring medical intervention.
- Basic tenets of self-hypnosis, why and how it works.
- Importance of prenatal bonding, nutrition and exercise.
- Relaxation and breathing techniques for labour and birthing.
- Elimination of the fear-tension-pain syndrome through guided visualisation of a calm, gentle birth.
- Special circumstances that require immediate medical attention.
- Progression of a normal labour and birth.



Besides visualisation, hypnobirthing can also help to relieve pain via the technique of controlled breathing. As Zurina observes, "A major cause of pain is the contractions. The problem with many women in labour is that they breathe too hard and fast. Andrew taught me how to breathe through at the right times during my contractions so that it's less painful."

The best thing is, hypnobirthing has no side-effects because patients can snap out of hypnosis as and when they wish. "Going into hypnosis does not mean you are under someone else's control. Instead, you are in absolute control where you choose your own thoughts and feelings and you are the one who decides if you even want to be hypnotised," asserts Andrew.

Another important emotional benefit of hypnobirthing is the heightened sense of involvement of the fathers. Andrew enthuses, "I was very involved and I felt like a useful part of the birthing process. There was this high sense of satisfaction and we really bonded as a couple."

Zurina's second labour was a direct Caesarean and this time she was not under hypnosis. She noticed the difference immediately as she certainly felt much more panicky and this was also noted by Dr Tan. In fact, Zurina feels so strongly about hypnobirthing that she and her husband have decided to make a video featuring real-life couples practising hypnobirthing techniques to spread the word around.

"Basically, being in control and keeping calm during labour is very important and hypnosis is a great way to focus," Dr Tan maintains.

Besides hypnosis, there are other ways of directing concentration.

"I had another patient who chanted her Buddhist mantra throughout her labour," Dr Tan remarks. 🕯