

The Journey of Labour....

Labour is a microcosm of life. It brings pleasure and pain, joy and sadness. It is a beginning and an ending. Labour will put you in touch with both your strengths and your vulnerabilities and offer you an opportunity to learn more about yourself. Labour is one of the most challenging experiences of a woman's life, it is also one of the most rewarding.

Labour is teamwork. It is mother and a baby learning together, how to yield and how to separate from the union of pregnancy, how to push and how to be born. You are not in control nor are you out of control during labour. The best way to approach labour is with an attitude of learning, of cooperation, of harmony of mind and body. To bring optimism rather than expectations and acceptance as events unfold. Most women really do not know what they are capable of, and they have inner resources and strengths they have not encountered before. It is important that your caregiver, your support people and especially **you** do not underestimate of what you are capable.

Some labours will be short and intense some will be long and drawn out. There may be plateaus of varying lengths. Some women have an irresistible urge to push at 7 centimetres, some wait an hour after being fully dilated to begin to feel like pushing.

When you are going with the flow of your labour, as your labour progresses and you adjust to the increasing intensity of the contractions you may gradually enter a somewhat altered state – you could call it “Labourland” or being in “the Zone”. This is your body releasing endorphins to help you through the process. Contractions have a particular rhythm and pattern of their own, for each woman it is different – for each baby it is different.

This is a unique journey you are about to embark on; one that has been done many times before by many, many women. Your body knows how to do this work, how to birth this baby. Even now your body is preparing itself, adjusting, changing, and getting ready to birth. It is not possible to control labour. It is, however, possible to influence labour in a positive or a negative manner. The best approach is to follow the process and meet whatever it may offer. Be confident and believe in your inner resources, your strengths and your physical ability to complete this journey in your own special way.

Letting go....

Labour requires flexibility. Labour is about yielding rather than directing. There is a major physical process happening that has an original blueprint already drawn in your body and to try and control - to redraw this blueprint may change it but not necessarily improve it.

The uterine contractions of labour have often been likened to the waves in the ocean. The waves begin slowly out in the ocean and as they come closer they begin to swell and build until they reach a peak and then they crest and continue to flow right onto the shore. The water is also flexible in nature, molding to the contours of the land and the shoreline. Following the natural flow of contractions allows you to cooperate with the force of nature.

Give yourself permission to express yourself during labour. Whether it is breathing, yelling or singing your way through a contraction, complaining, or grunting, each woman must find her way of releasing tension. It is important to do it in a focused way as part of your breathing techniques. This release is an important goal during contractions as is the complete relaxation between contractions.

Part of the intensity of labour comes from the physiological opening of the cervix to ten centimeters, which happens only when giving birth. There is a simultaneous psychological and emotional intensity to labour that may facilitate bonding in the moments immediately giving birth.

Working through labour contractions is a little like mountain climbing. There are moments when your muscles strain and then you rest between efforts – there may be moments that you feel you cannot go further. This is a good sign of progress. Just commit to doing one more contraction, then one more, and one more and so on until you are done. You will be able to do more than you think you can. Listen to your support team. Trust in your strengths. As you meet your baby at the end of labour, you will feel this reward.

Breathing for labour...

The only breathing you will need to do during most of your labour is a natural extension of normal breathing. Slow, deliberate and steady breaths throughout each contraction ensure that you and your baby receive the necessary oxygen. Four to five breaths (seven seconds for each inhalation and exhalation) are an average number per contraction. The most important thing is to keep oxygen moving through you.

As the labour progresses and the contractions require more of your attention you will naturally adjust your breathing. You may begin to breathe faster and shallower. It is important to keep your breathing as slow and even as possible to avoid hyper-ventilation. It is also useful to greet and release each contraction with a deep breath and then resume normal breathing. This is helpful to let your partner and support people know when the contractions begin and end. Welcome the deep rest that is possible between contractions.

Vocalization during active labour is a natural extension of breathing and serves to release tension caused by pain. You can use the sound of your breath as a focal point to help you during contractions and to ensure you are not holding your breath. Many people cease breathing as an instinctive response to pain. You can overcome this response simply by listening to your breathing sounds throughout each contraction. Some women hold their breath to avoid making noise or try to hide their response to pain. This may be because they are conditioned not to express themselves, or they are trying to avoid upsetting others. This is not a useful coping mechanism. It is very important to keep breathing throughout each contraction; let whatever sound needs to come out - come out. Remember this is your labour. Do what works for you and let others take care of themselves.

Focus on achieving as much relaxation as possible. Think about yielding to and releasing the pain. Do not worry if you are not totally relaxed during the peak of a contraction. Often moving and rocking during contractions can be helpful in moving through the contractions. Some women think of it as a labour dance.

Second Stage Breathing...

When the cervix is fully dilated you enter the second stage of labour. For many women this is a relief as they can take a more active role in their labour process. This second stage is the real work of labour and the most exciting. Some women begin pushing involuntarily, responding to an overwhelming urge, others will begin pushing after they are told they are ready.

Breathing for second stage follows a similar pattern to first stage. You need to adjust your breathing so you are working in harmony with the contractions and this will be the most effective way to push your baby out. Increased vocalization is common during second stage however, ensure that you are keeping your voice low and slow. Yelling or screaming is not effective and will waste your energy. Keep your chin toward your chest and resist the urge to arch away from the contraction.

Let the contraction build, take one or two greeting breaths, bear down strongly and slowly let your breath out. You may make a grunting sound – this is good. It is a natural sound with pushing. It often takes several contractions to get into the rhythm and work with the sensations. Let your bottom relax and open. Sometimes pushing on the toilet can be a really good place to let go.

Sometimes it is necessary to hold your breath for a few seconds as you are bearing down during second stage contractions. Your midwife will give you feedback about what is effective pushing. If too many people are telling you what to do, request that only one person directs you.

Crowning and Birth

As the baby descends the head will become visible and then slide back between contractions. This back and forth movement helps to stretch the perineal tissues. Finally, you will reach a point when the widest part of the baby's head is coming through the vaginal opening. This is referred to as crowning and you will feel a burning sensation in your perineal tissues. At this time it is important that you not push. Your midwife will tell you to stop pushing. Instead, lessen the pressure by using short, panting or blowing breaths. Think of breathing your baby out slowly and gently.

Once the head is crowned your baby will turn its head and shoulders and will be born with the next contraction. This is usually an easier push. The placenta will follow soon after – requiring a gentle push to complete your birth.