Coping with Pain in Labor: Natural Approaches to Pain Management

Course Pack & Additional Resources

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The Three R’s: Relaxation, Rhythm, and Ritual

There are three characteristics common to women who are observed to be coping well with pain in labor.

1. They are able to RELAX during labor and/or between contractions. In early labor, relaxation is a realistic and desirable goal. As labor progresses, many women cope much better if they don’t try to relax during contractions. They feel better if they move or vocalize during the contractions, or even tense parts of their bodies. It is vital, however, that they relax and remain calm between contractions.

2. The use of RHYTHM characterizes their coping style. This can be anything from slow dancing with their partner, to leaning over a birth ball and swaying the hips, bouncing on the birth ball, counting out loud, using a rhythmic breathing technique, repeating sounds or words, and so on.

3. They find and use RITUALS. The ritual is repeated use of personally meaningful rhythmic activities with every contraction. At first, women draw heavily on the coping measures they learned in childbirth class. However, those who cope well usually do more than that—they discover their own rituals spontaneously in labor. If disturbed in their ritual, or prevented from doing the things they have found to be helpful, laboring women may become upset and stressed.

Women are most likely to find their own coping style when they feel safe and supported, are free from restrictions on their mobility and vocal sounds, and are also free from disturbances to their concentration, such as other people talking to them, or doing procedures on them during contractions.

Following are some examples of unplanned, spontaneous rituals discovered by laboring women:

- One woman felt safe and cared for when her mother brushed her long, straight hair rhythmically during the contractions.
- Another rocked in a rocking chair in rhythm with her own pattern of breathing.
- Another wanted her partner to rub her lower leg lightly up and down in time with her breathing.
- Another wanted her partner to count her breaths out loud and point out to her when she was beyond the number of breaths that meant the halfway point in the contraction. Another dealt with her back pain by leaning on the bathroom sink, swaying rhythmically from side to side and moaning, while her partner pressed on her low back.
- Another let her breathing follow the rhythm of her partner’s hand moving up and down, “conducting;” she focused entirely on her partner’s ring as her guide.
Another integrated several rituals into one, slow dancing with her partner for every contraction as a helper lightly brushed behind her knees (as a reminder to relax the joint) at the onset of the contraction; she repeated the words “baby” and “open” out loud; and wanted an ice-cold washcloth to refresh herself between contractions.

Once a woman finds a ritual, she depends on it for many contractions, even hours. Changing the ritual or disturbing it throws her off. Most women change their ritual from time to time in labor, when a change of pace seems necessary. Sudden abandonment of the ritual is a likely sign of progress.

Adapted from materials authored by Penny Simkin in the DONA International Birth Doula Training Manual
The Value of Affirmations

Our values and beliefs influence what happens to us by aligning our energy with them and making it more likely that they will manifest in our lives. Much of our life has a self-fulfilling character. We seem to attract what we fear, or we can often say, “I knew that would happen to me.”

Since what we say about ourselves (positive or negative) strongly influences what actually unfolds in our lives, it is possible to take advantage of this by creating or using positive affirmations. Repeating or writing affirmations such as the following can help you to realize their truth and to identify and release any blocks from the past that may stand in the way of these statements fulfilling themselves in your life.

By employing affirmations, we can reprogram deep-seated, often subconscious, patterns in our lives that are not serving us well.

Some Pregnancy Affirmations
- My body is beautiful and strong.
- My baby is growing, beautiful and strong.
- I am and will be a good parent to my child (children).
- The Universe loves and supports me and my baby
- My baby and I are ready for the Divine Plan of our lives to unfold.
- The baby is naturally developing and doing just what he/she should.
- Pregnancy is natural, normal, healthy, safe, and divine for me and my baby.
- My baby knows when it is time to be born.
- My body will go into labor on its own, at the perfect time.
- I am doing a great job taking care of myself and the baby.

Some Birth Affirmations
- My body knows how to give birth and I will let it.
- Contractions help my baby to be born.
- Each contraction brings me closer to meeting my baby.
- Strong contractions are good ones.
- I am strong and I can let my contractions be strong.
- I am calm and relaxed. My baby feels my calmness and shares it.
- The baby and I are rested and ready for the work we will do.
- With each contraction my cervix is dilating a little more.
- My contractions are massaging the baby and hugging him/her.
- The baby is descending naturally.
- The baby’s head fits perfectly in my pelvis.
- I am opening.
- My tissues are stretching beautifully, just as they should.
- I accept the healthy pain of labor, if and when it is here.
- I feel the love of those who are helping me.
- I attract wonderful people to support me in labor.
- My health care providers are very respectful of my wishes.
- I send love to my baby and call him/her to my arms.

**Some Postpartum Affirmations**
- My body is beautiful and strong.
- I am proud of all that I have accomplished.
- My body knows how to make milk.
- My body is making the perfect amount of breast milk.
- I know how to nurse my baby.
- I am adjusting to life with my new baby.
- I share in the strength and wisdom of all mothers.

**Suggestions for Working with Affirmations**
- Work with one or more every day. The best times are just before sleeping, before starting the day, or when you are feeling troubled.

- Write each affirmation ten or twenty times on a sheet of paper, leaving space in the right-hand margin of the page for the “emotional response.” As you write the affirmation down on the left side of the page, jot down whatever thoughts, considerations, beliefs, fears, or emotions come to your mind. Keep repeating the affirmation and notice how the responses on the right side change.

- Put specific names and situations into the affirmation. Include your name in the affirmation. Say and write each affirmation in the first, second, and third person. “I (your name) love myself. You (your name) love yourself. (Your name) now loves herself.”

- Play with the vocabulary in the affirmation. Make it personal and meaningful. Be specific about your desired result.

- Record your affirmations on cassette tapes and play them back when you can. A good time is while driving or when going to bed. If you fall asleep, it can still work!

- Try looking in the mirror and saying the affirmations to yourself out loud. Keep saying them until you are able to see yourself with a relaxed, happy expression. Keep saying them until you eliminate all facial tension and grimaces.

- Sit across from a partner, each of you in a straight chair with your hands on your thighs and knees barely touching. Say the affirmation to your partner until you are comfortable doing it. Your partner can observe your body language carefully. If you squirm, fidget, or are unclear, you do not pass. He or she should not allow you to go on until you say the affirmation very clearly, without contrary body reactions and
upsets. Then your partner says them back to you, using the second person and your name. Continue until you can receive them without embarrassment. This is harder than it sounds!

- Don’t give up! If you ever get to a point where you begin to feel upset, shaky, or afraid about something negative you discover, don’t panic. Keep on writing the applicable affirmation over and over until your mind takes on a new thought. As it does, the negativity will fade away and you will feel lighter and better. Remember, it is just as easy to think positively as negatively. In fact, it is easier. Negative thinking actually takes more effort.

- Don’t be afraid to experiment. Affirmations can be useful in all areas of your life—for problems at work, problems with health, personal growth…. 
Visualizations for Birth

Visualization is a great relaxation technique for nearly everyone. It can be done in many situations and has great potential to be very individualized. When we talk about visualization, most people think of things like reading scenarios of walking through the forest or lying on the beach listening to waves. That can be a visualization exercise. However, what works best is usually something personal.

Many people enjoy reliving a positive experience, a date, a vacation, their wedding. This is done by the retelling of the story by your partner. Be sure to include all of the details to actually help remember—sights, smells, tastes, and sounds. Using all of the senses is important.

Explaining what is going on in the body and using those images as a relaxation tool is also beneficial. For example, reminding the mother that what she is feeling is her cervix opening and providing a visual image of that, such as a flower bud opening, often work well. Some women will even choose a single, inanimate object. It might be a photo, a special relaxation card, or whatever works.

Visualization for relaxation is a basic skill for labor and childbirth. Many childbirth classes teach visualization as a way to promote relaxation and reduce pain and fear in labor. Following the fear-tension-pain cycle, we know that to help reduce pain, we need to reduce fear and tension.

Many people think of visualization as imagining a happy place and trying to recreate that place in your mind. This is certainly one type of visualization. Sometimes, labor is too intense for that much thought or, if it is not practiced beforehand, it does not come easily in labor. This exercise for visualization is much simpler and can be used on the spot.

Begin by taking a few, deep abdominal breaths. This will help you release tension and center yourself. Then picture an image that represents tension, this could be any image, but the exercise will be most effective if you choose a picture that represents something to you from your own life. Examples might be a closed cervix or fist, a contraction, or a crying baby.

Continue the deep breathing as you find this tension image. As soon as you have focused on an image, begin to find a way to relax the image. That is, have the cervix soften and open in your mind; watch the contraction work and then ease; or have the crying baby brought skin to skin and calm.

You can use this during contractions or afterward as you try to scan your body for tension after the contraction is over. When you are done with this visualization exercise, consider repeating an affirmation to praise yourself and reinforce the relaxing thoughts.
Encouragement in Labor

During labor, one of the most power tools of the coach is the ability to ensure the mother that she is doing well and to encourage her to continue what she is already doing. You may not believe it, but many a laboring mother has been helped by three little words, “You’re doing great!” It sounds too simple to be true, but it is.

During active labor, the mother may not realize how far she has come. She is literally taking her labor one contraction at a time, and unlike those supporting her, she may not see it as one contraction closer to the birth. She may not even recognize that she has a significant portion of her labor behind her.

That is one of the reasons a coach is so important. The coach becomes the mother’s “eyes and ears,” watching what is happening and letting the mother know where she is. Comments such as “I can’t do this!” can be calmed by responses such as, “but you’ve been doing this for an hour and you’re doing great.” Suddenly, the mother will have a new-found confidence to continue.

Transition is a time of confusion for a mother. She cannot get comfortable and she doesn’t seem to know what to do. She may not even remember that she is in labor for a baby. It is at this point that the reassuring words of her coach can help a woman most.

She will need to be reminded how close she is to pushing and to holding her baby. She will also need to be reminded what to do. She may not remember for more than a few seconds, so repeat yourself without getting frustrated. Looks of panic on the mother can be responded to with, “I’m right here, we’re almost done. Let the contraction go away.”

What are the magic words of encouragement that will help the mother? That will depend on who she is, and what your relationship is to her. In some instances, “I love you” will be reassuring. In other cases, “You’re doing perfect, it’s beautiful to watch you” will reassure her. As coach, you should know the mother well enough to know what will relax and reassure her.

You may also try repeating an encouraging phrase several times. Lines such as the following, said to the mother during a contraction, can give her something to focus on, while reassuring her that what is happening is normal.

Encouraging Words to Say during Labor

I love you.
You’re doing so well.
That’s it … That’s the way.
You’re doing it!
You are so strong—strong enough for this.
You’re working with the contractions so well.
You are relaxing beautifully.
    It’s okay to cry.
    That was a good one!
    I’m right here.
    I will help you.
    You can do it.
Say with me, “I can do it.”
You’re doing exactly what you need to be doing.
Each contraction is bringing our baby closer.
    We will meet our baby soon!
    I’m proud of you.
Let’s just get through this one.
    Perfect, just perfect.
The baby is moving down, the baby will be here soon.
The baby is trying to come out. You are helping her come out.
    The stronger it feels, the better it works.
    You are doing so well.
Your body is working perfectly. Everything is working perfectly.
The Birth Marathon—Food & Drink for Labor & Birth

Moms birthing in most hospitals are faced with instructions to not eat solid food, restricted to ingesting clear liquids only. If labor goes on longer than your blood sugar can hold out and contractions or your energy begin to wane, try the following options. Your overall strategy here is to achieve a stable blood sugar throughout labor. This can be challenging, not just due to restrictive hospital policies and the limitations of what is available on site, but because:

- some women feel nauseous from the onset of labor
- some women respond to pain with nausea and vomiting
- digestion does slow considerably during active labor because blood flow is concentrated to the uterus
- you may not have an appetite
- you may fear vomiting (remember, however, that nausea is one of the symptoms caused by low blood sugar!)

Strategies

- Some women experience an urge to load up on carbohydrates in the 24-hour period before the onset of active labor, similar to what an athlete may do in preparation for running a marathon on the following day. Go for it! (I had a bread, salad, and pasta dinner at a local restaurant 12 hours before my second child was born and never felt nauseated in labor, which started about 5 hours after the meal.) This strategy is especially recommended if you are facing a scheduled induction. You don’t want the hard work to hit after you’ve been essentially fasting for 24 hours or more.
- EAT WHILE YOU ARE STILL AT HOME IN EARLY LABOR. This is key and must be maintained throughout the day. Don’t just settle for breakfast and stop there. Eat every 2–3 hours, whatever appeals. You may want to avoid heavy, greasy foods such as pizza or fast foods (which don’t digest easily under the best of circumstances).
- Avoid substances that will spike your blood sugar such as pop and other forms of concentrated sugar (read your labels!). These will dehydrate you and ultimately lead to your blood sugar crashing.
- Eat a banana on the way to the birth center/hospital. Despite most TV depictions of how women go into labor (i.e., a sudden contraction alerts her to the need to rush to the hospital where she gives birth soon after on her back, typically involving various emergencies for dramatic effect), most women have plenty of time to take care of themselves at home and head to the birthing center/hospital with little need for high drama.
- During labor, try a variety of the suggestions below, alternating them. A little protein here, some electrolytes there, something sweet to boost your energy, the Pregnancy Tea … you get the idea. That will keep you going if your labor is long. This is especially important for women who might be admitted to the hospital early in labor or whose labor is being induced.
• Drink lots of water, at least 4 ounces per hour throughout your labor, more if it’s a hot day and you’re sweating a lot. Have your support team help you with this. (Note to partners and doulas: It’s your job to encourage the mom to drink throughout her labor. If she is willing to drink, asking for it, and consistently taking several gulps when offered, then just keep the supply coming and keep an eye on her to ensure she doesn’t stop drinking at some point. However, if the mom is disinterested in drinking and reluctant to do so, then frequent small sips will be necessary. Keep offering!)

• Finally, don’t hesitate to accept IV fluids if you can’t keep anything down over a long period of time and are getting dehydrated. While most healthy women will not need routine IV fluids, dehydration can cause your labor to be dysfunctional and non-productive. An IV can turn the picture around and is an appropriate use of medical intervention.

Raspberry Leaf Tea Labor Cubes
Before labor begins, make up a VERY strong tea (two quarts of boiling water with 2 cups of dried red raspberry leaves added). Simmer with the lid off for at least 20–30 minutes as the volume reduces considerably. Strain and add ¼ cup of honey (raw is best if possible). Pour into ice cube trays and freeze, adding water if necessary for at least one tray’s worth. Store in a zippy bag at home or take with you to the birth center/hospital (usually you can store them in the freezer of the small room refrigerator or in the common “nutrition room” refrigerator). The honey gives mom a boost of energy, while the concentrated raspberry leaves provide minerals and may assist in bringing back strong contractions. In between the contractions, mom can easily crunch the cubes into a satisfying slush.

Electrolyte-Balanced Sports Drinks
There are a large variety of sports drinks on the market these days. Avoid the overly-sweet, chemically-generated metallic blue and other colored products not found in nature. See what’s available at your local health food store and find something you like. Have 2–3 quarts on hand for labor (your support team will appreciate these as well).

Miso Broth
If you’re unfamiliar, miso is a paste made from fermented soybeans. It is high in protein and tastes salty. If you haven’t tried miso, there are a number of different flavors available in the refrigerated section of your local health food store. Give them a try and find one you like. The paste can be brought with you to the hospital and kept in the refrigerator. Mix one tablespoon of miso into one cup of hot water. Avoid boiling miso as it kills many of the nutrients. There are also packets of instant “miso soup” on the market. This is a good option for doulas and midwives to carry with their birth supplies.

Concentrated Home-Made Chicken or Beef Broth
Place one whole (preferably organic) chicken or a couple of beef bones in a large soup pot. Bring to a boil and spoon off the scum that will rise to the surface over a 10-minute period and discard. Roughly cut up one onion, 3 carrots (washed, with skins on), and 3 stalks of celery, including tops. Chop up 2–3 garlic cloves and throw those in too (you can even leave the skins on as a timesaver). Cover and reduce heat, simmering for 1½ hours. Allow cooling and strain out the solids (make chicken salad with the meat). Put in refrigerator overnight so
that the layer of fat on top solidifies. In the morning, remove and discard the fat layer, but don’t worry if a little is left behind. Return the broth to the stove uncovered and bring to a boil, allowing the liquid to reduce to a rich-colored (and tasty!) broth. Add in salt to taste at the very end. Freeze in small containers to have on hand for labor.

**Herb Tea and Honey**
Bring a variety of your favorite herbal teabags and some raw honey with you to the hospital. When energy flags, especially in the second stage of labor, a cup of tea with a generous spoonful of honey can give you the boost you need to get the job done. Ginger tea can settle the stomach if nausea is an issue.

**Hot Drinks**
Americans are big on iced drinks, but in many parts of the world, ingesting iced drinks is not recommended. A number of cultures, from China to South America, have prohibitions against iced drinks for women in labor or postpartum. The wise women grandmas-to-be will not allow it. Feed the fire. You are supposed to get hot in labor! You will sweat. You will be uncomfortable. It’s okay. It’s more efficient.

**Labor Food**
Women have been using tubes of concentrated carbohydrates found in the runners’ stores (aka “goo”). Lots of flavors, promoted as digesting rapidly and easily while vigorously exercising, and easy to just take a squirt. Be sure and follow up with water as it is very concentrated. Rave reviews from birthing moms.

**Other Labor Foods**
- bananas (worth mentioning twice due to portability and high potassium content)
- yogurt or keifer or fruit smoothies
- light foods that appeal

*This article was written by Patty Brennan and is excerpted from our cookbook, Whole Family Recipes: For the Childbearing Year & Beyond, edited by Patty Brennan (2007).*
Additional Resources

Books

- *Ina’s May Guide to Childbirth*, by Ina May Gaskin; highly recommended
- *Visualizations for Childbirth*, by Carl Jones
- *HypnoBirthing: The Mongan Method* (comes with audio CD), by Marie Mongan

Best of the Web

  - Labor pain introduction
  - Labor pain options
  - Labor pain tips and tools
  - Labor pain best evidence