

Natural Pain Relief Techniques for Labor

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One of the most effective ways of coping with pain in labor is to learn to relax your body. In his groundbreaking research into the nature of birth pain, Dr. Grantly Dick-Read discovered that women who were physically tense felt more pain. In fact, Dick-Read found that women who learned to relax prior to their births were far better able to cope with their labors... many without needing medical pain relief. Dr. Dick-Read was a pioneer of natural childbirth. Since then, many other childbirth educators have found effective methods for relaxation. Many of the following techniques are adapted from the book *Birthing From Within* by Pam England and Rob Horowitz. (See resources to order)

Before you begin, find a comfortable position that allows you to fully relax. For many women, lying on their side is the most comfortable, but try different positions to see which works best for you!

Breath Awareness

To practice this technique, simply get into a relaxed position and *observe* your breathing. It is not necessary to try and control its rhythm, simply notice the pattern, the depth, the sound, etc. You can also add visualization to this exercise. For example, for every out breath, imagine your pelvis spreading gently and slowly. Or imagine a flower blossom opening.

Non-Focused Awareness

This is similar to breath awareness, except that you are observing all the things around you, not just your breathing. For example, if a nurse enters the room, you would simply state to yourself "a nurse has come in." There is no judgment or reaction to the information. Observe your surroundings: The sheets on the bed, the feeling of your head against the pillow, the sounds in the room, the sound of your own voice as you vocalize, etc. Try this with your eyes closed

for awareness of senses other than sight. What does the room smell like, for example?

Finding the edges

I have found this technique to be extremely effective, even during transition, which is usually the hardest part of labor. While the mom is having a contraction, her coach tells her to find the edge of the pain. For example, if you are having back labor, where does the sensation of pain end? Is it in your thighs, your shoulders, your hands? Once you find the edge, imagine yourself going beyond it into the part of your body that is NOT in pain and rest there for a while. Or you can try to imagine what the edge of the pain looks like using the same, non-judgmental observation technique as with non-focused awareness.

With finding the edges, the coach is very important because he will be walking the mother through the process. He will be conducting the dialogue. For example, he might say:

“Move out from the pain in your back until you find the edge of it. Where does the pain end? Can you feel where your body is relaxed and at ease? Rest in the relaxed part of your body, allowing the part that is in pain to do its work. Try to move back towards the pain and gently relax and soften the edges as you go....” Etc.

Another technique, related to the edge of pain is to try and observe the CENTER of the pain. Again, the coach will talk the mom through this process. Ask her to imagine that in the center of the pain, there is calm, just like in the eye of a hurricane. What does it feel like to have the pain swirling around you, while you are in the eye of the storm? Observe the movement of the pain as you breath in and out.

Imagine your baby

During contractions, it is sometimes very helpful to try and visualize what is happening inside you. This can include what the baby is doing, along with what your body is doing. Imagine that the pain you are experiencing is HELPING your baby through the process of birth. Own the pain. Use it. Again, coach, this is a technique that you can talk her through.

Vocalize

As the labor progresses, many women find that vocalizing can help them relax and stay focused. The sounds of labor should be deep, abdominal and guttural, not high-pitched yells or screams. Ideally, the sound will be a nice, long, sustained note coming from deep in your abdomen. Coach, if you hear her voice rising into a scream, you need to help her bring it down. It may be helpful to vocalize with her, to remind her where her voice is going to help the most.

Massage

Most women, for much of their labors, need to be touched. Touching can be massage, or it can be counter pressure on a painful part. You can go over her body and with touch, remind her to relax her body, especially between contractions. If you notice an area that is tense, rub it and remind her to let it go.

Water

This is, perhaps, the best non-drug pain relief available. And it is as near as your tub or Jacuzzi. In late labor, when the sensations are getting intense, it is usually ok for you to get into water. Women and Infants has Jacuzzis available, and there are always showers if a Jacuzzi isn't available or if there is a concern because your amniotic sack has broken. (Not usually an issue once you are at the hospital, but don't take a bath at home if your bag of water has broken) The feeling and warmth of the water can relax even the most stubborn muscles, which will often reduce the sensation of pain. In addition, you can use your non-focused awareness to observe the sound, the smell, etc. Try adding some essential oils to the tub or Jacuzzi. Lavender is probably the best for relaxation. Just a drop or two will do.

How to practice pain relief techniques:

Reading about these techniques is not going to be enough preparation for the actual event. It is important to practice them so that both the mom and the coach are comfortable with each technique. You cannot predict which ones will be successful for you

in labor, so it is a good idea to get familiar with all of them so you can pick and choose when the time comes.

One of the best ways to practice these techniques is by simulating pain. I like to hold an ice cube in my hand for 60 seconds. You can also hold an ice cube behind your ear, or you can have your coach pinch you behind your knee or squeeze your upper arm progressively harder, for 60 seconds. Also, if you experience any leg cramps or other discomforts of pregnancy, use them as an opportunity to practice!