

Training the mind to manage a miracle

Hypnobirthing specialist Suzanne Austen is taking the fear out of birth by strengthening the mind – and trusting in nature. SARAH HALLS reports.

Imagine a birth without the agony of contractions, the screaming and the fear. Replace it with a calm, serene environment, where the mother feels relaxed and totally in control.

Sound like pie in the sky? Thought so. But this is exactly what is being promised by hypnobirthing practitioner Suzanne Austen.

Pain-free birth is possible

At her classes in Earlsfield, she teaches expectant mothers how to have a pain-free birth and turns their partners into Paul McKenna-type helpers.

The method she uses, called hypnobirthing, is based on the work of obstetrician Dr Grantly Dick-Read. In the early 20th century, Dr Dick-Read noticed women who were calm and had positive expectations of their labour, tended to experience less pain than women who were frightened.

He realised their fear created tension, causing muscles to tighten and produce a more difficult labour. Ms Austen says: "If we look at cases of refugee women who have come from third-world countries to America, it's easy to see what happens.

"When they first arrive, they have very straightforward births. But after about five years in America, their births become much more complicated and they end up having caesareans and epidurals in the way most western women do. In that time they have taken on all these negative messages about child birth."

Ms Austen claims that way back in the Stone Age, for instance, giving birth was likely to be a much easier affair.

She says the body is designed to give birth when it is totally relaxed. So, for example, if a woman had gone into labour in ancient times while her village was attacked, fear would cause her muscles to tighten and stop the labour long enough for her to reach safety.

But now, Ms Austen says, it is the thought of the birth itself which is making women so frightened and causing them to have a more difficult time during labour.

Hypnobirthing teaches prospective mums how to reach a deep state of relaxation by practising methods of visualisation and self-hypnosis so the body's muscles can work the way they are meant to.

Fathers-to-be also learn how to support the mother's level of relaxation during the birth.

The labouring mother can then manage the tension caused by fear and anxiety, and approaches the birth feeling calm, confident and in control.

Ms Austen says: "There is a common misconception about hypnosis and women

Relaxed and in total control

often ask me if they will be in a trance or asleep as they give birth.

"In fact, what you experience is similar to daydreaming, or focusing on a movie, or staring into a fire. You are aware, fully in control, but also pleasantly relaxed. I've found that anyone interested and willing can benefit from hypnobirthing and apply the techniques.

"Even my clients whose births became high risk and who needed caesareans or to



be induced say that they found what they learned in the classes helped them stay calm, and made the experience easier."

Ms Austen has been practising clinical hypnotherapy for four years and qualified as a specialist over a year ago.

The method has been taught in Britain for about two years and she is one of only a handful of full-time practitioners in the country.

Dr Lorne Campbell, a New York clinical professor of family medicine, introduced hypnobirthing to his practice four years ago. Since then, he says his caesarean rate has dropped from 24 per cent to 1 per cent and none of his patients has ever requested analgesic drugs during labour.

A natural, beautiful thing

Ms Austen says: "I grew up on a farm in New Zealand and birth was a part of daily life. I was always encouraged to regard it as a natural, beautiful thing.

"It struck me that animals cope better with labour than humans and are usually relaxed and serene. Western women have been conditioned to expect traumatic birth, so that is normally exactly what happens."

For more information go to www.hypnobirthing.me.uk, call 07766 963228 or email info@HypnoBirthing.me.uk.



Pictures: (Top) Suzanne Austen is helping husbands hypnotise their wives during labour. Here she helps Nathan Godden perform a back massage on his wife, Jess, and (right), she gets the couple do a suggestibility test, where they have to hold a pencil between finger and thumb, and may end up not being able to drop it when told to do so.

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