

Lesson Three: *Pain and Natural Birth*

“A woman in birth is at once her most powerful, and most vulnerable. But any woman who has birthed unhindered understands that we are stronger than we know.”

Marcie Macari

Welcome back, Mom, to Lesson Three!

In Lesson Two, you learned about how your body is designed to give birth. You learned about your reproductive anatomy and the hormones that work together to help labor and birth happen. You learned the difference between Braxton Hicks contractions and real labor, and that you should contact your provider immediately if you have four or more contractions in an hour and you are less than 36 weeks along. You also learned the five signs that labor is close and the four stages of labor.

Putting “Natural” in Natural Birth

You may wonder why you should consider natural birth and accept the pain that goes with it. You might ask yourself, Is a natural birth something I may not realize I want?

You must understand the way nature meant birth to be in order to answer that question.

Women’s bodies are designed for birth. If not, humankind would have died out thousands of years ago. Here’s how it works. Near the end of pregnancy...

- The cervix softens;
- The baby settles lower into the pelvis;
- Labor begins; and
- Labor contractions open the cervix and guide the baby in rotating and moving through the birth canal and out.

But it is the pain of labor and delivery that worries most moms! So, it’s essential to understand the reason for it. The pain in childbirth is valuable, unlike other pain we experience, like the pain you might feel when injuring your arm or stubbing your toe. The acronym **PAIN** stands for:

P—Purposeful

A—Anticipated

I—Intermittent

N—Normal

So, let’s break down the labor pain process:

1. Oxytocin is released, which signals the brain to begin and strengthen each contraction. If this didn’t happen, the cervix would not open. Oxytocin continues to increase throughout labor, strengthening the contractions.

2. Pain guides the mother to move in ways that open her pelvis, such as squatting or rocking her hips. If Mom did not change positions like this, it would be harder for the baby to move into the space and position that is best for birth.

If you remove the pain, the feedback system between the brain and uterus is disrupted and can stall labor, making it much less efficient. Natural childbirth is not about suffering. Rather, it is about the freedom to find comfort in many ways and the freedom needed to respond to contractions in ways that guide the baby through the pelvis and birth canal more efficiently. However, for all the benefits of pain, our bodies still provide a natural way to relieve some of it. Here's how it works:

The progression of labor triggers increasing amounts of endorphins. These can be more potent than morphine. Rising levels make a shift in the brain, allowing you to be more in tune with your instincts, putting you into a semi-dreamlike state, and helping you focus on labor. Also, when you are surrounded by people whom you trust and with whom you feel safe and relaxed, all the pieces of natural labor work together for birth to happen.

After the baby is in your arms, these same hormones will bring you energy, joy, and love. Then, uninterrupted, you and your baby will know precisely how to greet one another, and the baby will naturally move to the breast to nurse for the first time.

Without medical interventions, you and your baby are free from any side effects from medications or procedures. However, medications, like an epidural, can prevent the natural flow of endorphins at the moment of birth and leave you feeling more exhausted than joyful.

Natural Birth Benefits for the Baby

The baby benefits from a natural birth.

1. The baby is not drowsy. All babies experience a slight shock from being born. They go from a warm, dark, quiet environment to a cold, bright, loud place. After birth, they want to rest a bit and take it all in. If born naturally and placed skin-to-skin with you, the resting period will be brief because your baby's instincts will kick in to move to your breast to feed. However, if born in a medicalized birth, your baby may be too exhausted to have that alert time to feed and gaze at you.
2. The baby travels through the birth canal, preparing them for life outside the womb. Newborns have immature immune systems and need all the help they can get to protect themselves from diseases. The baby receives maternal antibodies during pregnancy, but most are transferred during labor, helping support their immune system after birth and protecting them from infections. Babies born vaginally also receive bacteria on their skin from the vagina, which helps train their bodies to know good bacteria from bad and fight infection better.

9) Uvnas-Moberg Kerstin et al., "Maternal plasma levels of oxytocin during physiological childbirth—a systematic review with implications for uterine contractions and central actions of oxytocin," 285 (August 9, 2019), BMC Pregnancy and Birth, Springer Nature 2022 BioMed Central LTD, <https://bmcpregnancychildbirth.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12884-019-2365-9>, accessed January 18, 2022.

Natural Birth Benefits for Mom

You benefit from natural childbirth too!

1. Labor is often shorter with natural birth because moms can change positions that help guide their babies into the best positions for delivery. However, medications typically confine you to your bed and prolong labor. Staying in bed means it can take the baby longer to get to where they need to be and for your cervix to dilate fully.
2. Feeling of joy versus exhaustion. Medication can interfere with the burst of endorphins and oxytocin.
3. Faster recovery time. Moms who give birth naturally, generally have a shorter recovery time. They don't need to wait for medications or an epidural to wear off. They don't have incisions or stitches, apart from any natural tears. The natural endorphins also help them get on their feet sooner.
4. Increased feelings of satisfaction, empowerment, and confidence. Going through natural labor causes many women to feel empowered and confident, which follows them as they face other challenges throughout their lives.

The Three Rs: Relaxation, Rhythm, and Ritual

You will need to learn the three Rs. Penny Simpkin, a respected doula, childbirth educator, and author, introduced this concept. The three Rs stand for relaxation, rhythm, and ritual.

Relaxation

Relaxation in the first stage of labor allows the body to open and helps break the fear-tension-pain cycle. We tense our bodies when we anticipate and fear pain. Tension increases the sensation of pain, which makes us more afraid and tenser. Breaking this cycle can reduce the pain Mom perceives throughout labor.

The Gate Theory

The gate theory applies to the perception of pain. The idea is that there are ways to flood nerves with non-painful or pleasurable stimuli—like massage—so the pain signals are less likely to go through the nerve's gate and get to the brain to communicate that there is pain. For example, when you bang your arm on something, and it throbs, you feel less pain if you rub it. Why is that? The stimuli from the massage decrease the perception of pain.

Rhythm

Rhythm is also essential in coping with labor. The comfort techniques all have a rhythm to them. They might include rhythmic movements like swaying, or a rhythmic breathing pattern, or a rhythmic affirmation like, "I can do this. I can do this. I can do this."

When you can use rhythm in your coping strategies, you and your support team will know that you're coping well. For example, a mom may make noises that sound like she

is in distress, but if there is a rhythm to what she's doing, she is coping well through her contractions. Your support people need to understand this, so they don't needlessly worry. Real distress is indicated when you become panicked or disorganized in your actions or behavior.

The Take-Charge Method for Support People

If you struggle in finding your rhythm, your support people can help guide you back to it by taking charge. They can do this by first getting your attention, saying, "Look at me." Then they can ask you to focus on their eyes and breathe, or move rhythmically by asking you to follow the pattern until you find your rhythm again.

Ritual

Ritual is whatever technique you use to get through contractions. In the early phase of stage 1, you may use methods you learned in childbirth education to find what will work for you. Later, in the active and transition phases, you will likely develop spontaneous (non-planned) rituals to help you through contractions. For example, you may begin labor using a breathing pattern and swaying while your support person counts. But as labor progresses, you may find yourself leaning over a birth ball, staring at a picture on the wall while rocking back and forth spontaneously. Support people mustn't disrupt your rituals because it can throw you off and cause you stress. Instead, they should help by supporting your rituals, such as touching or massaging however you ask to be touched and keeping quiet during your contractions to allow you to concentrate. Your rituals might change based on the intensity of the contractions or how your body reacts in the moment.

Comfort and Coping Techniques to Practice

Practicing the different comfort and coping techniques is essential to help you fall into them naturally.

Focused Breathing

Breathing is critical for relaxation. While there is no magical breathing pattern for you to learn, it can help you to find a rhythm to use as part of your ritual. Breathing also helps bring oxygen to the baby during the contractions. Just make sure you are not holding your breath.

Breathing Patterns

Focused breathing. An example of focused breathing is a pattern such as "Hee hee, whooo, hee hee, whooo," or "Hee whooo, hee whooo."

Deep breathing. You can use deep breathing at the beginning of a contraction. Take in a deep breath through your nose and blow it out through your mouth.

Putting it Together. You can combine deep and patterned breathing to get through a painful contraction. This is something you can practice.

1. First, take a deep cleansing breath—in through your nose, filling your belly with air, and then out your mouth.

2. Next, use patterned breathing, such as “hee, hee, hoo.” You can pace the pattern faster as the contraction builds in intensity and then slower as the contraction subsides. When you and your support person practice different breathing patterns, you will find what you are most comfortable with, and the pattern will come easily once labor begins.
3. At the end of the contraction, take another deep, cleansing breath.

Focal Point

A focal point is something you look at and focus on during a contraction. You can combine it with other comfort and coping techniques, such as a breathing pattern or while rocking your body. Focal points can be whatever you want, such as an ultrasound picture of your baby, an object, an image with an inspirational quote, or even just a spot on the wall or your partner’s shirt. You may start with an intentional focal point, but as your rituals become spontaneous, it can change to anything in the room that catches your attention.

Example of combining focal point with a breathing technique:

As the contraction begins:

1. Take in a deep, cleansing breath through the nose, filling your tummy with air and slowly releasing it out your mouth.
2. In this example, begin talking about an object, such as an ultrasound picture. “I see my baby’s nose in the ultrasound. She has my nose. It’s a cute little button nose. Look at her lips. They’re so cute and pouty. She has her daddy’s strong forehead. Look how she sucks her thumb. She is so cute. I can’t wait to meet you, baby.”
3. As the contraction ends, take in a final, deep breath through the nose and release it slowly, blowing the contraction away.

Visualization

Visualization is a relaxation technique that is a story-based mental image that describes a calming scene or sends you to a special place in your mind. You can use it in many ways, and it always involves a positive image or experience. It includes the sights, smells, tastes, and sounds where appropriate. For example, it is:

- The retelling of a positive personal experience, such as a wonderful and loved vacation, the story of how you met your partner, your wedding, a shared relaxing and fun experience, or a pleasant time in life such as a loved childhood experience.
- A mental image of a happy place. An image of spending time in the mountains among the tall trees with the breeze whispering through the pines and a trickle of a gentle brook. Or lying on a warm, sandy beach with a cool breeze against your body, the sun warming your face, the salty smell of the ocean, and the sound of crashing waves against the shore.

- Creating an ideal experience or environment. Visualizing the ideal birth experience or describing your perfect house (what each room would look like, the colors, the perfect social spaces, etc.).
- A script describing ideal labor. Describe how each contraction opens the cervix and how the baby is slowly working their way down to birth. How meeting baby, skin-to-skin contact, and breastfeeding for the first time will feel.

You and your partner or support person can write out your own scripts to share. Then, your support person can read the script as you close your eyes, relax, and listen to what you're hearing. Or you can speak the experience out loud or to yourself as you focus inwardly and relax.

An example of a visualization script

Start with two deep, cleansing breaths, then relax, close your eyes, and listen as the script is read to you.

Picture a sphere in front of you. It can be any size you want it to be. Think about the color of your sphere. The light from the sphere is soft and glowing. As the contraction begins to build, just focus on the sphere as it increases in size. There is a pulsating glow, and the glow is dimming and glowing and dimming and glowing.

Breathe in and out with the rhythm of the light.

The glow of this sphere grows brighter as the contraction peaks. And it reveals a beautiful landscape before you. Breathe with the rhythm of the light. It's glowing and dimming. Glowing and dimming, revealing the landscape. As the contraction comes down, the landscape is coming more into focus, and the sphere is fading away. Look at the beautiful landscape before you and breathe in and out that fresh, calm air. You are in your favorite place. You can blow that contraction away. And breathe in and out, in and out. Now take a nice, cleansing breath and open your eyes.

Practice your scripts at home so during labor they will feel natural.

Massage and Counterpressure

Massage and counterpressure are two great ways to bring some comfort during a contraction. Remember, it's a way to flood the nerves with non-painful or pleasurable stimuli, so the pain signals are less likely to communicate pain.

You can use many different things for massage.

- You can purchase small, inexpensive massage tools that you can use to apply pressure to the areas that hurt.
- You can also use household items such as a rolling pin for your support person to roll up and down your back.
- You can use a tennis ball or the heels of your hands to press and roll in the areas that hurt, such as the lower back.

- You can use a large scarf that can fit around your belly.
- It's good to practice with these items to see what feels good before using them in labor.

Practice Massage and Counterpressure

Practice with your support person or partner.

Begin by getting on your knees leaning over a chair seat to provide your support person good access to your back. Have your support person try various things, such as pressing and rolling a tennis ball in your lower back, rolling a rolling pin up and down your back, using any massage tool you have. Practice getting the pressure just right to help you relax.

The Double Hip Squeeze

While leaning over the chair seat, have your support person feel for your hip bones and then move their hands back and down to find the squishy, indented area. The support person will put the heels of their hands in that area and squeeze and hold during the contraction.

You can also do the double hip squeeze using a scarf or piece of material that is long enough. Put the material under your belly and around the hip area, where you would squeeze with your hands. Then, have the support person cross the fabric in the back and pull it tight, squeezing the soft part of your hips. Pull and hold during contractions.

Sifting

Sifting is another technique used during or between a contraction. It can be used two ways.

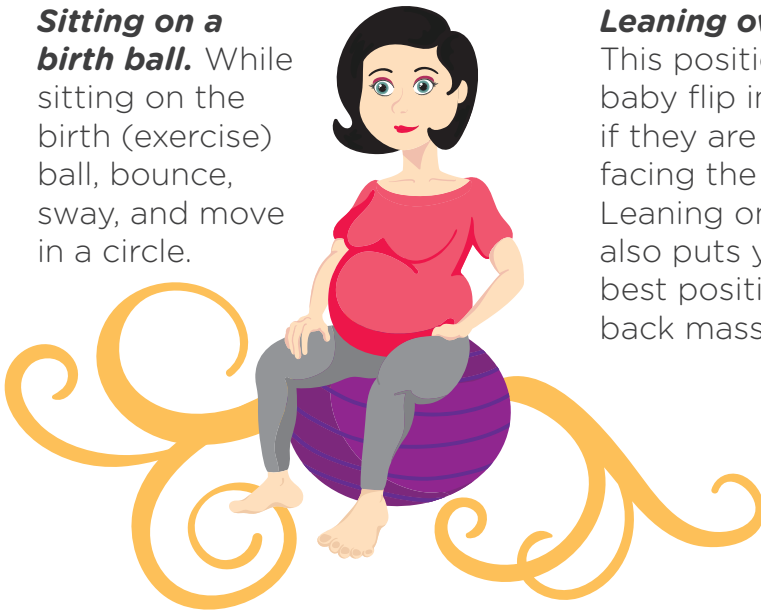
First, spread the scarf over the front of your belly with the support person holding the two ends of the scarf behind you. Next, have them move the scarf from side to side quickly, jiggling your belly. The jiggling motion disrupts the pain signals going to the brain.

Second, spread the scarf over your bottom with the support person standing behind you, holding both ends. Again, they will move it from side to side quickly. The jiggle motion can relax you after a contraction.

Positions

Changing positions frequently helps open the pelvis and allow the baby to move down and get into position for birth. It also helps you follow your body's lead and instincts to comfort yourself during labor and delivery. Here are some excellent positions to practice:

Sitting on a birth ball. While sitting on the birth (exercise) ball, bounce, sway, and move in a circle.



Leaning over a birth ball. This position can help the baby flip in the right direction if they are breech or not facing the correct way. Leaning on the ball also puts you in the best position for a back massage.



Slow dancing. Face your support person leaning your weight onto them with your arms around their neck. Slow dancing allows you to sway to your rhythm. You can also slow-dance by standing with your back to your support person's front (both facing the same direction). The support person puts their arms around your front and gently lifts your belly. Again, sway to your rhythm.



Birth Peanut. Straddle and sit on the peanut and bounce. You can also sit back on one end and lean over, with your belly in the center of the peanut. If you're bed-bound, you can lie on your side and place the peanut between your legs. Doing this can still help open the pelvis rather than lying on your back with your legs closed.



Squatting. Squatting is a great position to open the pelvis and help the baby move into position. First, have your support person sit in a chair. Next, stand in front of the support person, facing away. Then squat down between the support person's legs leaning back into them and using their legs to support you.

Sitting on a toilet. Sitting on a toilet is comfortable because the toilet seat doesn't have a center that puts pressure on your bottom. Straddle the toilet, facing the tank. You can place a pillow on the tank to lean into.

Hydrotherapy

The use of water during labor is very effective in helping you cope with pain. We think of a warm bath as an excellent relaxing way to end the day. The buoyancy of a tub of water can also take the pressure off your belly. Likewise, a shower with a handheld nozzle can provide comfort and a great massage.

Room Environment

The environment can play a significant role in how you cope with the labor. You and your support person should make sure it is inviting, relaxing, and stress-free. You can accomplish this by having calm, low lights, flameless candles, music, and aromatherapy using a diffuser and essential oils. It is all about what relaxes and calms you.

Nurse's Note: Natural Comfort Techniques during Labor

There are a variety of natural comfort techniques or non-pharmacological techniques that help ease labor pain. As mothers move through the labor and delivery process, the natural comfort techniques options have been found to reduce the mother's pain even when planning to use pain medication. Each mother's response to pain medication can vary. The mother may change how and when the natural comfort techniques are used based on her labor. Having positive and involved labor support and a supportive healthcare team will enhance the mother's birth experience.

Have you started considering childbirth pain and how you want to manage it? In what ways do you think you'll manage it? Are you interested in trying natural birth? Review the Pain Preferences Chart to see how you wish to manage pain. Then, look it over with your support person, if you have one picked out, and discuss it with them.

Practice makes perfect. Finally, take some time to practice the techniques you learned today and find what you are comfortable with. If you have a support person picked out, practice with them. Practicing will help you be ready and will help these techniques happen more naturally and automatically when you need them to.

In the next lesson, we'll talk about why informed decision-making is crucial during labor and birth, and how to do it. You'll learn an easy method to ensure you get all the important information needed to make the best decisions for you and your baby.

Don't forget to complete your homework before your next class.

