

## Gentle Birth

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BIO: Caroline Stewart is a Registered Massage Therapist and HypnoBirthing childbirth educator. She is passionate about sharing the knowledge of health and well-being with others and due to gently birth her second child in February.

What happened to Birth? As long as I can remember, I was scared of birth. Movies, books and discussions depicted birthing women as being in complete agony; screaming, cursing their partners and their bodies. But I have since learned that birth is natural and normal. Pain, along with all other constructions of the mind, is not necessary in normal and healthy situations. After one joyful birth and another on the way, I am no longer scared.

### *Women have birthed for millions of years*

Successful procreation has been the key to human life for many millions of years. It seems that evolution would naturally favour the women that birthed successfully and therefore, birth would be constantly improving in function and success. Until recently, birth was considered normal and natural. Birth was a celebration of life and it was understood that women's bodies were made to give birth. It was only within the last century or two that birth came to be feared.

Modern medicine was founded on the belief that when the body is out of balance, it needs to be fixed. It seems that the more knowledge we gained about how to fix the body, the more we feared the body as something that can, and very often does, fail us. Childbirth is no exception to this fear. Our society concentrates on the 'what ifs' and is always ready and waiting to fix the problem, often before it even occurs.

Particularly in Western society, mistrust in birth and the birthing body has led to generations of fear surrounding birth. How can we argue with or even see another way when the birth experiences of our mothers, grandmothers, family and friends have all been painful and awful experiences? Undoing millions of years of normal birth through medicalization and fear has left many of us confused and without support from family, friends or medical staff.

### *The birthing body is NOT flawed – Women were made to do this!*

Women's bodies are perfectly designed to birth easily and effectively. Our birthing muscles work just as well, if not more effectively than the other major muscles in our body. Two different types of muscles are evident in the uterus: the longitudinal muscles, and the circular muscles.

The longitudinal muscles running up and down are most concentrated at the top of the uterus in order to move the baby downwards during a contraction. The circular muscles

concentrated near the cervix are designed to maintain the integrity and form of the uterus throughout the lifespan and in pregnancy. Both sets of muscles are perfectly designed to work together during pregnancy and birth.

When oxytocin is released at the onset of labour the longitudinal muscles contract to move the baby downwards and the circular muscles relax and open, effectively opening and thinning the cervix. This is very important knowledge in understanding the way that a woman's body is perfectly designed for birth. So, if these muscles are perfectly designed to support birth, why do so many women experience pain in labour and birth?

#### *Catecholamines cause pain in labor*

For almost a century now, Physicians have known that the antagonistic effects of endorphins and catecholamines play a key role in the experience of pain and the ease (or difficulties) experienced in birthing. In a state of relaxation, endorphins are secreted in the body, creating an overall sense of well-being and a reduction in the sensations of pain. During times of fear, instead of endorphins, catecholamines are secreted.

Catecholamines cause the 'fight, flight, or freeze' response that we have all experienced. Basically, in times of stress our bodies direct all available resources to survival. What this means for birthing is that oxygen is diverted away from the uterus, the circular muscles of the uterus contract and often our labours 'shut-down' (freeze) until the stress is removed.

Without optimal levels of oxygen and vital nutrients, the uterus is functioning less than optimal. In addition, the contraction of the circular muscles near the cervix increase the sensations of pain and cramping as the longitudinal muscles continue working to move the baby downwards. Instead of working together, these muscles are working against each other. The result is pain and often long, difficult labours.

#### *Fear and pain are unnecessary*

A pioneer in the Natural Childbirth movement, Dr. Grantly Dick-Read proposed in his book *Childbirth Without Fear* (1933) that there exists a 'fear-tension-pain' syndrome in childbirth. Basically, fear of the birth experience or of any kind during labour and birth cause tension in the body. Fear causes tension in the body and the body reacts with the 'fight, flight or freeze' response, which ultimately leads to pain and further fear in labour and birth.

Dr. Grantly Dick-Read states "there is no physiological function in the body that gives rise to pain in the normal course of health. In no other animal species is the process of birth apparently associated with any suffering, pain or agony, except where pathology exists or in an unnatural state, such as captivity" (*Childbirth Without Fear*, 1933).

So, the question we are left with is: What are we afraid of? I believe that our society was originally afraid of the lack of control associated with birthing, which led to experiences of pain and tension that were passed down from recent generations. The medicalization

of birth began in response to the perceived lack of control that medical professionals had over the birthing experience. From there, due to painful and traumatizing experiences, birth has come to be viewed as difficult, excruciating and requiring intervention.

Knowing differently, that the body is perfectly designed to give birth easily and effectively, pain and tension are no longer necessary! In normal situations, the only requirement of a gentle and easy birth is relaxation (endorphins are our friends ☺).

### *Support for birthing women*

Natural birth is becoming more well-known and supported in Alberta. The pioneering works of Dr. Grantly Dick-Read, Dr. Robert Bradley and other influential Physicians, along with the introduction of midwifery care and support organizations (such as ASAC) have provided women with extensive information and support for natural birth.

Childbirth education classes that emphasize natural and gentle birth are also widely available. In particular, HypnoBirthing classes focus on the elimination of fear and provide women with the tools needed for deep relaxation and trust in the birthing experience.

With all of our current knowledge about gentle birth, support from local organizations and midwives, and available childbirth education I believe it is time that we embrace the normalcy and celebration of birth. Change for our births and for future generations starts...from within.

### Sources:

*Childbirth Without Fear* by Grantly Dick-Read. 1933.

*HypnoBirthing: The Mongan Method* by Marie Mongan. 2005.