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Calm, centered and ready to have that baby

Hypnobirthing gives moms-to-be a drug-free alternative

By Elizabeth Olson, The New York Times

Chrissy Jensen and her husband, Chris, took all the usual baby prep classes, including Lamaze, baby care and even infant CPR. But the soon-to-be-mom, who lives in Venice, still felt something was missing.

"I kept saying, these are all great, but where are the classes that prepare your head for this?"

She found her answer when she attended a one-day hypnobirthing class taught by Michelle LeClaire O'Neill, a Pacific Palisades clinical psychologist and registered nurse who is the author of several books on the subject, including "Better Birthing With Hypnosis" (Keats Publishing; \$16.95).

"I really liked it because it was all about the mind-body connection," said Jensen. "It wasn't just about physically giving birth. And it really helped me and my husband stay more focused (during childbirth)."

Although there are other practitioners who use the term, O'Neill developed her LeClaire hypnobirthing method in 1987, using hypnosis and meditation techniques that she'd employed to help cancer patients cope with pain. By teaching pregnant women and their partners how to achieve a hypnotic state where the mind is in deep concentration and the body is relaxed, the goal is to create a "natural physical anesthesia" during labor and delivery.

Hypnobirthing not only helps decrease pain and prenatal anxiety, says O'Neill, but it also allows pregnant women "to have the healthiest experience possible prenatally, in labor and in recovery." And dads (or whoever else may be the birthing partner) get to realize "they can support the woman by just being present."

Today, many women are reaching out to hypnobirthing as well as a variety of other drug-free childbirth alternatives, including aromatherapy and birthing pools, according to experts on gynecology and obstetrics. They are inspired by Web sites such as Urbanbaby.com, reality birth television shows like "House of Babies" on the Discovery Health Channel and celebrities including Angelina Jolie, whose sojourn with Brad Pitt in Namibia spurred speculation that they would have their baby using water birthing. Tom Cruise caused a stir when he said Katie Holmes would give birth according to the principles of Scientology — in silence. (He later explained that she could make noise but that others had to be quiet for a calm delivery of their baby, a girl, born on April 18.)

While "silent birth" raised eyebrows, even the more widely practiced hypnobirthing still draws its share of skepticism.

"When you hear 'hypno,' you think weird, hippie, earthy-type stuff," said Kelly Yeiser, 31, of Asheville, N.C., who had her first baby last August using the technique. "But it's really more about meditation and getting yourself into a calm, relaxed state."

Women who have attended classes say a big appeal of hypnobirthing is that it builds confidence and helps banish fears because it focuses on the positive. Jensen said she spent time each day during the last month of her pregnancy listening to a CD that was given to her during O'Neill's class. Often her husband would join her. "It helped to center me. It also got us to spend time together."

Obstetricians interviewed said that today's expectant mothers are more focused on finding new ways to reduce or even eliminate labor and birth pain.

At one end of the spectrum, women are opting for Caesareans in record numbers. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, the combined percentage of women who had C-sections or used drugs to induce labor was about half of the 4.1 million childbirths in 2004.

Of the remaining women, many fear that drugs will hurt their newborns and want a way to avoid them as well as to control the pain.

Some of the alternatives they are selecting include water birthing, in which the woman immerses herself in a tub or pool to reduce labor discomfort, and sometimes for the birth.

Another technique is for the woman to change positions so she is not always lying down but is sitting on a giant ball, for example. Some women have acupuncture, and others use aromatherapy to create a soothing environment.

Regardless of what a woman's childbirth plans are, hypnobirthing can still be a part of it, O'Neill says. "Even if you've chosen to have a c-section this is the class for you because it's not just about birth. It's also about pregnancy and follow-up. It's something you'll have for the rest of your life."

The trend is toward nonmedical methods, said Dr. William Camann, associate professor at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston and co-author of the recently released "Easy Labor, Every Woman's Guide to Choosing Less Pain and More Joy During Childbirth" (Random House).

Once, he said, "there was no overlap, and there tended to be animosity and distrust" between those who espoused natural childbirth and advocates of medical procedures. But that has changed, he added, because women are researching alternatives and finding them on the Internet.

Hospitals today are also more accepting of a woman's desire to be in control during labor and delivery, Camann said. "There's been a gradual trend toward acceptance of alternative methods, even though five years ago, asking for a hypnobirth was almost unheard of. Now it's much more common."

So, does it work? In 2004, the British Journal of Anesthesia said studies involving 8,000 women found that those who used hypnosis techniques during childbirth rated their pain as less severe than those who did not.

Yeiser of Asheville, whose baby was born after only 2 1/2 hours of labor, said, "I was so relaxed that I slept through the first stage of labor."

While many hospitals now permit hypnobirth, doctors are wary because they fear litigation. The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists leaves it up to the individual doctor's judgment.

Such techniques are not a surefire way to avoid pain but rather "adjuncts and not the end-all to birth," said Dr. Jeffrey M. Segil, an obstetrician who offers a hypnobirthing option to patients in his practice in Dover, N.H.

"Women should not be set up to feel that they've failed if they can't follow through to a totally natural delivery," he said.

And after delivery, the technique can still come in handy, says Jensen, who is now happily at home with her 4-month-old son, Carver.

"After you have a baby, one day can just start to flow into the next. I definitely have listened to the CD a couple of times just to get back to centering myself."

Lifestyle Editor Diana McKeon Charkalis contributed to this story.