

# Breathing FOR LABOR

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# BREATHING IS A VIABLE COPING STRATEGY

When we feel fear, tension, and pain, the breath may become shallow, fast, and irregular. To find calm, relaxation and focus on yourself, bring attention to your breath. The power of breath is within your own ability to focus on and channel. Breath is something that is always with you. Connect to your breath to provide a focus and an anchor and a relaxed and ready nervous system to reduce the pain experience.

Breath is a powerful tool to utilize during labor. Our breath also gives clues to tell us where we are holding. Check in with your breath. The breath is the portal through the contractions.

Practice these breathing techniques to develop more space inside so when your labor experience starts becoming intense you can remain calm and steady. Breathing well can help you transition from anxiety to calm.

Tuning into your body and practicing breathing techniques prior to labor will help create the pathways needed to prepare your mind-body connection for the task that awaits you.

In the following pages, I'll provide different breathing techniques, how to utilize them, and different positions as you move your way through the stages of labor.

# BREATHING PATTERNS AND TECHNIQUES

Practice the following breathing techniques prior to labor to become familiar with the patterns and allow you to connect with your body.

## **CALM BREATHING**

- Take a breath in through the nose and breathe out slowly and gently through the mouth.
- Drop your shoulders, relax your jaw, and let go of any tension.
- If you have a stuffy nose due to pregnancy, breathe in and out through the mouth while focusing on the breathing out.
- When practicing, allow your exhale to be a little longer than your breath in.

## **FOCUSED BREATHING**

Practice breathing during a deep stretch or holding an ice cube in your hand. The exhale becomes the release.

## **SOUNDING BREATHS**

- Practice humming, singing, chanting, sighing and notice how you feel.

Note: Take a calm breath at the beginning and end of each contraction to let go of any held tension and to stay centered and present.

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## **PELVIC FLOOR RELEASE**

- Place one hand on your chest and another on your belly.
- As you inhale, become aware of the pelvic floor muscles lengthening and relaxing during the breath in.
- As you breathe out slowly and gently, your pelvic floor returns to its resting state.
- Practice nightly for a few minutes before you go to sleep.
- Associate the release breath with a time and place where it is safe to let go.

## **DIAPHRAGMATIC OR BELLY BREATHING**

- Slow, controlled abdominal breathing. Breathe to your center and connect with your baby.

## **COUNTING BREATHS**

- Breathe in for a count of 4, breathe out for a count of 6

## SCRIPTING

Creating a script to help produce a relaxed state during labor can help calm your entire body. Scripting can help focus the mind and bring awareness to your breath and body.

Develop your script with your physical therapist or labor support person to practice ahead of time and use during labor.

## VISUALIZATION

Visualization is a guided imagery technique that helps create harmony between your mind and body to reduce stress, decrease pain, lower blood pressure, and improve oxygenation

While practicing your breathing techniques, you'll want to visualize in your mind a place of relaxation and peace. Having an actual photograph or picture of a peaceful place can also help to bring about the visualization. Positive visualizations especially of loved ones and trusted friends.

### **EXAMPLES OF VISUALIZATION**

- My cervix is softening, opening, and stretching
- My baby is moving down and out
- The baby is coming
- I am safe and loved
- The tide of the ocean washing in and out
- Being immersed or floating in a pool, lake, or ocean
- Being in a favorite place with your new baby in your arms

# PLANNING YOUR BIRTH

- Think about and list your birth preferences
  - What do you want to be told during labor
  - What images or scripts do you want to see or hear during labor and birth?
  - Write or draw your scripts or images on flashcards to be easily accessible during labor
- Share your images or scripts with your birth team
- Practice your visualizations and breathing techniques nightly

During the first stage of labor, the goal is to encourage descent into the pelvis and support the baby's ideal birthing position.

Use distraction activities until the contractions reach a level of intensity at which you cannot continue to walk or talk through the contraction. When you have to stop and focus on your breath until the contraction eases stop trying to distract yourself and begin to use a labor ritual.

Labor rituals may involve sighing (breathing slowly, with sound, and rhythmically) to release muscle tension by focusing your attention with each breath out.

## ACTIVITIES TO HELP DESCENT AND POSITIONING

### ACTIVITIES

- Walk/climb stairs
- Hip circles/figure of 8's
- Sway hips/body/dip the hip

### POSITIONS

- Standing or leaning
- Sitting or leaning on a physioball
- Straddle a chair
- Hands and Knees
- Open lunge or kneeling lunge
- Squat or pelvic tilts
- Hanging squat with a partner
- Sitting with knees apart
- Lying on left side



# BREATHING AND VOCALIZATIONS

- At the beginning and end of each contraction take a slow, deep breath
- Begin calm breathing when contractions are intense enough that you can no longer walk or talk through them without pausing
- Use calm breathing for as long as you find it helpful. Switch to another pattern if you become tense and can no longer relax during contractions
- As the contraction begins, sigh as you breathe out and release any tension
- Focus your attention. Take a breath, and then breathe out, slowly softly, and gently letting out a sigh if you like
- Inhale, then breathe out slowly, gently, and softly letting your body relax and release any tension
- You can sigh, hum, sing to baby, lullaby, chant, count, or just make a low sound during your exhale

During this phase of labor, it may take 5-7 breaths to move through a contraction. Focus on your breath, an image, a script, a phrase, counting or positive visualizations especially of loved ones and trusted friends.

## ACTIVITIES TO HELP DESCENT AND POSITIONING

### ACTIVITIES

- Sit to stand
- Move from all fours to high kneeling
- Walk and lean
- Move rhythmically
  - walk
  - sway rock
  - slow-dance with your support person
  - tap or stroke yourself, partner, or another object
  - Or close eyes and become still and relaxed

### POSITIONS

- Sit on a ball or straddle a chair
- Supported squat
- Stand and lean
- Hands and knees or lean over a physioball
- Lie on your side with a peanut ball between legs
- Stand or sit in the shower

# BREATHING AND VOCALIZATIONS

- A steady breathing rhythm can help calm and relax you, especially if you release tension on the breath out. You always have control of your breath. Take an easy breath in, a longer breath out.
- Breathe through a contraction like breathing through a stretch in yoga. As you exhale you can “stretch” a bit more. Visualize the cervix stretching around the baby's head.
- Breathe in through your nose, out through your mouth. Take one contraction at a time. One breath at a time – It becomes a process of elimination and it's one less contraction to get through.
- Imagine that you are one contraction closer to meeting your baby.

**Try different variations of breath and vocalizations to see what's right for you. Focus on the exhalation.**

## ***BREATHING VARIATIONS TO TRY***

### **CALM BREATH**

- When the contraction begins, bring your attention to your breath.
- Let out a sigh and release any tension in your jaw, shoulders, or pelvis.
- Take a breath in through your nose, if you can, and breathe out through your mouth letting the sound out with a sigh.
- As you breathe out, relax and release tension.
- As the contraction ends, let it go.

### **FOCUSED BREATH**

- When the contraction begins, focus your attention.
- Take a quick breath in and a short breath out just loud enough to be heard.
- Imagine that you're climbing a hill. Quick breath in. Short breath out.
- As the contraction begins to come down, slow down your breathing allowing the breath out to become longer and easeful.
- If you become lightheaded or feel like you are going to hyperventilate, slow down your breaths and try to relax your shoulders and body, releasing any tension in your body.

### **COUNTING BREATHS**

- Inhale for the count of 4. Breathe out for 4 counts



**Try to stay on top of your breathing as the wave of the contraction begins to reach the top. If you lose yourself. Pause and catch your breath and find your rhythm again.**

**Try to harness your breath to the contraction. As the contraction wave breaks and it starts to come down focus on your exhalations and letting go, letting go, letting go.**

During this exciting phase of labor, the baby is descending, rotating and getting into an ideal position to begin to birth. The the contractions may become significantly longer and stronger.

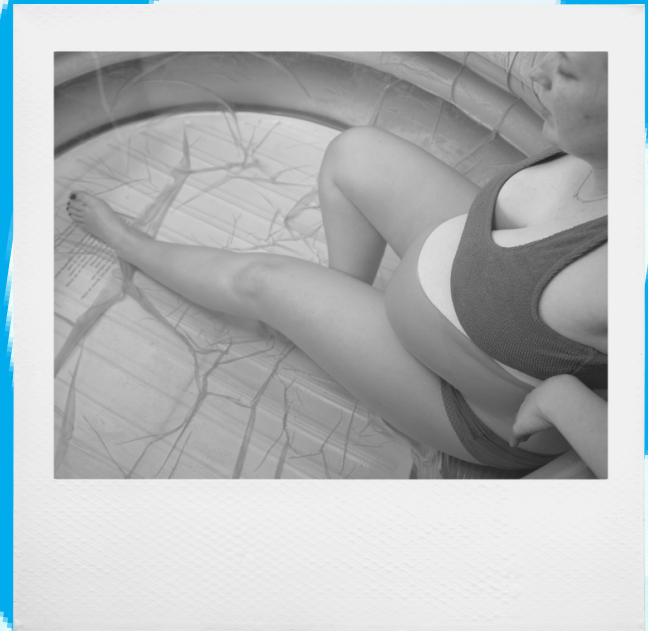
## ***ACTIVITIES TO HELP DESCENT AND POSITIONING***

### **⊙ ACTIVITIES**

- Move rhythmically
- Sit to stands
- Walking
- Standing or leaning onto the side of the hospital bed/counter/railing while rocking or side swaying and stepping or marching.
- Squat to stand
- Stair climbing

### **⊙ POSITIONS**

- Standing or standing and leaning
- Sitting upright
- Forward-leaning seated position
- Sitting straddling a chair
- Forward kneeling position
- Supported upright kneeling position
- Supported upright kneeling
- Hands and knees
- Supported squat / Squat / hanging squat
- Lunge
- Asymmetrical lunge (one knee) kneeling position
- Side-lying position



# BREATHING AND VOCALIZATIONS

- Find a breathing pattern that focuses, calms, and relaxes you. Find your own comfortable rhythm. It should not cause you to feel short of breath, dizzy, or lightheaded.
- Take a breath and focus on
  - Chanting, moaning, humming, singing or counting.
  - A deep breath in through the nose, with a low vocalization on the exhale
  - Focused breath work: Inhale for the count of 4 and then exhale for the count of 4, 5 or 6.
- We often release a strong emotion or physical sensation through sound or a vocal release. Crying is a vocal release of emotions. Our shoulders and throats relax as tears are shed. A low moan helps reduce tension in the jaw and throat which also reduces tension in the pelvis. When you breathe in – exhale with a low sound.

**Holding a positive or familiar image will help move you through the process.**

## RESTING PHASE

- The Passive or Resting Phase of 2nd Stage is 10cm to visible baby hair.
- Be patient. Rest and relax, and wait for the urge to push.
- Remind your providers of your birth preferences around pushing, such as the kind of pushing efforts and positions that you'd like to use, and communicate your feelings about an episiotomy.

## ACTIVITIES

- Change positions to support the baby into the ideal birthing position.
- Nap or take a restorative rest.
- Get into water if possible

## POSITIONS

- Side-lying
- Hands and knees
- Squatting
- Supported squat
- Standing



# ACTIVE / BIRTHING PHASE

## **ACTIVE/ PARTICIPATORY PUSHING**

- The contraction begins
- Focus your attention
- Breathe normally as you wait for the contraction to build
- Take in a breath and bear down at peak of the contraction for 4-7 seconds at a time
- While bearing down, either hold your breath, exhale or let it out with a sound.

## **DIRECTED PUSHING**

Your labor team is directing you. This technique may be used if you have an epidural, since the urge to push isn't always clear or felt

- The contraction begins
- Focus. Breathe in and out a couple of times
- Take a breath in and hold it (keep your throat soft) while you bear down for the count of 7-10, let out your breath. Take a few quick breaths in and out and repeat, holding and doing a "proper" strain.
- Repeat until contraction ends
- If you feel like someone else's count up to 10 is too long, ask for them to count to 5, 6 or 7
- Take a full relaxation breath releasing any tension in the body

# DESCENT PHASE CONTINUED

## **SPONTANEOUS PUSHING**

- Bear down and push when you feel the urge.
- Breathe out with the urge with with a low moan or groan or gently hold your breath followed by a grunt, sigh or sound.

## **J BREATHING**

- Take a quick breath in, then exhale with a long downward and forward breath out.
- As you exhale, visualize directing your breath along the back of your throat into your spine and all the way down through your birth path.
- Let out a big sigh and relax your body as you breathe out. Breathe normally and let the contraction guide you.

## POSITIONS FOR DESCENT PHASE

- Semi-sitting
- Sit on the toilet for a few contractions
- Supine
- Side-lying
- Hands and knees
- Squatting
- Standing

**Relax the pelvis and lower part of the body. Release any tension in the pelvic floor.**

## ACTIVITIES

- Change positions every half an hour or more if progress is slow.
- Focus on relaxing your bottom. Relax your throat and jaw.
- Warm moist compresses may help relax the perineum.
- Have someone hold a mirror so you can see the top of your baby's head begin to show during a contraction.

# CROWNING PHASE

Crowning occurs when the top of the baby's head is seen at the vaginal opening.

## BREATHING AND VOCALIZATION

- Slow down the birth of the baby's head.
- The perineum needs time to release, stretch, thin and open around the baby's head.
- Stop pushing and breathe out or lift your chin and blow or pant throughout the contraction to keep from pushing.
- No Epidural: You may feel a burning sensation. This is the cue to slow down, pant or blow and ease the baby out.
- EPIDURAL: Follow directions to slow down and breathe or pant or blow the baby out.
- Relax your jaw, your throat, your teeth, your tongue to relax your perineum.

## VISUALIZATION

- Visualize opening like a flower blooming and your baby moving down and out

## ACTIVITY

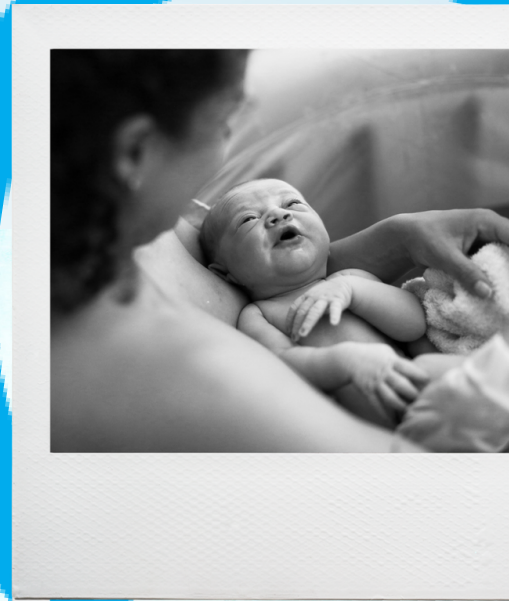
- Touch your baby! Put your hand down so that you have the joy of escorting your baby out with your OB or midwife.

# THE BIRTH OF THE PLACENTA

- Your uterus will continue contracting to deliver the placenta. You may be asked to give a little push to help deliver the placenta.
- Hold your baby skin to skin immediately and uninterrupted if possible.

# CESAREAN BIRTH

- If surgery is necessary for the health of you and your baby, you can utilize relaxation breathing to help you be present and calm to welcome your new baby and hear the first cries.
- You can ask to hold your baby with assistance immediately after birth or even experience skin to skin with your baby while still in the operating room.





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Giving birth is one of the most significant events of any woman's life. Whether a natural physiological birth or an epidural birth is planned, my goal is to help you be birth-ready and confident!

For more information regarding me and my birth coaching services, please visit my website, [Chantaltraub.com](http://Chantaltraub.com)