



Can your Thoughts Affect your Birth?

QUESTION: *I am expecting my first baby in a few months and I am worried that I will end up with a cesarean -- even though I'm not considered high risk. One of my friends has told me that if I keep thinking this way I will end up having one. I have heard there is a mind-body connection and now I am worried that my thoughts can actually affect the way I give birth. What do you think?*

ANSWER: The mind-body connection is commonly oversimplified, and misunderstandings about psychological influences on childbirth are no exception. **It is true that our beliefs and expectations influence our ability to cope with labor, which can impact the hormonal flow and physiology of the process. But this effect is related to more complex biological responses to fear,** rather than the superficial interpretation that your thoughts will cause you to have a cesarean! This simplistic association denies not only the complexity of the relationship of brain-within-body, but implies a false assumption of mind "control" which does not exist in labor.

Labor is an autonomic process. In other words, it is a spontaneous physical process that you do not have control over! It must happen by itself, just as digestion, gestation, and millions of other automatic bodily functions. Your thoughts have no more "control" over your body than over the rising and setting of the sun. Instead, it is the emotional beliefs communicated through the limbic system that interact with our biology.

The limbic system is often described as the emotional center of the brain because it sends messages to the body based on emotional arousal. **Hormones, neurochemicals and other substances are released according to an individual's perception of the world.** During labor, the hormone oxytocin is released by the pituitary gland. In addition, prostaglandins are circulated throughout the blood stream, helping to soften the cervix as the oxytocin causes the uterus to contract. **The amounts of oxytocin released and the secretion of hormones that control prostaglandins during labor are determined by the hypothalamus, which is affected by the limbic system.**

The brain regulates labor in response to many messages, including the woman's emotional state. **Heightened levels of fear and anxiety during labor have been found to decrease the flow of oxytocin. In this way, emotional factors can influence your labor.** But anxieties are normal during any life transition and becoming a mother is a transition of great magnitude! So what can we do about our anxieties?

One woman's emotional response to her situation will be different than the next, although the external circumstances are similar. Therefore, individualized preparation and care is far more effective when it deals with a woman's specific "birth inventory," which is a profile of her significant fears and concerns about upcoming motherhood and childbirth.

Although childbirth preparation classes may teach you relaxation techniques, anxiety about this life transition will be calmed only by addressing your individual concerns. Let's take a look at the following areas that contribute to normal delivery. Given that you are medically low-risk and receiving adequate nutrition and prenatal care, you will benefit from turning your attention to the following areas of personal development:

BECOMING A MOTHER • Becoming a mother

Having a baby creates a myriad of changes in our lives. Becoming a mother is one of the greatest life changes you will ever experience.

Our past childhood relationships with our mothers, our fathers and the overall connection we experienced in our parents' marriages form the backdrop for our emotional readiness for motherhood. If we felt positive support in our relationships with parents, or have worked through disappointments and childhood wounds to the extent that we trust our own marriages and abilities to mother, we will enter labor with confidence, rather than anxiety of what lies on the other side of childbirth.

What is your expectation for motherhood? Do you feel confident about your ability to nurture and guide your child? If not, what will help you develop trust in yourself to mother?

PAST CHILDBIRTH HISTORY

The stories about birth, both real or mythologized in the family, influence our underlying sense of safety and trust in the childbirth process. Our own births, too, may impact the subliminal expectations we carry into labor. More than relaxation techniques, our true ability to trust the process of labor allows our bodies to relax and function more smoothly.

Birth visualization which engages the limbic system of the brain through body-centered relaxation can help women change past negative experience and encourage positive associations. Refer to chapter eight in "An Easier Childbirth" and the audiotape "Body-Centered Hypnosis for Pregnancy, Bonding and Childbirth" to construct a childbirth visualization that addresses your specific concerns during this life transition.

What are your associations and experiences related to childbirth? If you have had a negative childbirth experience in the past, what would you want to change this time? Can you see the possibility for a positive experience in your next childbirth?

REALISTIC LABOR PREPARATION

The hippocampus of the brain mediates between what we expect and the reality of our experience. When a woman is not adequately prepared to meet and cope with the normal pain of labor contractions, she may become frightened, even believing that something is going very wrong for her. The belief that something is wrong disrupts breathing, increases tension and catecholamines (hormones produced in stress). These stress hormones are

thought to produce a signal to shut down the production and/or release of oxytocin in the blood stream during labor. They may also be responsible for decreased oxygen supply to the baby during pregnancy.

If a woman is realistically prepared to cope with labor, knowledgeable of the process and receiving adequate emotional support through labor, she is likely to actively approach each contraction, rather than attempt to avoid it. Avoidance response in the limbic system is akin to "fight or flight." This physiological response uses up resources in the body, directing blood to the external muscles for defense or running. This may drain the autonomic muscles, such as the uterus, of the blood flow needed to function smoothly.

Are you realistically prepared to cope with pain during labor, whether or not you are planning on pain medication (as medication is usually not available until labor is progressed to a certain point)? Do you have emotional support to help you through labor?

PRESENT FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Our expectations that our partners and immediate family members are available for support after the baby comes helps us enter labor with a sense that the future is secure. Anxiety related to the expectation that a baby will propel you into deprivation and chaos as a couple will increase anxiety, while nurturing family relationships will engender a sense of calm, resulting from trust that the couple will be able to handle the changes that a baby will bring to their lives and their marriage.

What are your plans for sharing caretaking responsibilities after your child is born? Have you discussed the ways in which having a baby will change your life as a couple? Have you committed yourselves to communicating about your experiences of parenthood, after your child is born?

Keep in mind, that there is no perfect preparation for labor or motherhood. Psychological "readiness" occurs because we are given encouragement and opportunity to address the concerns we have as women who are giving birth and becoming mothers.

Our psychology lives inside our bodies. There is no war of mind over matter here. The mind-body connection is based on a relationship with, rather than control over, our physicality.

Give yourself the opportunity to face your fears. Reflect on the many ways you may be afraid of "losing control." Childbirth, motherhood and life itself cause us to yield to the power of nature. Turning inwards to reflect on your development will help you strengthen your inner resources at the same time you express your specific needs for support from others.

Facing your fears and reaching out for emotional support increases your ability to handle whatever situation lies before you with a sense of calm and well-being. Achieving this state of mind ensures that you have done your part to increase the potential for a smooth and uncomplicated delivery.

Gayle Peterson, MSSW, LCSW, PhD is a family therapist specializing in prenatal and family development. She trains professionals in her **prenatal counseling model** and is the author of [An Easier Childbirth](#), [Birthing Normally](#) and her latest book, [Making Healthy Families](#). Her articles on family relationships appear in professional journals and she is an oft-quoted expert in popular magazines such as *Woman's Day*, *Mothering* and *Parenting*. She is a clinical member of The Association for Marriage and Family Therapy and a Diplomate with the National Association of Social Work. She also serves on the advisory board for *Fit Pregnancy Magazine*.

Dr. Gayle Peterson has written family columns for ParentsPlace.com, igrandparents.com, the Bay Area's *Parents Press* newspaper and the Sierra Foothill's *Family Post*. She has also hosted a live radio show, "Ask Dr. Gayle" on www.ivillage.com, answering questions on family relationships and parenting. Dr. Peterson has appeared on numerous radio and television interviews including Canadian broadcast as a family and communications expert in the twelve part documentary "Baby's Best Chance". She is former clinical director of the Holistic Health Program at John F. Kennedy University in Northern California and adjunct faculty at the California Institute for Integral Studies in San Francisco. A national public speaker on women's issues and family development, Gayle Peterson practices psychotherapy in Oakland, California and Nevada City, California. She also offers an online certification training program in **Prenatal Counseling and Birth Hypnosis**. Gayle and is a wife, mother of two adult children and a proud grandmother of three lively boys and one sparkling granddaughter..

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Send Comments and Inquiries to Dr. Gayle Peterson at gp@askdrgayle.com

