

Session 1: Handout 1

Relaxation and breathing: a boost for you and for your baby

You have probably heard that relaxation and breathing is helpful. This handout introduces you to these techniques so you can all practice over the next weeks to reduce stress both for you and the baby.

Mastering the skill of relaxation and breathing is a life skill that is useful in many different situations; coping with stressful times at work or at home, or in other situations such as being in hospital. If you are having trouble sleeping, relaxation and breathing can help.

Controlling your breathing is one of the quickest ways to relax. When you are anxious or tense your body undergoes many changes controlled through your sympathetic nervous system linked to your hormonal system. So, for instance, adrenalin is released, your muscles tense, your breathing becomes faster and more shallow. This happens during contractions as you tense up. The quickest way to get your parasympathetic nervous system working, which does the opposite to your sympathetic nervous system and calms you down, is to slow your breathing down and take deeper breaths.

Breathing

- slow your breathing down
- breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth
- breathe from your diaphragm so that you are breathing more deeply. Put one hand on your chest and the other hand on your abdomen. You are aiming for the hand on your chest to stay still and the hand on your abdomen to move in and out.
- imagine, for example, blowing a balloon away.

This is a skill that mothers and everyone else will need to practice before the birth. Practising for a few minutes every day will help you to relax. This is important for the mother, so that she can relax and for the baby during pregnancy, so that the baby can have relaxing times in the womb. Practising breathing helps to prepare the mother for the birth. It is also important for everyone else in the delivery suite to practise breathing so that they can remain calm, providing support for themselves, the mother and the baby.

For mothers, think what will help you relax, for example, massage. Your partner can rub or stroke your back. Some people like to use a plastic or wooden massager. Again, this is something that can be practiced regularly while you are pregnant. This will help you and your baby to relax and prepare you for the birth.

You can start practising this type of breathing as well as relaxation. You could also start talking with your partner/birth partner about what you think might be helpful during labour.

For fathers, partners and birth partners, you may also find it helpful to think about how you can help the mother to relax and what can help you to relax. How do you think you are going to feel during the labour? How are you going to stay calm so that you can help the mother?

Relaxation

There are different types of relaxation and what suits one person will not suit another person. Many relaxation techniques are available on CDs. You may wish to download your favourite onto your MP3 or iPod so that you can play it to yourself in the hospital.

All relaxation methods include slowing down your breathing. As was mentioned before, this is a very effective way to relax.

Tense/relax methods

These are based on you tensing each muscle in your body and then releasing the muscle so that it is relaxed. Start with the feet and work upwards. This is an exercise you could do with your partner. You will need to be comfortable and not in tight clothing. Your partner could take you through the different parts of your body, slowly. For example: First, slow down your breathing, breathing from your diaphragm. Curl up the toes on your left foot, hold for a few seconds and now relax. Feel the relaxation in your toes and foot. Now tense the muscles in the back of your lower left leg. Hold for a few seconds. Now relax, letting any tension flow out of your muscles. Feel the relaxation at the back of your lower left leg. Now tense the muscles in the front of your lower left leg. Hold for a few seconds. Now relax, letting go of any tension. Feel the relaxation in the front of your lower left leg ... then carry on with each section of your body.

Visualisation

These are based on imagining yourself in a relaxed place, such as lying on a beach or sitting in a forest or meadow. You need to think of places that are relaxing for you and then imagine that you are lying there feeling relaxed. It may be your garden at home or your bedroom. It just needs to be a place that feels relaxing to you. Imagine the place in detail in your mind and imagine yourself becoming more and more relaxed.

Some people like to imagine something like a flower rather than being in a place. The technique is the same, imagine the flower or object in detail in your mind and concentrate on becoming more and more relaxed.



Mindfulness

These are based on thinking about each bit of your body so that you become aware of it. You will notice that as soon as you think about your left heel you will suddenly be aware of it. Again start with the feet and work upwards. Start with your left toes and progress up your left leg, then repeat on your right leg.

All of these methods are more effective if you associate a word with the relaxing effect that they produce. For instance, if you are using the tense/relax method keep using the word 'relax' so that you associate this word with the relaxed state. Your brain will then learn to associate that word with being relaxed which will help you relax even more quickly. This is called classical conditioning in psychology theory and if anyone knows a bit about classical conditioning it is exactly the same process as that used with Pavlov's dogs!

As a mother, you will also be able to calm your baby after he is born through skin-to-skin contact, putting the newborn baby on your skin. It has the same effect on him as for you, it calms both of you and regulates both your heartbeats. After the baby is born the midwife will ask you if you would like skin-to-skin and will put the baby on your tummy or chest for you to hold. However, as a father or partner, you can also have skin-to-skin contact with the baby.