

The Physiology of Fear

Nadia Raafat explains just how fear can affect how we give birth and just how important relaxation really is.

It's a four letter word, it begins with F and it keeps you up at night.

Fear. Fear is the shadow that haunts women through their pregnancy and undermines labour. It's that insidious voice that breaks down your courage and leads you to run into the arms of the hospital anaesthetist begging for epidurals.

What's more, if the studies are anything to go by, today, we are more frightened about the prospect of childbirth than ever before. Ironic, given the fact that today, childbirth has never been safer.

However our fear is valid and we have good reasons for running scared; the media, the hospitalisation of child birth, the proliferation of alarming stories and, mainly, the fact that the primal physical nature of birth is so alien to the intellectual creatures that we have become. So despite the apparent safety of birth, fear has been perpetrated along with an expectation of pain, which becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Pain is expected, fear is present, the body is tense and pain is experienced.

It wouldn't be so bad if it wasn't for the fact that our fear of birth is affecting how we go about it.

One quarter of us are having caesareans – nearly twice as many as ten years ago. In fact the more fear a woman feels, the more likely she is to need an epidural or some other form of intervention. In a nutshell, fear is woman's greatest enemy in the labour room.

What happens physiologically when we feel fear?

There are three layers of muscles in the uterus; outer longitudinal muscles and inner horizontally circular muscles plus a middle layer. The circular muscles – located at the bottom of the uterus and thickest near the cervix – are drawn up in labour by

the stronger longitudinal muscles – enabling the baby to move down into the birth canal. When the mother is relaxed and comfortable, these muscles work harmoniously together; the vertical muscles draw up and the circular muscles draw back – labour is easy.

Except not when fear is in the room.

Fear makes your body produce stress hormones called catecholamine which triggers your body's instinctive flight or fight response. In this state of alert your muscles (including your uterine ones) tense up. Clenched fists, a tight mouth, a furrowed brow all send the wrong signals to the birth passage muscles – which also seize up.

In a state of alert blood flow is re-directed to the parts of the body that can protect it; (i.e. not the uterus). The lack of blood in the uterus leads to a constricting of the muscles so that instead of relaxing and opening, the neck of the uterus tightens, and labour stalls. In this state the mother will experience an increase in her sensitivity to pain.

As well as being extremely painful for the mother, the mother's tightening up can have an adverse effect on the baby whose head is being pushed by the expelling force of the vertical muscles against an unrelenting cervix? It is at this point that the labouring mother tired, defeated possibly asks for intervention. And fear has its self-fulfilling outcome.

It doesn't have to be this way.

We are not supposed to have painful births. In other cultures, at other times in our own history birth was a pain-free experience. Even today there are many women, thanks to the proliferation of birth education classes and birth preparation classes, experiencing gentle births. If you are safe and relatively relaxed during labour, instead of producing those dreadful catecholamines, you can ignite

the wondrous endorphin flame, the body's natural painkiller. Some people say these magic chemicals are up to 500 times more potent than morphine. Well I don't know about that but I can assure you they are unilaterally agreed to be the body's natural painkiller. When these hormones flood the body, the contractions become manageable; strong but manageable.

So what are we scared of?

Hospital for starters, losing control, not coping with the pain, having an emergency C-section, sustaining a bad tear or episiotomy, something being wrong with the baby... and underlying all of these is that great blanket fear of the unknown.

The good news is you can address your fears.

The best way to eliminate that which you fear is to know it. So talk about them, write them down, join a good childbirth class, learn to relax (this is the heart of any good pregnancy yoga class), practise visualisation techniques, try alternative therapies, even birth hypnosis, hire a doula or an independent midwife (in addition to your partner) someone you can trust, visit your birthing centre, attend a birth rehearsal... and learn to breathe. Above all else learn to breathe because that will relax you. And finally, be realistic... if it's unbearable, you won't die, and you'll simply have an epidural.

Addressing your fears and preparing for birth is as much a part of being pregnant as having a scan and packing your hospital bag. And if you don't, you will be the only person suffering in the end.

Nadia Raafat is a health writer and antenatal teacher. For more information on her pregnancy and postnatal classes in Battersea and Clapham visit www.hypnogyoga.co.uk or call her on 07771 687 128.