



TEN HOLISTIC WAYS TO PREPARE FOR THE INTENSITY OF BIRTH

By Virginia Bobro

Certified Birthing From Within Childbirth Mentor, Doula, and Lactation Consultant

There are many ways to prepare for childbirth. We fill our brains with information, facts, and research about it. We hear others' experiences and opinions, which can often be overwhelming to a pregnant woman! We prepare our bodies for birth by getting regular prenatal care, eating well, and exercising. Sometimes neglected in our culture is tending to the psychological, emotional, and spiritual preparation of women (and men) as they approach this life-changing event. There are hundreds of books and websites about getting ready for birth, and many facts and opinions about how to deal with the pain. Keep in mind that "pain" is actually a small word. It doesn't truly convey the full spectrum of intensity that can unfold during labor and birth. In addition to the physical sensations of baby moving down through the pelvis and cervix, ligaments and tissues stretching, there is usually fatigue, back ache, thirst, and hunger. Normal emotional responses such as fear, excitement, uncertainty, discouragement, and love can be intense and overwhelming for both the birthing woman and her birth partners.

So, here is my list of ten important ways to holistically and mindfully prepare for the wide range of possibilities and demands of birth and parenting, both physical and emotional.

1. Dig Deep

Examine your beliefs, judgment, and assumptions about pain and coping with pain. What do you already know about labor pain? What do you think is okay and not okay to do in labor? How many ways are there to cope with the intensity of labor? What do you judge in yourself or others? *What are **you** willing to do to get your baby out?*

2. Get Real!

Gain a realistic view of what happens in birth. Avoid dramatic fear-based shows and idealized glorious births filmed in soft-focus with soothing music. Instead, head for a class or video that honestly and objectively discusses and shows the natural movements, sounds, and activities that are common at most births. Your childbirth teacher may even role-play a realistic contraction, complete with rocking, moaning, cursing, or crying.

3. Tend to Your Body

Excellent prenatal nutrition and regular exercise are crucial to preparing for the physical rigors of birth. Taking good care of your body means taking good care of your baby, and lessens the risk of complications during and after birth. Yoga, stretching, swimming, and some cardio work (such as a brisk daily walk) get you ready for the hard work of labor. Recovery and postpartum weight loss is typically easier when a mom is in good physical shape before birth.

4. Align Your Birth Team

Wherever you plan to birth (birth center, hospital or at home), ensure that your midwife or doctor is in alignment with your intention and beliefs about pain and pain management. Beginning and maintaining an open, honest dialog during prenatal visits is very important. By communicating who you are and explaining your values and priorities, you set up a relationship based on mutual respect and trust. This will help foster positive interactions during labor as well.

5. Invite Dad into the Picture

Whether your birth partner is your husband, your lover, your friend or your mother, it is important for you both to explore expectations about birth and postpartum. Take your partner to classes that exploring the partner's experience. He (or she) may have beliefs, hopes and concerns about the birth and parenting that are unlike yours. He needs to know how to fulfill two roles: help you **and** tend to his own needs for information and support.

6. Create a Circle of Support

Gather your emotional and practical resources as soon as possible. Know who in your community and family can give you what you need, whether it be a shoulder to cry on or a home-cooked meal. A doula (trained birth companion who specializes in emotional and practical support before, during and/or after birth) is considered by many families to be the most important tool to have during labor. Having your allies in place allows you to focus on your important work of growing, birthing and mothering your baby.

7. Prepare for the Pain

First, let's understand the distinction between pain and suffering. Pain and the physical sensations of birth are simply *what is*. Suffering occurs when we believe the negative internal story we tell ourselves about the pain. Increasing your awareness of the internal workings of your mind under stress can quickly build a pain-coping mindset. Learning mindfulness processes is the first step; taking it further--a commitment to daily practice--will strengthen your mental resolve. Knowing that almost every woman in labor will experience feelings of discouragement and negative self-talk can help you build determination as well as compassion for yourself when things don't go as planned. Many women find that spending just ten minutes a day connecting with their baby and visualizing themselves opening in labor helps to unwind their nervous system from the busy-ness and stress of everyday life.

8. Look Your Fears in the Eye

"Worry is the work of pregnancy," writes Pam England in her book, *Birthing From Within*. What are you *really* hoping to avoid in birth or postpartum? Be willing to explore the possibility of unwished-for events. If your expectations and plans for birth are flexible and arising from self-awareness, then when birth takes another path, you can source from love rather than fear. You can remain present to yourself and do what needs to be done, even when it's not what you envisioned or hoped for.

If you are functioning in a state of fear, panic, obsession, or avoidance about particular aspects of pregnancy, birth, and parenting, then you have some inner exploration to do! Find a friend, childbirth educator, or doula who is not afraid of fear and will allow you space to share and move through your fears. There are many more ways of addressing fears, including hypnosis, meditation, art, ritual, visualization, and counseling.

9. Tend to Your Heart and Spirit

Journaling, dance, art, music, spiritual practice, and being in nature are all ways of connecting to our hearts and intuition. Balance structured activities (such as classes) with the freedom of spontaneous expression. When you feel alive and mindful now, then later, as birth unfolds, your internal knowing will help guide you during intense moments.

10. Dive into Labor!

In labor, there are lots of things you and your support team can do to help you cope with the intensity of birth: loving touch and massage, moving and changing positions, keeping hydrated and nourished, keeping your focus and determination, words of support, guided meditation and visualization, love and encouragement, listening and moving to music, and much more. Know that moments of doubt and fear will arise, and be willing to surrender to the power of birth—that which cannot be controlled or completely planned for. Be willing to get down-and-dirty, to give it all you've got, to do your best even when things get hard or scary.

One last thing to keep in mind: your birth matters. When you and the people around you believe that preparing your mind, body and soul for birth is important, then you can truly dive deeply and whole-heartedly into the experience. No matter what unexpected twists and turns may unfold in your journey, it is YOUR journey. Then you can come through one of the most intense experiences of your life full of self-love and new knowing.

Virginia Bobro is the mother of three children and lives in Santa Barbara, California. In addition to being an IBCLC (lactation consultant), Certified Doula and Certified Birthing From Within Mentor, she is also the Managing Director of Birthing From Within® and facilitates workshops for birth professionals and parents around the world. You can reach her at: 805-729-6670 or virginia@birthingfromwithin.com.