

WELLBEING

No Pain, all Gain?

A hit with celebrity mums Gisele Bündchen and Jessica Alba, hypnobirthing has now gone mainstream, with classes available on the NHS and many midwives learning the techniques. But does it actually work?

Every pregnant woman wants her labour to be as pain-free as possible, and for most expectant mothers that means opting for gas and air, pethidine or an epidural. But a growing number of them are putting mind over matter and using hypnotherapy to help alleviate the pain, stress and discomfort of childbirth.

Gisele Bündchen is certainly a fan. Speaking about the birth of her son Benjamin in 2009, the mum-of-two told a Brazilian TV show: "It wasn't painful, not even a little bit. The whole time, my head was so focused – every contraction, the baby is closer, the baby is closer. So, it wasn't like, 'Oh, what pain.' It was, 'With every contraction, he is getting closer to me.'"

The model and actress opted for hypnobirthing over an epidural because, in her words, "I wanted to be conscious and present for what was happening. I didn't want to be anaesthetised. I wanted to feel." And she is not alone. Jessica Alba has spoken openly about using hypnobirthing techniques when having her daughters Honor and Haven.

Describing it as a "guided meditation", she explained: "I'm just concentrating on breathing and staying relaxed, because it's when you get tense, that makes the whole labour worse and more painful." Angelina Jolie is also said to have tried the technique and it is even rumoured that the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge used hypnobirthing for the arrivals of both Prince George and Princess Charlotte.

NHS OPTIONS

If you are tempted to try it for yourself, the good news is that in some areas the NHS has started to incorporate hypnobirthing into midwifery training as standard. Once the preserve of a privileged few, the move by NHS trusts in Colchester, Wolverhampton, Stevenage, the Scottish Highlands, Exeter, Gloucester, Walsall and Bury St Edmunds means that the techniques could soon be available to many more mums.

However Gail Johnson of the Royal College of Midwives sounds a note of caution. "While this is a very positive move, and [we welcome] anything that supports women to have the best experience of childbirth possible, it isn't going to necessarily roll out over the entire NHS," she says. "This is just a few Trusts who are testing and trialling and developing this. That said, it offers a great opportunity to see if it really does benefit women in labour as I don't think there has been any clinical evidence of trials on the benefit of hypnobirthing; it is purely word of mouth and



(Clockwise from top left): The Duchess of Cambridge, Gisele Bündchen, Jessica Alba and Angelina Jolie are all said to be fans of hypnobirthing

objective opinion. Remember that what you are trying to measure is entirely subjective; women have different birth experiences and different pain and stress thresholds, and there are some who use hypnobirthing who end up with medical complications. The key thing is that, at last, women who believe in hypnobirthing are being given a choice, and that is always a good thing."

PERSONAL PLANS

It will certainly be welcomed by the seven out of ten expectant mums who now opt for customised labour and birth. In a survey of 1,500 women carried out by Netmums, 56 per cent said they would consider including one of the alternative birth techniques in their birth plan, including hypnobirthing. The My Birth, My Way survey also revealed that one in ten women now aspire to an unassisted birth, while one in five feel they should be able to request a Caesarean section for personal reasons, rather than only in cases of medical necessity.

The idea of hypnobirthing is to put women

back in control of what is happening to their bodies during childbirth. They do this by mastering self hypnosis, relaxation and breathing techniques learned – along with their birthing partner – at specialist antenatal classes. Reported benefits not only include lower pain levels, but speedier delivery, with less surgical intervention and less use of painkilling drugs and muscle relaxants.

"Hypnobirthing is not about being put into a trance," explains Gail Johnson. "It is all about learning strategies that help you through labour. But remember that if there is a medical complication in labour that puts the mother or baby at risk, hypnobirthing cannot stop that."

HISTORIC IDEAS

You might think that all this is something new, but in fact the ideas behind the technique date back to the 1940s. In 1942 Dr Grantly Dick-Read, the English obstetrician on whose principles the National Childbirth Trust (NCT) was founded, published his ground-breaking book *Childbirth Without Fear* (originally entitled *Revelation of Childbirth*). An advocate of natural childbirth, he believed that the fear felt by a woman during childbirth had a direct impact on the amount of pain she experienced. He theorised that the negative emotions caused blood to be filtered away from the uterus, which, as a result, was left without oxygen and could not perform its function efficiently or without pain. Leading US hypnotherapist Marie Mongan later took this theory and created an antenatal education programme based around self hypnosis, the aim of which was maximum relaxation during labour and delivery.

Today classes are available up and down the country. Privately, they usually replace the standard antenatal birthing classes but within the NHS the two will sit side by side. At present there are no rules as to whether this will be available free of charge or if parents-to-be will have to pay at least some of the cost. Classes are held either for individual couples or small groups, with three sessions over three weeks, or two sessions over two weekends. Participants are also given homework and CDs to help them break the fear, tension and associated pain that hypnotherapists and many midwives believe blight many women's experience of childbirth. **■**

- For more information visit hypnobirthing.co.uk
- kghypnobirthing.com has details of the hypnobirthing course accredited by the Royal College of Midwives