



So, here you are...pregnant and thinking of the inevitable - the day you give birth. You're a smart cookie and I won't sugarcoat it. Labor hurts. There, I said it! And you can too. There's no sense in denying the pain or pretending it's anything else but painful. You might think back to that time you stubbed your toe, the accident you had, or your period cramps and thought "There's absolutely NO WAY I can handle labor contractions!" Well, you're not alone. The unknown is scary but, friend, I am here to give you a few pearls of wisdom.

KEEP IT REAL

It's OK to tell yourself the truth. That you're scared of not being able to cope. Sit with that feeling. Let it exist, don't deny your truth. But here's where you set yourself free from the doom. You remember that millions of women before you have done this since the beginning of time and lived to tell the tale. They are no different than you. Make room for both truths.

THERE'S A PURPOSE

You might think pain is, well, a pain in the butt and you could do without it. But pain is your body's way of telling you something is wrong. Can you imagine placing your hand on a hot burner and your nerves not sending pain signals to your brain? You can kiss your hand goodbye! That pain is screaming at you "Hey, you need this hand so take care of it!" There's also the kind of pain that simply exists because you have some type of chronic condition. Again, your body is telling you something is wrong.

But here's the beauty of labor pains: There's nothing wrong with you! This is pain with a purpose. Tell yourself this until it becomes tattooed in your brain. Contractions occur when your uterus tightens in order to push the baby out. Every contraction you get is the total opposite of danger, it's proof that you're progressing. Contractions typically last 1-2 minutes and leave no residual pain. That is, once it's over you are no longer in pain. You CAN do anything for 1 minute! Change your perception and welcome these surges.

There is also something called the "Fear-Tension-Pain" cycle. This states that if you are fearful, you will become tense, and when you tense up you create pain. It's basically a self-fulfilling prophecy about pain. The more you fear pain, the more pain you are in. Stress releases catecholamines and these can stall your labor if they're excessive, so what we need are the opposite...the good hormones called oxytocin (the happy hormone) and endorphins (nature's painkiller). How do you make those happen? Release the fear and read on!

HELPFUL TOOLS

Yes, you can totally convince your mind that you've got this under control by promoting positive sensations during labor that keep the bad hormones at bay and increase the good hormones. You can start by completely relaxing your face and keeping a limp body during contractions. Thoughtful breathing can help you through them. Once a contraction is over, rejoice in that break and slow down your breath. Do not think about the next contraction or how the last one felt. It's over and you move on.

Mantras are especially helpful in keeping you focused and determined. You can repeat them aloud, have someone tell them to you, or have them printed and hung on the wall. You can choose something motivational like "You are strong", something realistic like "Every contraction brings you closer to the baby", or you can use your imagination and choose "Ride the wave, then float."

Massage and touch are something you already do because it's instinctual. You hit your funny bone and your immediate reaction is to rub and squeeze your elbow. The same goes with contractions. Enlist the help of your partner, doula, or friend to apply counter pressure, hot/cold packs, or gentle massage wherever you need relief.

Scents can also bamboozle your brain. Smell is the strongest sense and can take you back to fond memories that bring you happiness when you need it the most. So, crack open those essential oils and find the one that takes you to your happy place.

A TENS unit, rebozo, birth comb, hot/cold packs, and massage tools are great items to keep in your labor bag to promote relaxation or help with pain. Become familiar with them during pregnancy.

Lastly, you're never too old to go back to the basics of pain relief and cry, whine, shout, or even ask for your mommy. It worked as a kid and will likely keep working. Express yourself!

PHYSICAL PREP IS KEY

Labor is a marathon. And just like any marathon, you can train for it. Working out ensures that your body is in great shape to overcome the physical demands of labor. If exercise is part of your life, then you'll surely remember that time you thought you couldn't do one more burpee or run one more block but somehow you gathered all the strength you had and overcame that obstacle. You tell yourself "Just one more rep, just 10 more seconds." Yes, physical exercise can improve your mental endurance. You become accustomed to pain equaling progress.

You may also practice a few uncomfortable scenarios and use your toolbox to help you through them. Try pinching the web of your hand with a clothespin or holding an ice cube to mimic pain. Notice how you deal with this pain and find the best coping technique for yourself. We all handle it differently.

KEEP IT POSITIVE

Leave those over-the-top movie scenes of frantic, out of control laboring women behind you. That's Hollywood and we know none of that is real. Instead, surround yourself with beautiful, empowering, real-life videos of women doing what we were made to do, what YOU were made to do. Hit up YouTube and search "positive, natural birth." Notice that these women are no better than you because they ARE you. Begin to see yourself in them and become them. Read people's experiences with natural childbirth, and join a Facebook group that supports medicine-free labor. Soon, you'll create your own movie script that'll put Hollywood birth scenes to shame.

BUT DO NOT SUFFER

Now, there is a difference between pain and suffering and you need to know when it's OK to ask for pain medication. There is absolutely no shame in recognizing the difference and speaking up for yourself. You already know that labor pains are physical and go away but if you reach a point where the pain creates emotional reactions that make you feel out of control, scared, and helpless, then you are not doing yourself any good by enduring this kind of torture...remember the Fear-Tension-Pain theory. You can reduce your chances of suffering by surrounding yourself with a supportive birth team, employing comfort measures, and changing your perception of labor pains during pregnancy. Never, ever feel embarrassed or like you've let yourself down by choosing your emotional safety!