

## CLINICAL REPORT

### OBSTETRIC HYPNOSIS — AN EXPERIENCE

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Most parents would probably agree that the birth of a child is one of the most — if not *the* most — enthralling experience in adult life. Sadly there are still many parents who prepare for this experience inadequately and thus tend to miss out on some of the fullness of the experience. Pain-killing drugs have led to the reduction of pain during birth but also to a numbing of the senses. There are, however, some methods of pain relief that help women to cope with the strength of contractions that are part of giving birth while at the same time sharpen the senses, thus allowing for an increased awareness of the majesty of the experience. Hypnosis is one of these methods. The following account describes our experience of the birth under hypnosis of our first child. We repeated a similar procedure during the birth of our second child 3½ years later. The results were similar to those reported here.

#### MOTHER'S ACCOUNT

About 3 months prior to the expected date of confinement, we began to prepare for the birth of our child under hypnosis. Similar to any other skill, the skill of hypnosis as well as the skill of being hypnotized can be learned and has to be trained. We therefore held weekly sessions of hypnosis, mainly with the aim for the mother to gain a deep level of relaxation and raise her level of hypnotizability. Although the father had used hypnosis in a variety of treatment programmes, such as pain control, sleeplessness, giving up smoking, and stress and anxiety related problems, he had never used hypnosis in obstetrics. We were both learning.

During these sessions we worked on deep relaxation, using images such as the 'garden', the 'beach', and breathing exercises, and pain control using 'numbness of the hand'. The main image for pain control was flowers that were floating in the river; the mother was instructed to lift out a flower and place it on a particular part of her body, say her knee. She was asked to imagine that the flower soaked all the pain and took the pain with it when she lifted it back into the river. It was taking the pain away as it floated down the river. With increased practice this image became stronger and more and more successful. She was also instructed in the use of self-hypnosis and used it regularly.

In the 2 weeks prior to the birth she was hypnotized daily and the images were now becoming very strong and effective. Approximately 4 days before the birth she spent some time in meditation feeling her way into the birth experience. Since this was her first child, she had to rely on reports of birth experiences from other women.

However, she was able to develop strong images and wrote down the image she felt would be most effective for use on the day. Before describing the image we used, the reader has to be made aware that this was a highly personalized image. Many of the mother's past experiences with relaxation techniques, for example the use of a floatation tank, as well as other experiences, such as the recent visit to a cave, obviously influenced her imagination. The important issue here is the use of imagery, which was developed by the mother herself rather than by the hypnotist, and the effect of such imagery.

### *The image*

Following induction and deepening, she was asked to imagine going through the garden and sitting down at a river. This image is described in detail in most standard books on hypnosis. The personalized image that she had developed herself went on:

You slowly get up and follow the narrow path along the river. You enjoy the warm air and the flow of the river as it becomes slower and deeper . . . the river is filled with flowers . . . more and more flowers gather in it.

(Pause)

You eventually reach a place where the river enters into a cave . . . It is now flowing very slowly and is engulfed with flowers. The flowers and the river fill the whole of the entrance to the cave . . . You enter into the river. As you enter into the river you feel the warmth of the water . . . You lie down on the water and float along with the flowers . . . The water is surrounding your body making you feel secure and relaxed. You are really enjoying this experience of floating slowly along with the flowers . . . The water has a comfortable depth and temperature.

As you float along into the cave you realize that the walls of the cave are safe and soft so there is nothing that could hurt you . . . safe and secure . . . Slowly waves develop in the cave. These waves are regular and safe and will slowly let you float along the various paths of the cave . . . You observe the flowers following the flow of the waves and feel your body respond to the ups and downs of them . . . You enjoy the lift from the upward movement of the water, . . . the power of it and the strength, and you feel exhilarated and happy with the speed of the downward movement of the waves . . . As each of these regular waves plays with the flowers and with your body you get more and more relaxed and excited . . . You let the waves move your body and feel relaxed . . . very relaxed and safe . . . You are looking forward more and more to the next wave . . . The movement of your body is in perfect harmony with the movement of the water and the flowers.

This image was repeated and emphasized during the first stage of labour. Instructions were given of being in control of opening and closing her eyes as well as being able to talk and be alert. Also, it was important to comply with the instructions of the midwives and be able to answer any questions they may have.

As labour was induced, she was on the drip for the entire duration of labour and birth. Contractions as well as the baby's heart beat were monitored during the whole time. The mother was therefore confined to an armchair until transition. The image for transition was as follows:

Eventually the cave narrows and the flow of the water becomes faster and stronger. Your feeling of excitement increases with the speed of the water. You are really enjoying the speed with which your body is propelled forward.

When we moved to the delivery room for the delivery stage the image was developed as follows:

You are now approaching the end of the cave. As the cave widens, the flow of the water is becoming very slow and you have to help to get to the exit of the cave.

Take a deep breath and push your way towards the opening (*repeat as necessary*) where a wide warm sea is awaiting your arrival. I am awaiting your arrival from the other side of the exit and am here to welcome you.

After the birth and the medical check of the baby the importance of finishing the hypnosis must not be underestimated. The father used routine procedures to guide the mother back to reality, out of hypnosis.

The experience of giving birth under hypnosis was the most incredible experience we have ever had. Not only were we able to ensure that the baby was not exposed to any unnecessary drugs during birth, but also we both had a strong sense of achievement due to the fact that we were fully alert during the whole time and the father had been actively involved in pain relief.

In most cases of birth under hypnosis the woman giving birth is taught self-hypnosis and has to rely on her own ability to remain in control. At times during the process of birth, owing to pure exhaustion the mother would have found that very difficult if not impossible to do this. She needed the father there to stay in control of the hypnosis and be able to emphasize the images or to give her a further deepening as the effect of the pain control wore off. Hypnosis has been proved to be an effective means of pain control during labour; however, we suggest that it may be too much to expect mothers to be able to use self-hypnosis only. We therefore suggest that the birth partner should be taught to use hypnosis and that both mother and birth partner should prepare well in advance.

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