

The Primal Brain

Whereas we used to act according to our instincts, in matters concerning our nature, we now mistrust them, preferring to give ourselves over to those in authority or to technological innovation. In effect, we ask science and the scientists what to do. When it comes to birth, science and our understanding of the brain actually validates our instincts. When a mother is left to birth without guidance, she will do all the things best conducive to a positive birth experience. **Her nature knows what her brain and her body needs.**

In rudimentary terms the brain can be divided into two parts; the **neo-cortex** or new brain, which is the part that makes us human and the hypothalamus or **primal brain**, which directs our instinctive behaviour. This old brain is what we share with animals, and it is our **animal nature** that must be respected for birth.

Labour and birth are directed by a cocktail of hormones that are emitted by the primal part of our brain. It is believed that the process of birth is instigated by the baby, upon full maturation of their lungs. They send a hormonal signal to the mother's brain which then emits a corresponding mixture of hormones to direct labour. The main ingredient of this is oxytocin, the very same hormone involved in love-making, bonding and breastfeeding.

The **two brain** issue would be irrelevant were it not for the fact that both parts of the brain **fail to work in tandem**. The new brain, or intellect, dominates- when it is in use, it forces the instinctive brain to recede. In fact in our culture, so consumed by the rational, instinct is almost entirely disregarded, condemned to giving us little more than the odd gut feeling or occasional female intuition. Yet being instinctive is exactly what a woman needs to be in order to birth comfortably and safely. Stories of women feeling highly intuitive or more in touch with their instincts- as well as much more forgetful- when they are pregnant or as mothers should come as no surprise. This is a natural consequence of pregnancy and a perfect preparation for birth.

The difficulty arises because the way in which we conventionally labour in the West- in a hospital, surrounded by strangers, under bright lights and under direction- **'switches on' the intellectual brain and inhibits the back brain** from functioning as it should. Anything that provokes inhibition, fear or consciousness will serve as an impediment to labour, whereas the converse- anything that allows a woman to let go and behave more instinctively will be conducive to labour.

The Best Conditions for Labour and How to Secure them

Michel Odent argues that in order to determine what the best environment for labour would be, imagine that you were trying to go to sleep. If you can sleep in the conditions then you are likely to be able labour in them. In the same way that it is hard to sleep with a brain that is busy and buzzing, it is also hard to labour with such a brain.

Privacy; It is hard to go to sleep with a crowd of onlookers (it is hard to even read with onlookers- how disconcerting is it when people read over your shoulder?). In the same way, the front brain is switched on in the presence of strangers when we feel we must be alert and wary. Herd animals go off on their own to birth and rejoin the herd when their baby is born, instinctively aware that a safe birth is an unobserved one.

Question who is attending the birth and whether they really need to be there. If you are able to secure yourself one midwife to care for you throughout your pregnancy and labour then jump at this chance. Feel free to debate who will be your birth partner and whether your husband/partner, mother or best friend is best placed to be by your side. Consider a doula or trained birth assistant if you feel that an experienced extra pair of hands might improve your sense of security and well-being.

Darkness or low lighting; going to sleep with the lights on is hard because it stimulates the neo-cortex. Any such stimulation will make birth more difficult, and so dim lights are essential.

When on a hospital tour, see what provisions they have for lighting and if it all seems bright and glaring ask if there are any alternatives. If planning to give birth at home, have a low level lamp at the ready, or even some candles.

Quiet; this means no unnecessary questions or talking. Michel Odent says that a good midwife should be in the corner with one eye on her knitting and the other on the labouring woman. If any talking is necessary, it should be limited to the essentials. Though words of gentle encouragement and quiet reassurance are sometimes welcome and an essential part of a positive birth experience, a midwife and birth partner should be sensitive to the mother and say or do nothing that might bring her outside of her experience.

For those giving birth in hospital, the transition from home to hospital can sometimes make labour falter. To ease the transition and maintain an already established labour, make sure that your birth partner is primed to answer questions and that you have your birth plan and antenatal notes at the ready. Try to remain focussed and as undistracted as possible until you are in the delivery room.

Security; to labour easily a woman needs to feel safe and secure. Adrenaline is an impediment to the first stage of labour and increases the pain involved. A woman needs to establish what will make her feel the most secure- for some it is being in hospital close to medical intervention if necessary, for others it will be being at home and attended to by just a midwife. It might involve having your mother near or nowhere to be seen !! Security is subjective, but working out what is best for you is an essential part of birth preparation.

Freedom; in particular to move as the mother might like- so no prescribed positions or being forced to lie on a bed. Freedom also includes the ability to eat and drink as you like and the more subtle freedoms, such as freedom from inhibition. It's a complex topic and again a subjective one, but the key thing is a woman must be able to lose herself to the process of birth.

Knowledge is essential in this regard, as well as a determination to stand up for your right to be mobile in labour and to create the environment that you feel most comfortable with.

Finally, birth is a balance between being in control, particularly in the preparation, and then letting go and trusting in the process. Many of us find it very difficult to do the latter, and retreating into our back brains can be something of a tall order. Regular yoga practice can help facilitate this ability to let go, enabling a woman to lose herself to the process of birth and thereby significantly increasing her chances of a positive and easy birth experience.

