

Tracking your Tigers: Effects of Fear on Labor



Expectant parents often face many fears about the upcoming birth of their child. Moms may fear: how bad will the pain be? Will I be able to cope with it? Will I lose control? Will something go wrong? Will I be unable to birth this baby? Dads may fear: Can I be a good support person? Will I pass out? Can I cope with seeing her in pain? Will any of my needs get met during the labor and birth? And all parents may fear: Will I be a good parent? Is this world a safe place for my baby? What if there's something wrong with the baby?

It is normal to have all these fears going into an unknown experience. Especially when it's such a momentous, life-changing experience.

As normal as these fears are, it is important to do some work prior to labor to help tame these fears. During pregnancy, you may be able to ignore the fear, but during labor, we may become more vulnerable. Sometimes, fears may come up to "bite you" during labor.

Effects of fear on labor:

- Increased pain for mom: Fear tends to increase muscle tension. The more tense our bodies are, the more pain we experience.
- Possible increase in heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing rate. These can develop because fear activates adrenaline, and a fight or flight response.
- Possible complications with labor: Adrenaline neutralizes the effect of oxytocin, the hormone which stimulates labor contractions, which dilate the cervix, and bring baby down through the birth canal. If fear blocks oxytocin, it may lead to longer labor, failure to progress, more medical intervention to move labor along, or to deliver the baby.

All of these can happen whether it's mom's fear, or fear she picks up from her partner.

In *Birthing from Within*, Pam England uses the metaphor of a hungry tiger lurking outside to explain the effects of fear on labor. She says that it does not matter whether it is a real situation that we fear, or just our own fantasies, because the autonomic nervous system is not able to tell the difference between real and imagined "tigers."

Since the nervous system responds to imagery, it's important to bring your images, beliefs and fears to *conscious* awareness, where you can tame, eliminate, or even harness them.

She recommends an exercise prior to labor to help you track and tame your tigers:

- 1) Write down all the things you hope won't happen.
- 2) Look your tigers in the eye. (Let your imagination flow into the fear. Explore all the aspects of that fear, and imagine "what's the worst that could happen?")
- 3) Ask yourself: What do I need to do to tame or escape each tiger (i.e. What will make my birth feel safe to me?)
- 4) DO IT! (Even if you are afraid.) Get help if you need it.

Then, create an image of birth involving safety and strength, and your nervous system will respond, producing a state of relaxation, normal heart and respiratory rate, and strong effective contractions. Focus on this image in the weeks prior to birth.

During labor, if these fears, or others, arise, share them with people, and talk them through. Your labor support people and the medical staff can help you work through the fear, and back towards a sense of safety and strength so your labor can move forward.