

Touch Relaxation



One of the great things about touch relaxation is the involvement of the birth partner as a key roll in helping the mother relax. Learning and practicing this method can help both people feel connected and help the partner feel useful and needed. It's important to remember that there may be times during labor when a woman does not like to be touched. It can vary between individuals and often moment to moment during labor. Practicing these things in preparation for labor still carries the benefits of promoting a bond between birthing woman and partner and learning to relax each body part with the power of your mind and breath. Partners, think of yourself as the coach preparing your MVP for their peak performance. You may not be as hands on in the game as you anticipated, but all your preparation is paying off, making you her MVP!

First, lie down in the same position you would get in to go to sleep. Take a few moments to adjust and get as comfortable as possible. Scan your whole body for muscle tension: a furrowed forehead, clenched fists and a tight mouth are the easiest ones to spot. Pay attention to your thighs, buttock and chest, too. Then practice releasing each group of muscles from head to toe systematically. Tense, and then relax each muscle group to help you identify the two different states. When your partner cues you with "contraction," think, "relax and release." Then feel these tight muscles loosen. This conditions you to expect pleasure rather than pain to follow tension.

Partner Tip: Find out which touches and what kind of massage relaxes the mother best. Observe her as she sleeps or relaxes about the house. Note the positions she normally puts herself in, as knowing these may be helpful as she relaxes during labor.

Starting from the top down, relax the forehead, eyelids, face muscles, jaw, neck, shoulder, arm muscles, chest, back, abdomen, hips, thighs, legs, and feet. Your partner accompanies the relaxation of each muscle group with a gentle, light touch of the various areas, stroking lightly with the fingertips. Your partner can give verbal suggestions of relaxation in a soft, quiet voice, nearly a whisper. For the sake of practice, once completely relaxed, test your partner's relaxation by gently lifting her hand and dropping it. (Note: You do not need to do this during labor.)

Once you are relaxed, your partner may firmly and slowly rub the curved, lower back area in a soothing, rhythmic massage. (Tip: Use lotion or massage oil to reduce friction and make the massage better for both partners.) These muscles are the uterosacrals, the muscles that carry around your heavy uterus all day and so this massage will feel especially great at the end of the day. Practice this touch cued relaxation each night before bed. At a signal, imagine the return of another contraction and for one minute the mother should practice fully relaxing from head to toe, systematically and deliberately. Signal the end of the contraction and do not try to hold the relaxation between practice contractions. Relaxation is work! It takes both physical and mental energy so save it for during contractions and simply resettle and rest between.

Mind-Body Connection:

It's important when practicing any relaxation technique to remember the mind-body connection!

"The mind and body are interacting, one helping or hindering the other. It is probably impossible to relax the body completely if the mind is under tension. Likewise, it is impossible to relax the mind completely if the body is under tension."

- Robert A. Bradley, M.D., "The Husband-Coached Childbirth"

"Remember this, for it is as true as true gets: Your body is not a lemon. You are not a machine. The Creator is not a careless mechanic. Human female bodies have the same potential to give birth well as aardvarks, lions, rhinoceri, elephants, moose, and water buffalo. Even if it has not been your habit throughout your life so far, I recommend that you learn to think positively about your body."

- Ina May Gaskin, "Ina May's Guide to Childbirth"

Alternatives:

Because women can vary on the types of touch that they enjoy during labor, it's a good idea to try out different types of relaxation techniques. The following are a few touch-based alternatives to consider, all of which help relieve tension and promote relaxation.

Gentle Pressure: As contractions increase in intensity you may notice tightening of the brow, eyes, jaw or hands. Gentle pressure, with or without movement, can help the mother identify and release that tension. For overall tension—give her a strong bear hug and let her release into you.

Kneading: Slow rhythmic kneading is effective for reducing tension in the shoulders, thighs or buttocks. Grasp the muscle between the heel of your hand and your closed fingers. Squeeze in with gentle pressure, hold, then release and repeat, moving across the muscle. The thumbs may be used with the heel of the hand, but avoid pinching with thumb and fingers.

Stroking: Use firm pressure with the palm of the hand to stroke from shoulder to hip, or thigh to knee. Before one hand leaves the body, the other hand begins a second stroke. Alternate hands, maintaining constant contact with the mother as you slowly move across her back or thigh. Hand over hand movement across the lower abdomen may be done by the mother during a contraction as it is a natural response to rub where it hurts. Alternatively, you can try stroking the same way but with very soft touch from only your figure tips.

Counter pressure: Applying heavy pressure on painful areas of the lower back is effective. Fold your fingers flat against the palm of your hand. Keeping your wrist straight, use the knuckles to press into her pain. Position yourself so your body will lean into your arm to increase the pressure from your fist. The heel of the hand may be used for counter pressure, but it is more uncomfortable on the wrist for long periods.

Hydrotherapy: Hydrotherapy is becoming an increasingly popular method of easing labor pains. The pressure, pulse and warmth of a shower during the first stage of labor and the buoyant, weightless freedom of a tub during the first and second stage are both helpful during labor.

Reflexology: Reflexology is the process of applying pressure or strokes to certain areas of the feet to relieve pain or problems in other parts of the body. The theory suggests that the feet are a map to the body. Stimulation of nerve endings sends messages to the affected areas and releases endorphins and monoamines, which control pain. The following are a few you may wish to try:

For a slow progressing labor

In a semi-reclining position on your back, or sitting in a chair with your feet up, have your partner take hold of toes 2 and 3 on both feet. (#1 toe is your big toe, #5 is your pinkie toe). Firmly squeeze and release, repeatedly at the same time.

After a few minutes, you may feel a warmth running up your legs and to the pelvic area. This sensation may speed up labor. Once you feel this, have your partner continue until you feel that you are in active labor again.

During active labor

In the same position, have your partner press firmly with a thumb at the center of each arch., just to the left and down slightly from the arch of your right foot, and just to the right and down slightly from the arch of your left foot is the diaphragm.

Press and hold at the same time, alternating with small circles or strumming across the areas. This reflexology point will help you breath. Increased breathing enables you take fuller and longer breaths allowing relaxation, especially during contractions.

References:

- American Pregnancy Association: AmericanPregnancy.org
- Mayo Clinic Guide To A Healthy Pregnancy. Harms, Roger W., M.D., et al, Part 2. Prepared Childbirth. Amis, Debby, and Jeanne Green, Childbirth Section.

