

No more labour pains?

Rachel Palmer, 30, was terrified of giving birth after hearing so many horror stories. So when she became pregnant with her first child, Kofi, she turned to hypnotherapy to help her through labour Words by Adrian Lee Photograph by John Wright

I grew up believing that childbirth was something to be dreaded. My mother had a bad experience with me and someone was always having a terrible time on the television.

So when my partner, Owen, 34, and I found we were expecting our first baby, I thought I'd be one of those women who wanted drugs to ease the agony. I'm not good at pain, and have even fainted having an injection.

But about three months into my pregnancy, a friend sent me an email about hypnotherapy. I was dubious at first but decided to find out more. Although I'm not really into all that holistic stuff, the more I read, the more it made sense and I realised there is a lot of science behind it.

The idea is that if you are panicking and scared you will feel more pain but there are ways, using hypnosis, to allow your body to work as it is designed to.

To my surprise I discovered there was a place

"I'm not pretending it was easy or I didn't feel pain but I have no doubt that hypnosis really helped. I got the birth I wanted, without fear or panic"

near my home in Hove, East Sussex, where I could do exactly that. I rang up and spoke to Steve Griffiths, a HypnoBirthing practitioner. He outlined what would happen, without using hippy language, and I decided that was how I wanted to have my baby. At that stage, I wasn't expecting anything magical but I thought it wouldn't do any harm and I hoped it would help me to overcome some of my negative thoughts.

Steve explained that I would be able to take control of the birth, which is the opposite of

what you are led to expect in a labour.

The course involved four sessions, lasting two hours each and Owen came with me. I was given CDs to listen to at home and exercises to do every day. But I was embarrassed to tell people about it and when I did I got a lot of eye-rolling and smirks from other mothers.

About the same time, I also decided I would like a natural water birth and arranged to have the baby at Crowborough Birthing Centre, where there are no doctors, only midwives.

Steve taught me relaxation techniques and there was a lot of visualisation, including one exercise when you imagine your body is jelly and you go all floppy. Another one involved thinking of different colours enveloping my body.

During the sessions, Steve relaxed me and gave me suggestions about how my body would deliver the baby. He created a scenario in which it would be an easy birth. On one occasion he told me to imagine a warm, yellow light and I

could actually feel a physical sensation. That showed me how powerful the mind can be.

By the time of the last session, two weeks before I was due to give birth, I had gone from being scared to looking forward to it. My friends thought I was deluding myself, but if you do tell yourself something every day, you do start believing it.

By the time I got to the birthing centre, my cervix was 4cm dilated. On the way there, I lay in the back of the car listening to relaxation

music. The midwives could not believe I was in labour when I arrived because I was so excited I was practically skipping around. I even asked Owen to take a photo of me by the birthing pool.

After my waters broke I began telling myself that my pelvis was soft and the baby could easily fit through. I was in a lot of pain but I didn't panic or think I couldn't cope. There was gas and air available but I didn't need it. I felt in control and nothing could go wrong.

I imagined myself floating above the ground with my pain far below me. I was always aware of what was going on around me. Owen massaged my back and reminded me to keep doing what Steve had taught me, including a technique called "sleep breathing".

When our son, Kofi, arrived on November 10, he did not look like a newborn baby. He was so big – weighing 10lbs 15oz. He looked like he was a month old and the widest part of his head was 40cm, which is much bigger than average.

The midwives told me if they had known his size in advance I would have been considered a high risk case and would have been forced to have my baby in a hospital. Most likely I would also have been given a caesarean and lost control over my birth.

I'm not pretending that it was easy or that I didn't feel pain but I have no doubt hypnosis really helped. I got the birth I wanted, without fear or panic, which I am sure would have taken over the moment my contractions started if I had not done the hypnotherapy course.

By the time I gave birth I was able to put myself into a relaxed state of mind and get rid of tension from my body. I can remember every single moment of the birth and I would even say I enjoyed it. And that is something you don't hear very often from a new mum. **S**