

The Great Letting Go
Supporting Laboring Women in their Most Intense Moments

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Witnessing childbirth is an extraordinary and life-changing event. We are very lucky to live in an era that encourages the presence and participation of partners as birth supporters. However, the *experience* of husbands and partners is often left out of the equation when preparing for birth. In addition to learning the 'what to expect' about birth and parenting, it is also essential to consider the special preparation a partner must have to witness childbirth and to develop confidence in themselves as birth supporters.

The first task in this preparation is to evaluate the limiting beliefs we carry about what a 'good birth' looks like. Only when we've taken an inventory of our preconceived ideas of birth are we then able to accurately identify what is needed for any given moment in birth and support laboring women from a place of acceptance instead of fear.

When many of us picture women laboring in childbirth, we picture a woman drenched in sweat, screaming in angst or anger. This image invokes feelings of being 'out of control.' We feel that she needs help; that she is not coping and we want to change something for her. We've internalized the idea that coping is limited to quiet controlled breathing. This idea surfaces as we are faced with strong feelings of not knowing what to do for this laboring woman. It is difficult for us to accept that strong vocalizing, rocking, heaving and vomiting are normal and helpful ways of coping with the intensity of birth. When it comes down to the moment, many of us feel uncomfortable and unprepared for this behavior in birth.

Acknowledging Internal Beliefs

From a very young age, society cultivates the idea that only particular behaviors are acceptable, polite or appropriate in order for young children to integrate themselves into their greater community. Ascribing to these parameters helps growing children learn to be a functional part of their community and in this sense is very useful.

However, these constraints on social behavior do not have a place in the birth room. As laboring women our challenge is to let go of the societal norms of good behavior and embrace the instinctual movements, sounds and bodily urges of childbirth. As birth supporters we experience the same challenge as we are called to fully accept, support and encourage the mother to do anything she needs to do to let baby out.

Holding back in birth can hold birth back! Resisting an urge in birth such as vocalizing, swearing, rocking, crying, etc. often includes some form of physical tension, which impacts our body's ability to open and let labor continue. The real work of labor then is to let go. Let go of wanting to control, let go of preconceived ideals of 'good coping.' Let go of trying to *change* what you are feeling and instead, welcome the natural responses of the laboring body.

The Great Letting Go

From the early stages of labor (and even in pregnancy!), we are challenged to begin letting go of beliefs or expectations we have about our self and about birth. For example, you may need to deviate from your birth plan and adjust to the next best thing. Or perhaps the doctor or midwife on call is one you haven't met before and you need to embrace this new person in your support team. For many parents, as labor progresses, the intensity of surges increases and you are challenged to try new ways of coping or supporting. In any case, as the intensity in labor continues to increase, the need to be flexible and open to our experience instead of resisting it becomes more important.

There sometimes comes a point in labor when the mother completely opens to the urges of her laboring body and without restraint she moves and heaves, cries and moans, vomits and leaks. She is completely present in her laboring body, she is completely letting go. I call this point in birth "The Great Letting Go." The Great Letting Go is often a part of birth that partners are not prepared for. It happens when the mother no longer holds back what she is feeling and fully expresses herself as she opens to labor. The Great Letting Go can be overwhelming to witness and is often associated with the most intense part of birth.

By 'intense' I don't necessarily mean the most painful. For many women pain is a part of their experience. For some women it may dominate their experience. For a lot of women, they describe labor as painful to some degree, but more emotionally intense or ecstatic than painful. Their physical and behavioral response is to the *intensity* of birth; whatever that means for their unique experience of childbirth.

By this description it follows that the way a woman looks in birth is NOT necessarily reflective of the amount of *pain* she is in. This is an important lesson to note when being witness to and supporting a woman during The Great Letting Go. In the documentary *Orgasmic Birth: The Best Kept Secret* one woman says about her birth experience, "I needed to scream. It wasn't necessarily pain[ful], but it was all just so overwhelming I *needed* to just call out...it felt very satisfying to scream. Extremely satisfying."

To an outsider, this woman's response in birth may lead them to believe that she was in tremendous pain. They may conclude that she is not coping well and suggest this to her in the way they look at her, touch her or in the type of pain coping support they offer her. When in fact, she is doing all of this *because* it feels good to do it! Her screaming, crying, moaning, rocking, rolling, swearing, pooping, and complaining *is her coping*. She is doing it because it helps.

During The Great Letting Go, it is of utmost importance that partners check in with themselves and notice what assumptions they are making about the moment. Only after letting go of these assumptions and really tuning into what's needed in the moment can we support the mother in her natural responses to birth. When we offer non-judgmental support in this way, a mother feels accepted and encouraged to continue doing what works for her.

So what does support really look like during The Great Letting Go?

Supporting During The Great Letting Go

It is very normal to question yourself when you are being so physically and emotionally challenged as you are in labor. Women may feel self-conscious of letting go in birth and need to be reminded again and again that it's ok to do what works for them to cope. As birth supporters we can create an

environment that encourages her to allow her body to do the work of birth and reassure her that she is accepted and loved even in the face of completely letting go.

As birth supporters, we are sometimes under the impression that we need to do something tangible or hands-on in order to be helpful. For partners, this is not necessarily the case. Simply being present for her can be enough for her to feel supported by you, even when she's also coping by howling, rocking or calling out. Support during her most intense moments in birth may be as simple as telling her you love her, giving her the occasional (or many!) kisses and being nearby.

However there are other things we can do as birth supporters to help her to let go. As we mentioned before, women may hold back in birth in some way. They may hold back feelings of sadness, anger or pleasure for fear of making someone uncomfortable. Or it may be bodily urges like moaning, moving or dancing that they are hesitant to express. Supporting during The Great Letting Go includes giving her permission to embrace her urges and do whatever it is her body needs her to do.

You can invite her to fully express herself by directly asking her, "Is there anything you're holding back?" and inviting her to do that thing. If you know what it is she's feeling nervous about doing, do it with her so she's not alone. If someone walks into the room and you're *both* moaning or rocking, etc. keep doing what you're doing. Don't stop.

When we're 'walked in on' while doing something intimate, we often feel embarrassed or feel the need to tone it down or stop so as not to make others uncomfortable. As birth supporters, if we continue to do what was working for her, even when someone enters the room, it shows her that it's ok to go on and she doesn't need to stop. Seeing that you were not dismayed by the change in environment reassures her that she is not alone and can keep going.

Support for Partners

While sometimes labor support is focused solely on the laboring mother, it is of utmost importance that husbands and partners have their own support system in place for birth. Becoming a parent is a big transition and witnessing your loved one through birth can be difficult, even when you are well prepared for The Great Letting Go. During pregnancy, before you go in labor, consider what support might be helpful for you as birth partner.

Doulas offer non-medical support during pregnancy, birth and the immediate postpartum and are an amazing resource for both the mother and partner to draw on. Your doula will come to your home in early labour, many times even before you see your health care provider so that you are not alone as you navigate your way through the unknown of birth. For partners she can offer suggestions for support, allow partners to take breaks to eat, sleep, use the washroom or get fresh air and give partners emotional support throughout the birthing process.

Prenatally, it is important to practice 'letting go' in your daily life. Explore your beliefs about birth, what good support looks like, about receiving and accepting support for yourself. Notice where you can become more flexible and practice flexibility in that aspect of your life. If you never allow yourself to be goofy or dance, do it! Have a dance party in your living room or make funny faces in the mirror. Do what you need to do NOW to cultivate the flexible mindset necessary to let go and accept birth fully.

You may also enroll in a prenatal class or another course that further cultivates this sense of flexibility and offers practical emotional preparation for The Great Letting Go of birth and parenting.

Whatever it is that you need to take care of yourself as partner and/or birth support, make sure it is in place before birth. In order to be the best support you can be, you need to be supported as well.

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When preparing for birth or supporting parents during labour, it is of utmost importance to consider the special needs of partners. Not only does it make a difference for the experience of the partner, but it makes a tremendous impact in the way a mother feels supported if her partner is well prepared for the intensity that often accompanies birth. Practical preparation of partners for the emotional and mental challenges of supporting birth is *necessary* to develop the confidence and flexibility needed to navigate the unpredictability of labour.

As practitioners, giving ample time and consideration to the partner's experience can have a tremendous impact on their development as a parent and their relationship with their child. We've allowed partners into the birth room, it is now time to take the next step and include them fully in the preparation for birth.



Amanda Spakowski is the founder of The Nesting Place: Prenatal Classes & Doula Care. She is a birth doula and Toronto's only Birthing From Within educator. Her background in human biology, peer counseling, crisis intervention and assisting in home daycares has allowed her to bring an experienced and unique perspective to her classes and care.

Amanda's passion for supporting each person's unique transition to parenthood is evident as she brings a thoughtful and compassionate facilitating style to all of her classes. Additionally, her commitment to inclusive space creates a safe and nurturing environment for parents to learn more about themselves as they prepare for childbirth.

For more information about these and Amanda's other birth-related workshops for birth professionals, please find her at www.TheNestingPlace.ca or TheNestingPlace.blog.com.

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