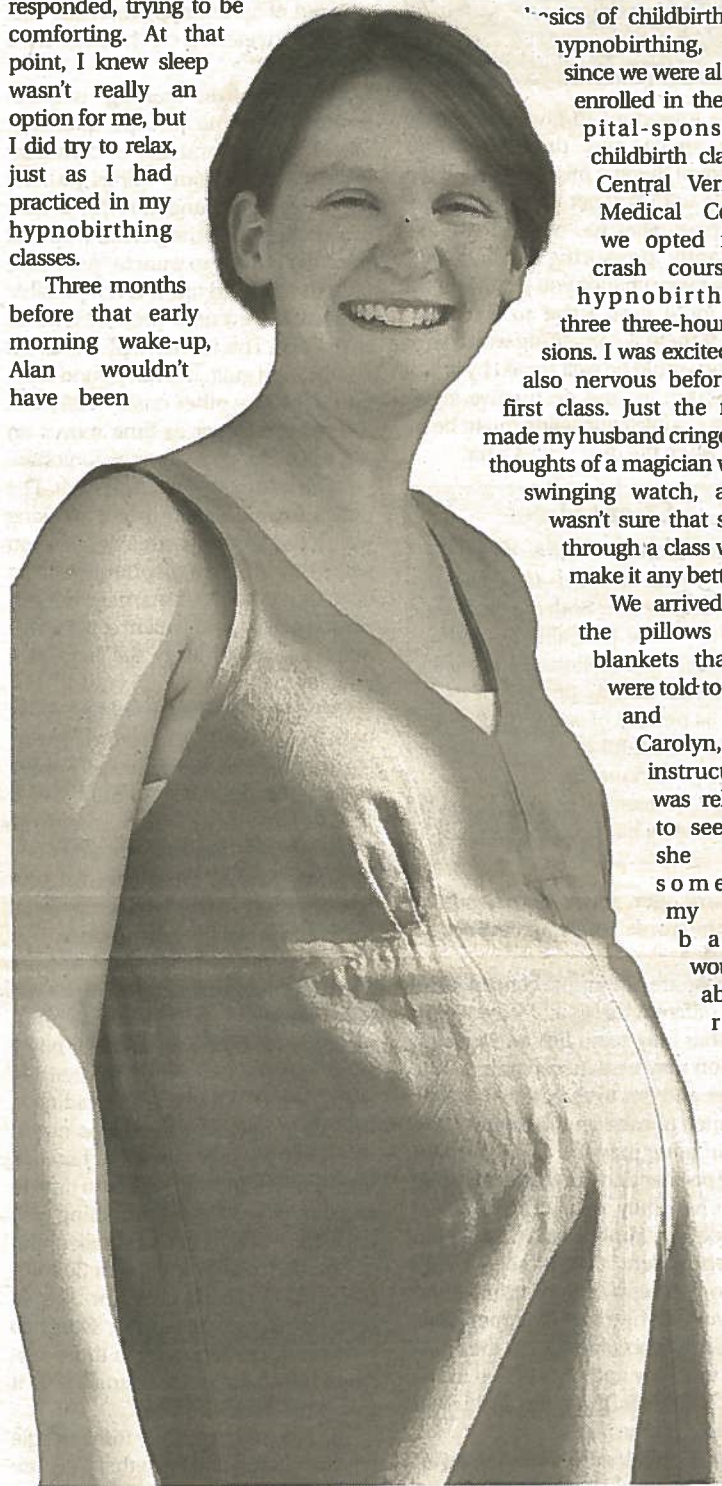


# Hypnobirthing: It's Not Magic – But it Worked Like a Charm

by Carrie L. Chandler

At 3 a.m. on April 20, I had my first contraction. *It was time.* “This baby is coming,” I announced, waking my still-sleeping husband. “Just relax and go back to sleep,” Alan drowsily responded, trying to be comforting. At that point, I knew sleep wasn't really an option for me, but I did try to relax, just as I had practiced in my hypnobirthing classes.

Three months before that early morning wake-up, Alan wouldn't have been



so sanguine about telling me to relax. We had discussed taking a hypnobirthing class and he was skeptical, but agreed to go if it was what I really wanted. And I was determined. I had read the books and knew it was for me. It fit right into my personal philosophy of listening to my body, which stems from my yoga practice.

Wellspring Hypnotherapy offers a seven-class course covering the basics of childbirth and hypnobirthing, but since we were already enrolled in the hospital-sponsored childbirth class at Central Vermont Medical Center, we opted for a crash course in hypnobirthing—three three-hour sessions. I was excited, but also nervous before the first class. Just the name made my husband cringe with thoughts of a magician with a swinging watch, and I wasn't sure that sitting through a class would make it any better.

We arrived with the pillows and blankets that we were told to bring and met Carolyn, the instructor. I was relieved to see that she was someone my husband would be able to relate

to, not a swinging watch to be found. There were seven other couples in the class. As we went around and introduced ourselves, I saw that they weren't so different from us. It was also heartening to hear that there was a couple who had used hypnobirthing successfully for their first birth and were back for a refresher for their second.

After introductions, the instructor explained exactly what hypnobirthing is. I'd had lots of practice even before class started, doing my best to address the questions of curious friends and relatives. But, I was making it up as I went along, so it was reassuring to hear her explanation. Hypnobirthing is not like traditional hypnosis, she said, but a way to relax while in the midst of labor, or any uncomfortable situation, like a root canal.

The practice is based on the basic “fight or flight” response to pain. With labor, though, you don't want to fight it – you want it to happen. It's the only way that your baby will make its appearance in the world. The key to hypnobirthing is relaxing and going *with* the contractions instead of tensing up and working against them. To help with that goal, some hypnobirthing practitioners don't use the word pain in reference to childbirth at all. You want your body to literally open, and tense muscles anticipating pain won't allow that to happen. Labor pain is good pain.

After the primer, we watched birth videos far different from the traditional hospital genre. These silent women were not even cringing. They yelled no obscenities at their partners, had no tense faces, and apparently felt nothing but relaxation. Skeptics were treated to a *Dateline* segment that worked hard but unsuccessfully to discredit hypnobirthing. When I saw those women birthing in complete relaxation, I became a believer.

Also in that first class, we practiced various relaxation techniques. At first it felt a bit uncomfortable, but seeing those videos I decided that the end result was worth the embarrassment. Before the instructor began, she cautioned that we would only relax if we allowed it to happen. She told us to get into a comfortable position and began counting down from ten to one. Even then, I could feel my body relaxing.

Hypnobirthing methods are meant to help laboring mothers focus on opening their bodies and lessening their discomfort. During my practice at home, I found two that really worked for me: counting from ten down to one and letting go a little more at each number; and envisioning a place where I could fully relax.

The point of home practice is to build a kind of muscle memory, to get my body used to relaxing so I could find the same state during labor.

It turns out that as soon as the instructor mentioned “fight or flight,” she had Alan hooked. As a physical education teacher, these were words he was familiar with. Driving home after that first class, he looked at me and said, “I think this will really work. It makes a lot of sense.” His support was key for me. After all, he had helped get me into this; I needed him to be there at the end as well!

At the last two classes, we practiced

process; they were all about learning to relax.

The other CDs included one to use after our 37th week that focused on opening to the birth process and visualizing labor, and a recording of affirmations regarding birth. I listened to those in the car and they would run through my head all day long. “My baby and my body will work together through the process of labor . . . my labor will occur at just the right time.” Even if these might not help me through the process of labor, I felt they helped combat all the horrific labor stories that people feel inclined to tell pregnant women.

So, in that early morning conversation in which my husband told me to relax, he was saying the exact thing that I needed to hear. And relax I did. I stayed in bed for about two hours until my contractions were about ten minutes apart and then I found solace in a tub of hot water. During all that time, I didn't go to my special place and I didn't once count from ten down to one. I just kept reminding myself to relax and open to the process. I had the labor visualization CD on in the background, and although I wasn't focusing on the words I knew it was helping me to relax. I was completely in my body and in my own zone, listening and helping the journey of birth along.

I lost track of time in the tub, but ended up calling Alan down around 7:30 a.m. He kept track of my contractions and packed the car in between each one. My due date was still a week away and we had not even thought about what we would pack when the time came. In between his frantic running between the house and the car, he came into the bathroom to check on me, asking if I was still relaxed.

At about noon, we called the midwife and she told us to start making our way to the hospital. We arrived at the childbirth center at about 1:30 p.m. The nurse came in to see how I was doing as soon as I got into the room. I told her that I was ready to push. Although she didn't say it, her reaction was one of disbelief. How many first-time moms come into the hospital ready to push? The midwife checked me and determined that I was right. An hour and a half later, we welcomed my beautiful little boy into the world.

It turned out that my labor process closely resembled the one I had envisioned in class. And my husband was indeed calm throughout the process, even taking the time to make sure that I was staying calm. For us, hypnobirthing was the perfect preparation for childbirth. It allowed me to just go with the sensations. It was not the magic potion that made childbirth painless; it just helped me understand that the pain was a part of the process. It also helped me understand that if I went with the pain, labor might progress a little faster.

As for Alan, he went from thinking that it was a bunch of bunk to being a believer. “Seeing you go through the whole process convinced me that it worked,” he told me after the birth. “Your labor went well and fast and you seemed to handle it well.” And that is the highest praise I could ever have received. Well, except for those first cries of my new baby.

Carrie Chandler is a freelance writer and new mommy living in Barre. She is pictured above with husband Alan and new son Elias. □

other relaxation techniques, including visualizing the kind of labor each woman wanted. In mine, I was at home for most of my labor and went to the hospital only once I felt like I was ready to have this baby.

Although the classes were important, the instructor made it clear that practice at home was imperative. She handed out three CDs for home use. I was the one who used them; my hus-

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band had gone as far as he could go by attending class. Generally a relaxed guy, he wasn't too worried about stressing out during the labor. I, on the other hand, practiced religiously every day. I would pop in the relaxation CD, lie on the couch, and go to my special place. It got to the point where I craved my time of relaxation every day. The techniques that I practiced early on had nothing to do with the birth