

Map Breath Awareness



Practicing breath awareness regularly will help you to really know the technique in your own body and mind, allowing you to bring a more authentic, confident understanding to your work with parents.

When to use this process

- Ideally, you will introduce breath awareness in your first session with an individual, couple, or group.
- It can be taught at a prenatal session or you can also introduce the technique on the spur of the moment (whether in a class/session or in labor), without having previously “trained” your client.

What to have in advance

- Each parent will need a bowl with a few ice cubes, and a hand towel/dish towel/several paper towels.
- Chimes/bell for marking the beginning and end of ice-holding “contractions.”
- Watch/timer to time “contractions.”

Introduce the purpose of breath awareness (BA)

Focusing attention on the breath, and on noticing how this attention moves, allows parents to:

- Reduce suffering by shifting attention away from the stories their minds are telling.
- Move away from trying to think their way through labor.
- Notice their responses to sensation.
- Notice their internal dialogues.
- Build a coping mindset.

Build a framework for breath awareness

- BA differs from “breathing techniques” often taught for labor: it’s not about breathing with a certain technique or pattern.
- In fact, breath awareness is not about *how* the parent is breathing at all. It’s a way of thinking, not a way of breathing.
- It is rooted in a trust that the body will breathe itself just right. (Just as the body regulates heart rate and digestion.)
- Parents witness their breath, just as it is, without directing, controlling, or judging it.
- Laboring people - and people undergoing physical or psychological intensity - throughout the world often practice BA, without necessarily using the term or articulating it in this way.
- We are bringing this-instinctive practice to parents’ conscious awareness before labor.
- Even when practicing BA “perfectly,” you may still feel the ice, or labor pains, etc. You may also experience continuous

distraction/mind-wandering. All of that is normal. The practice simply gives you a different way to relate to your sensations and state of mind, and a way to step away - even if only momentarily - from any suffering stories that your mind is creating.

Parents practice breath awareness with no ice

Ideally, you will begin by leading parents in breath awareness without ice first, allowing them to relax and sink into the experience. You might use prompts such as:

- Let your eyes soften, gaze downward, or close, and bring your full attention to your breath...
- Notice exactly when your exhale (outward breath) begins and ends...
- Make no effort to change or control your breath in any way...if you find your breathing changes as you are observing it, just notice the changes...
- Be curious: is your outward breath long or shallow? Soft or tight?
- If your mind begins to wander, just bring your attention back to your next outward breath...do this as many times as necessary.

Parents practice with ice

After parents have been practicing BA in silence for a minute or two on their own with no ice, tell them to pick up their ice when you ring the bell, and put it down when you ring it again. Time them for a 60-second “ice contraction.” Remain silent during the contraction, to allow parents to find their own way. After the contraction is over, open the solution focused dialogue: “Let go of all of your ideas about how well you did, or didn’t do, or how well it worked or didn’t work. Notice what is happening for you in THIS moment...Consider...what did you notice?”

Parents practice a series of ice contractions

- Now parents will practice BA through three ice contractions in a row.
- Remind parents to switch the hand that's holding ice.
- Remind parents that the point of the ice is to be a source of resistance, so if holding it in one hand isn't really creating significant discomfort for them, they can use more ice, hold ice in both hands, hold ice against their wrist/back of neck/behind ears/etc. The goal here is to create enough discomfort that they need to actively cope.
- Remind parents to continue their BA practice between contractions. There are three reasons for this:
 - To not break out of the BA/coping trance state.
 - To practice relaxing between contractions in order to save energy and recharge.
 - To remind ourselves that coping techniques are not only for contractions - there may be things we need to cope with in the between-times as well.
- You can have the partners support the pregnant parent, or have everyone in class do it independently. (You could also do a second series of partner-supported contractions after having some dialogue about an independent series - if you choose to do that, you could even have the pregnant person support the partner for one!)
- Ring them in and out of three 60-second contractions, with rest periods between of about the same length.
- You may choose to be silent, or be silent during some and give guidance during some, or play soothing music, etc.
- If you wish to offer supporting phrases, or guide partners in doing so, you could try...
 - Be aware of how your breath changes naturally with sensation...
 - You don't need to change what's happening...just notice your breath in this moment...and this moment...and this moment...

- Release as you breathe out...
- When your mind wanders or starts thinking...gently bring your attention back to your very next breath...that's right...
- Open the solution focused dialogue with questions such as...
 - “What did you notice?”
 - “What was different?”
 - “What did your partner do that was helpful?” “What might you want more or less of, next time?” (Note: for the partner feedback, providing directive questions and focusing on what is working, leads the feedback to become more clear and less vague or critical.)

Next steps

Offer suggestions for how parents can practice at home, on their own or with a partner, to continue learning and developing a coping mindset.