

Pain Coping Map

Circular Breathing



“Re-energize, especially toward the end of labor—share a deeply harmonious, essentially non-verbal, connection with your partner.” Pam England, Keepsake Journal

When to use this process:

This process can be taught anytime, especially with or after introducing Breath Awareness. If used in a class series, you can introduce this practice in the third or fourth session. It can also be taught at a prenatal session or in labor without previous training.

Time: 30-45 minutes

What to have in advance:



Ice cubes and towels for each parent
Bell or chimes for the mentor.

Introduce the Purpose of Circular Breathing:

This practice can increase energy and help create a deep non-verbal connection between the parents.

It is especially helpful when:

- Pregnant people and their partners may become exhausted or mentally worn down, especially toward the end of labor.
- During times of transition, such as admission to the hospital, or a change of staff in the labor room.
- When parents feel scared, scattered or distracted.
- Something may need to be done to renew energy and commitment, and at the same time be calming and grounding.

Build a Framework for Circular Breathing:

1. We often think of the flow of energy in labor--and movement of the baby—as going “downward.” Physically, that is true, but a problem can arise when the birthing person’s energy or attention goes “upward”—to their head. Various distractions (internal and external) draw them back into thinking, worrying, or planning.
2. This practice is designed to take you out of your thinking mind and “down” into your pelvis. It calms and focuses the mind—perfect for labor!
3. We're going to draw on a breathing technique from China, developed at least two thousand years ago. It is called the Microcosmic Circuit or Ovarian Breathing. We have modified it



slightly for pregnancy and labor; we call it, simply, “Circular Breathing.”

4. This teaching recognizes that life-giving power, including the power to create another human being, originates in the ovaries and testes. Drawing on this generative power and circulating it throughout the body when exhausted and depleted of energy refreshes the body and restores mental clarity and hope.
5. This is a practice that you can do alone, on your own--anytime--not just in labor. And it is something you can do together with your birth partner in labor.

Important instructions for parents before they hold the ice:

This practice requires some explanation before they can begin practicing.

Tell parents:

“Circular Breathing has its own continuous rhythm, but while learning, it helps to break it down into two parts. I will describe and demonstrate slowly first, then you’ll try at your normal breathing rate.”

Part One: In-Breath

Demonstrate with your hands making the tracing movement on your own body. You can also make a sketch on a board or flip-chart. Imagine, as you breathe in, you are pulling life-giving energy from the front of your pelvis downward and back, sweeping along the inside of your perineum, and up your spine to the crown of your head. At the end of your inhale, in the brief pause before exhale begins, focus your attention on the crown of your head or on your forehead between your eyes.

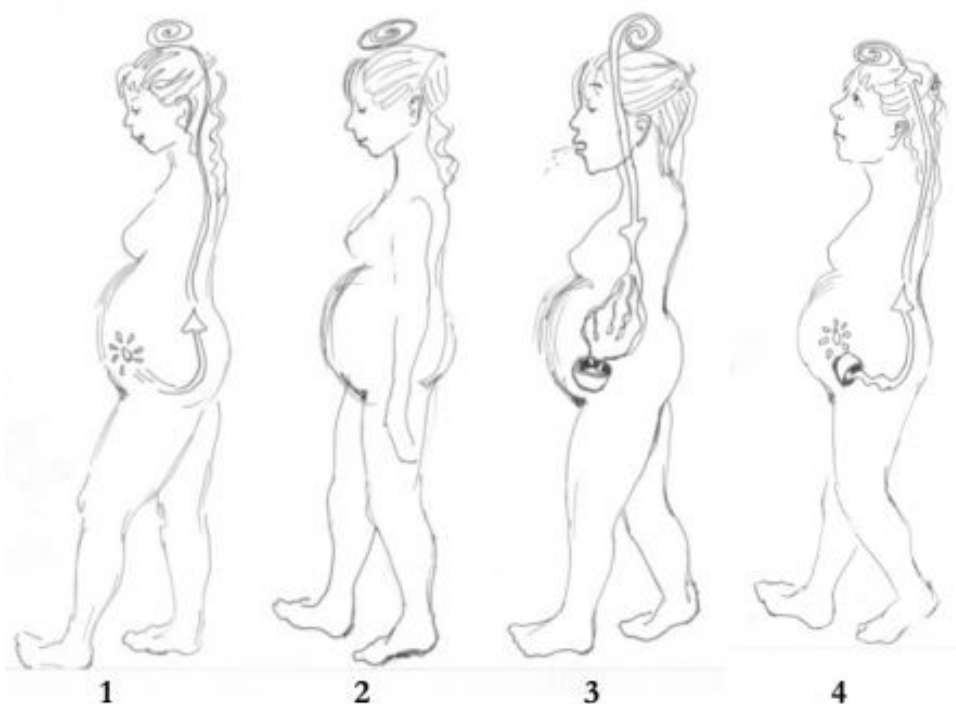
Part Two: Out-Breath



As your exhale begins, follow your outward breath, from beginning to end, from the top of your head downward through your body to the bottom of your belly--top of your public bone.

Now have parents try, giving further guidance as follows:

The technique requires you to sit up, or stand up, straight: so you can't slouch. Posture makes a big difference in our attitude and physical energy. This can be very important in labor. If we are tired, beginning to lose hope or focus, and collapse physically, it adds to the despair and exhaustion. So, with this tried-and-true breathing technique, you will breathe in "upward"--straightening and strengthening your spine--and breath out "downward"--into your pelvis and your baby.



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Invite them to begin Breath Awareness--wait a few moments as they adjust their bodies.

Tell them:

1. *You can close your eyes, or keep your eyes slightly open, gazing softly downward. Looking up and around distracts you from your inward journey in the labyrinth and in labor.*
2. *Rest your hands at the bottom of your belly—the top of your pelvis, where your pubic bone is.*
3. In-Breath (repeat Part One, above) Add: *It is important to imagine your breath moving upward following the curves inside your spine, not outside your body. Attention on upward moving inhalation is uplifting and refreshing. Practice this inhalation meditation for a few breaths.*
4. Pause while they practice.
5. Out-Breath (repeat Part Two, above): *Imagine this life-giving breath re-energizing every organ, every tiny cell, in your body. Imagine your next special breath out energizing and illuminating your womb and your baby. Practice this exhalation meditation for a few breaths.*
6. Pause while they practice.
7. *Now you'll begin to experience the circular pattern of breath: breathing up the inner curves of your spine, breathing down into the body...up...down. Feel the relaxing rhythm of Circular Breathing for several breaths.*
8. Pause while they practice.
9. *Now, notice the brief pauses between your in-breath and out-breath, and your out-breath and in-breath. Bringing your attention to this still*

place between breaths slows down the mind and deepens meditation. Pay attention to this in-between-breaths place for the next few breaths.

Part Three: Fill and spill your “cup of breath”

It may help deepen meditation to add the “cup of breath” imagery. Imagine a little “cup” sitting behind your pubic bone area. As you exhale, instead of letting the breath dissipate, imagine it is pouring into the cup. During the pause between outward and inward breath, imagine the full cup tips back and, as you breathe in, you pull the life-giving breath from the cup across the perineum and up the spine.

It is important that parents practice for a few minutes WITHOUT ICE, as it can take a while to get the hang of it.

Parents practice with ice:

Once parents have been practicing the entire cycle for a few minutes without ice, it's time to ring the bell! Time 60 seconds (increasing it to 90 seconds OR having them hold ice in both hands for the duration of their Circular Breathing practice session will increase the challenge).

You may continue to give key cue words during this first contraction.

We recommend doing a quick check-in after the first ice-contraction to see how it went. Start with “what worked?” then follow up with anyone who has troubles or questions.

Have them practice for a series of 2-3 contractions and through the rest-periods as well.

Partners guiding the pregnant person:



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Over the years, we have found that when the birth companion uses their hands to support their partner during Circular Breathing the practice is even more effective. If you attend births, this is a way to help a birthing parent during labor.

In class, you can teach partners a handful of important points about Laborland and labor etiquette, as you go along.

Here is a breakdown of the steps:

Tell the pregnant person:

Once you know Circular Breathing, you will not need to be “coached” to practice it in labor. However, when your partner practices Circular Breathing with you, it deepens your harmonious connection with one another, and can make the practice much more effective. So, let’s have partners learn and practice how to support their partner through Circular Breathing. Everyone should set aside ice and towel nearby during this next part.

1. Get couples in position: The pregnant parent stands up straight, and partners stand next to them, but facing in towards them (so they are at right angles to each other).
2. Have the pregnant parent start the breathing part of practicing Circular Breathing. Partners rest their (dominant) hand flat and somewhat firmly on the pregnant partner’s sacrum. (If they don’t know what that is, now’s a good time to show them!)
3. Partners begin simply by matching the pregnant parent’s breath. They breathe in as the pregnant parent breathes in, matching their partner’s breath as they breathe out. The support partner will need to pay close attention to follow their partner’s breath. (This is key!) Encourage the pregnant parent to breathe audibly and out through their mouth, so the support partner can more easily follow their rhythm.



Once everyone seems in sync, go to the next step:

4. As the pregnant person inhales, the support partner moves their hand upward from the sacrum to the crown of the head, in one smooth yet confident motion until it rests on top of their head with the “weight of a nickel”. Avoid getting tangled in long hair by moving it to the side or quickly skipping over it.
5. The partner will then take their hand OFF the top of their head and place their other (non-dominant) hand flat on the pregnant person’s chest or on top of their big round belly. The partner’s touch should be full contact and reassuring, not tickly, light or uncertain.
6. As the pregnant person exhales (remember—they are breathing together), in rhythm with the outward breath, the partner will draw their hand down over the belly and rest on the pubic bone. The partner can suggest, “Breathe into my hand,” as they exhale, to encourage a longer exhale that brings the pregnant person into their body and out of their thinking mind.

“into their body and out of their thinking mind”

Partners support through a series of contractions:

Once partners are in the swing of things and are reasonably competent (don’t expect or wait for perfection), you are ready to have them practice with ice. Get them ready as follows:

- Have the pregnant person hold their cup of ice, with the towel at their feet to catch the drips. Alternatively, you can invite them to put their ice (along with their partner’s ice) on their towel in front of them and have them step ONTO the ice (with one or both feet) for each contraction.

- Warn the couple that the pregnant person's breathing may change when they pick up the ice, so they will have to pay close attention and stay tuned into their breathing.
- Tell them they'll do three contractions plus rest periods.
- After the three contractions/two rest periods are up, invite the one who is pregnant to give feedback privately to their partner, with FIRST: what worked; and SECOND: what needs to change.
- If partners are struggling, give them more tips (see below), and let them try again.
- If you have time, or if parents ask, have couples practice a few ice-contractions in other positions such as, hands-and-knees, sitting on a chair, or lying on their side.

Tips & Troubleshooting:

1. One hand should always remain in contact with the body, while the other hand is OFF the body and getting into position for the next movement. The pregnant person's concentration can be disrupted if both hands are either ON or OFF at the same time.
2. If a partner struggles at moving their hands in rhythm with the pregnant parent's breath, you can discreetly go over and put your hands on their hands and guide them in the rhythm until they get the hang of it.
3. If the pregnant parent is being monitored in labor, belts may restrict the support partner from freely moving their hands in this complete pattern. As an alternative, they can talk the pregnant parent through Circular Breathing and rest one hand on their lower belly, or on their sacrum, so their energy and effort is directed downward toward the work of labor. Remind the support partner that no matter the circumstance (in a birth tub, cesarean, or epidural, for instance), they

can always match their breath to the pregnant parent's breath and that is a wonderful way to stay connected.

4. If you are working with a pregnant person who does not have a partner, you may either ask permission to step in and offer this support yourself (in class, a prenatal session, or in labor), or suggest that they try it with their doula or other support people. Offer the reminder that this is a powerful process to do on your own, without partner support.



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