

Giving birth can be one of the most empowering or frightening experiences of a woman's life. LANA NOWAKOWSKI discovers why preparation is key, and gets the lowdown on calm birthing and hypnobirthing, two of Australia's most popular birth preparation methods.

# *An empowerer*



# *ing birth*

Does the prospect of going into labour leave you feeling terrified? If that question made you squirm, you'll be delighted to learn that it doesn't have to. If, like most first-time mothers, you could use some help overcoming your fears, a positive birthing course could be the answer you're looking for. Thousands of women across Australia credit calm birthing and hypnobirthing courses with helping them to shake off the cultural concept of birth as an emergency, prepare for birth with confidence and give birth calmly.

We enlisted the help of two practitioners to demystify what's involved in these courses, and more importantly, determine how a mum can feel empowered before, during and after giving birth.

## **CAN ANY BIRTH BE EMPOWERING?**

The simple answer is yes. But rather than being concerned with vaginal birth versus caesarean, experts believe that empowerment comes from birthing with confidence. According to Karen McClay, a midwife, registered nurse, mum and director of Calmbirth ([calmbirth.com.au](http://calmbirth.com.au)), there is a pervasive social myth about textbook vaginal births being the 'best' and 'most empowering' type. In reality, this couldn't be further from the truth. "Empowerment is not about how you give birth," she says. "The empowerment



is found in the way you experience birth and talk about it afterwards.”

In fact, the benefits of an empowered birth can last for many years after the baby is born. Melissa Spilsted, a clinical hypnotherapist, teacher, mum and director of Hypnobirthing Australia ([hypnobirthingaustralia.com.au](http://hypnobirthingaustralia.com.au)), says that drawing confidence from your birthing experience can empower you in every area of your life. “When we meet challenging life experiences head-on and work through them, it can be very empowering. An empowered birth can give you confidence to tackle other life challenges, like parenting.”

### **THE RISE OF INDEPENDENT BIRTH EDUCATION**

Most hospital-based childbirth classes have come a long way since the old days, when grainy videos of traumatic births left many pregnant women terrified, and policy-driven instructions left many pregnant women feeling like little more than a number. Nonetheless, these days, there is a huge demand for independent, positive birthing education in addition to the standard hospital classes. Spilsted says there is a positive birth movement happening across Australia. “Positive birthing education is the key to increasing birthing confidence, making birth easier and reducing interventions,” she says.



### **CALM BIRTH EDUCATION EXPLAINED**

Calmbirth’s course teaches pregnant women and birthing partners about how birth works, and provides support strategies for pregnancy and birth including relaxation, meditation, visualisation and breathing techniques.

The course is built around the philosophy that with knowledge comes confidence. “Our beliefs and perceptions can either work against us in birth or allow us to work with birth, so a primary aim of the course is explaining, de-mything and normalising birth to address conscious



## AN EMPOWERED BIRTH CAN GIVE YOU CONFIDENCE TO TACKLE OTHER LIFE CHALLENGES, LIKE PARENTING.

and subconscious fears and anxieties,” says McClay.

“When you understand what birth is about, you gain confidence to birth the best way possible – and that’s the best way for you and this baby, the safest way, working with birth, and working in partnership with your caregivers,” she says. “We’re about giving knowledge and tools to really allow couples to remain in control of their birth journey and the decisions around it.”

McClay says the Calmbirth course aims to connect women with their bodies and the birth process. “We teach women to be physically active during birth while remaining calm and centred,” she says. “We give women the tools they need to actively work through the sensations without feeling overwhelmed or frightened.”

### A GUIDE TO HYPNOBIRTHING EDUCATION

Hypnobirthing Australia’s course gives pregnant women and birthing partners an understanding of birth processes, and equips them with mind and body support tools for use during pregnancy and birth. Hypnosis is a trance-like state that simultaneously enhances focus and relaxation, and hypnobirthing involves self-hypnosis, as well as hypnotherapy techniques for birthing partners to use with birthing mums.

Spilsted describes hypnosis as a series of repetitions that tap into the subconscious, and explains that it is similar to being in a state of daydreaming or an in-between state of starting to wake up or starting to go to sleep. “You become so conditioned to affirmations and relaxations during pregnancy that during

labour you already have all of those positive thoughts and affirmations at the forefront of your mind,” she says.

The basic philosophy of hypnobirthing is approaching birth in an informed, positive and prepared way, and the name can be deceptive. “We do not shy away from the fact that we use hypnotherapy, but it’s not all about hypnosis,” she says. “Hypnosis is one of the tools we use.”

### HOW WILL I FEEL AFTER MY COURSE?

McClay says that no matter how a pregnant woman has prepared, she will probably still have some nerves about the birth. “Even so, you’re ready to go,” she says. “You feel like you’ve had an opportunity to look at all aspects of birth. You look forward to the birth with excitement, rather than wondering how you’re going to get through it. I’ve had a dad come to me and say, ‘I reckon I could birth this baby!’”

Spilsted agrees that it’s natural to have nervous anticipation before the birth. “We are launching into the unknown

when we have a child, in so many ways – physically, emotionally, mentally,” she says. “Our lives change forever. When you are mentally prepared, you can completely focus on the task at hand and do the best you can with whatever circumstances you have, without being inhibited by fear.”

### WHICH COURSE SHOULD I GO FOR?

Neither McClay nor Spilsted says their course is superior. “It’s a matter of doing your research and choosing the one that fits in best with your own philosophies,” says Spilsted. “Women in Australia are so

lucky to have different birthing options. It’s a beautiful thing to have choice.”

Amey Bencke is a doula (a birthing companion and post-birth supporter) who has worked with calm birth mums and hypnobirthing mums. She says she cannot pick one course over the other and has found that both courses are helpful. “From my perspective, calm birth and hypnobirthing have similar techniques and both work well,” she says. “My clients rave about the classes and the empowerment that comes with knowing how to have the best possible birth experience, no matter how or where they birth.”

WHEN YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT BIRTH IS ABOUT, YOU GAIN CONFIDENCE TO BIRTH THE BEST WAY POSSIBLE

## COURSE OUTLINE

If you still can't decide which method is most suited to you, here's a brief run-down of calm birth and hypnobirthing.

Both courses:

- Explain, normalise and de-myth birth processes.
- Are suitable for women having any sort of birth, including planned and emergency C-section.
- Welcome and involve the mother's partner in the birth preparation and the birth process.
- Provide a wide range of tools to the birthing mother and birthing partner for a calm, positive and empowering birth experience. Both include breathing, meditation, visualisation, relaxation, vocalisation, movement and touch techniques.
- Are open to the idea of pain relief drugs being helpful or necessary in some circumstances (but many women who have done these courses find they do not need any, or much, pain relief medication for vaginal deliveries).
- Run in small group classes for a total of 12 hours (for example, over a weekend or in a three-hour class one evening a week for four weeks).
- Cost around \$500. ■

