

The Language of Labour

Over-sharers just love pregnant women, don't they? They pounce in supermarkets, at barbecues and on all forms of public transport, eager to share their tales of drama on the high seas. LANA NOWAKOWSKI asks what pregnant women do and don't need to hear, and what to do when over-sharers strike.

When it comes to the things pregnant women do and don't need to hear, Tracey Anderson-Askew (calmbirthcanberra.com.au) knows her stuff. As a mother of four, she has heard every inappropriate comment in the book, and having worked as a childbirth educator for the last 15 years, she has helped thousands of women face their fears and prepare for childbirth.

Anderson-Askew says the subtlest negative comments about childbirth, even those made by loved ones with the best intentions, can create fear and doubt in a pregnant woman's mind. And the impact of negative comments doesn't always stop there. "Fear and doubt can strongly influence a woman's labour and generate self-fulfilling prophecies. The mind-body connection plays a major role

in childbirth; what we think and believe about childbirth is really important," says Anderson-Askew.

What are we so afraid of?

Anderson-Askew's class participants consistently rank birth complications and pain as their top fears about childbirth – and it's not just coming from the women.

"Men are often as afraid of childbirth as women are," she says. "The pain-related fear for men tends to be seeing her suffering and not knowing how to help. The natural inclination is to try to protect her and fix the pain. Unless men are prepared for the childbirth they are about to be involved in, they are often the first ones in the labour room to ask for pain management."





ANDERSON- ASKEW'S TOP MESSAGES FOR PREGNANT WOMEN

- Work with the mindset 'I can do this.'
- Work with your labour, not against it.
- Have a variety of tools and strategies to manage the birth.

Why are we scared?

The two key sources of childbirth-related fears are the stories of family and friends, and what we see and hear on TV, in movies and on computer screens,

says Anderson-Askew. "The most powerful way we pick up on fear around childbirth is the way our mothers, sisters and aunts have talked to us. We are genetically connected to these people and we tend to identify that our bodies are the same or similar," she says. "Outside of our families, other people's stories can be really significant in shaping how we think about childbirth. A lot depends on how much we trust these people and what mindset we're in when we hear their stories."

It can help to remember that almost all on-screen childbirths have been highly edited, and are designed to entertain rather than educate. Anderson-Askew says that childbirth

is usually very boring a lot of the time. "You have a contraction and then you have to wait," she says. "We can inadvertently pick up fears from visual media because the childbirths we see are about panic and pain and people rushing around madly the entire time."

THE TOP THINGS PREGNANT WOMAN DON'T NEED TO HEAR

1 Horror stories

The number one thing Anderson-Askew says no pregnant woman needs to hear is another woman's childbirth horror story. Women share those stories with pregnant women for all sorts of reasons, including entertainment, warning what may be ahead, and



childbirth without any reliable tools and strategies.”

2 Painkiller pushing

Another thing that pregnant women don't need to hear is that strong medications and painkillers are the one and only answer during labour. “Under certain circumstances, drugs can be helpful during labour,” she says. “Of course they can. But they come with risks, and those need to be weighed up. Drugs are overused in our culture, and this is because women don't believe they've got what they need to get through childbirth and so many people are telling them the same.”

If drugs are the only coping strategy, a woman in labour might be in for a shock. “She might arrive at the hospital almost fully dilated when it's too late for most drugs, or the anaesthetist might be delayed,” says Anderson-Askew. “Many women are unprepared for these scenarios. Some will get so distressed that it will interfere with labour, and suddenly, things become much harder.”

ANDERSON-ASKEW'S TOP MESSAGES FOR CHILDBIRTH PARTNERS

- You are really influential on the birthing woman.
- You can help make childbirth easier and shorter, by helping her feel calm, safe, loved and supported.
- Believe in her.

attempting to process a traumatic birth by sharing their experience.

“If people launch into horror stories, don't lose sight of the fact that every childbirth is different,” says Anderson-Askew. “Ask them to tell you what they learned and what helped them, because that is the part that might be really relevant to you. Deflect it back so they can think about what's going to be constructive.”

Anderson-Askew says that you might hear a helpful idea, but often you will hear no ideas at all. “A lot of women will just shake their heads and say there was nothing that really helped them,” she says. “This helps you understand the reality of how many people go into

3 Pain predictions

Pain is a subjective experience, and our pain levels can be significantly influenced by our expectations.

Anderson-Askew says it is unhelpful to tell a pregnant woman what level of pain you think she might be in for.

“Telling a pregnant woman that your pain was terrible, or giving her your predictions on how bad you think her pain is going to be, is irrelevant and such a disservice,” says Anderson-Askew. “Fear causes the release of adrenaline and other stress hormones, making labour more painful and potentially more complicated.”

4 The intimacy factor

Locker room trash talk has many men worried about not being able to unsee a vaginal delivery. Although women can be very exposed during

childbirth, Anderson-Askew says it can be a positive experience with phenomenal relationship rewards.

“Intimacy is that absolute comfort with each other in all our glory and all those bits we usually try to hide. Depending on the dynamics of the relationship, the vulnerability and exposure of childbirth can create more intimacy in a relationship or it can have the opposite effect.”

5 If the ship has sailed

If you have already been frightened or disheartened by other people's negative comments about childbirth, Anderson-Askew suggests you start your preparation now by getting a good support team around you. “During pregnancy and labour, you really need to be surrounded by people who believe in you.”

She recommends developing a solid understanding of how childbirth works, creating your own strong belief system about childbirth, and doing the emotional preparation you need to get into a good mindset. “We often don't realise just how much is floating around in our heads, getting in the way of what we need to do,” she says.

DURING PREGNANCY AND LABOUR, YOU REALLY NEED TO BE SURROUNDED BY PEOPLE WHO BELIEVE IN YOU.

6 Putting a lid on it

You might like to show this article to the women you love and trust, since their comments usually sink in deeper than any others. “Regardless of how the comments were intended, if they are negative and get under your skin, they can significantly change the way your body responds to labour,” says Anderson-Askew. “The silver lining is that the opposite is true, too.” ■

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