

As a birth partner

- You don't need to coach your partner constantly, for her breath and movement will be most effective when they are natural and instinctive.
- If she loses her rhythm, you can gently guide her back. Bring your face close to hers and say her name, and 'Breathe with me.' Then inhale fully and exhale long and slow, until she begins to mirror your rhythm. Establish eye contact if you can.
- Affirmations in time with her breathing can encourage her. Talk to her by name: 'You are doing fine, you are doing well . . . our baby is coming down gently, everything's going well . . . I'm with you, I'm here.'
- If you have practised visualisations use hypnotic language as you guide her.

If your partner is holding her breath for short periods while she bears down she may want to grip your hand or bite on a cloth, which you can hold for her. Help to bring her back to a calm state between contractions.

- If she is finding it hard to slow her breath talk to her gently: 'Breathe in, breathe out, breathe with me, breathe in, breathe out . . .' If this does not help, massage may be more effective.
- She may be so focused that she does not need active help and just wants you to be there quietly.
- Try not to mirror her breathing – if you can breathe regularly you'll preserve your own energy.
- As your baby emerges, your encouragement and praise will help your partner summon her power.

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- You may need to hook your arms under hers as she squats or let her wrap her arms around your neck.
- Keep yourself grounded with your feet widely spaced or sit so you can be balanced and conserve energy. If you are standing, then bend your knees a little to protect your back from strain. If you have a back problem sit on a bed while supporting her. Be patient: she may need to change positions frequently or stay in one for a long time.
- She might ask you to join her in the pool.
- At times it may be best for you to sit and hold her hand or give a gentle massage.
- If you get stiff or uncomfortable, a midwife can take over while you stretch or take a break.
- If you have practised different positions together, you may be able to give suggestions: but don't take it personally if they are ignored!

As a birth partner: second stage

You may become almost as focused on the birth as your partner is. It is surprising how many people dread the idea of labour and end up totally engrossed, discarding inhibitions and finding hidden reserves of energy, love and support. Some partners, men or women, do find it very difficult and it may be frightening to watch someone overcome by the forces of birth. When your baby's head becomes visible you may be overcome with joy and relief, and shout out instantly to let her know that you can see her baby. Your congratulations and encouragement will help her find the energy for the final pushes, and you will be the first to see the baby's face and then the rest of the body.

When your partner is pushing she'll probably rely on you for maximum physical support, particularly if she is giving birth upright. At times you may need to bear most of her weight: if you're worried about this or have a back problem, let the midwives know so that they can help you. Even if you're not sure about massage, your partner will tell you where she needs to feel pressure.

- If you feel yourself panicking, hand over your role to a midwife or another birth partner and take a break – this could refresh you.
- If you don't want to witness the actual birth you could stay close to her head.
- Even if you are very exhausted you will probably feel a surge of energy when you meet your baby.
- You may wish to cut the umbilical cord.
- Once your baby is born you may be the one to pass her to her mother, or your partner may ask you to cuddle your baby while she recovers. You begin communicating through touch, talking and eye contact.
- If there's room in the bed, or your partner is in the water pool, you could join them both.
- If any difficulties arise during labour your love and support will mean a lot. You may be a valuable go-between for your partner and the midwives. If intervention is recommended she may need your help to make a decision.

When the time is right, you can tell the world what you (and your partner, of course) have accomplished. But it may be best to delay phone calls until you have had time to sit quietly with your wonderful newborn baby.

As a birth partner: first stage

If contractions are mild or widely spaced you may be able to help in a calm and relaxed way.

- You could make a cup of tea or give a soothing massage wherever your partner feels the need – her back, hands, thighs, shoulders, face or feet. She may appreciate the feeling of a cool damp cloth on her forehead.
- You could walk or sway gently with your partner as she leans on you.
- To help yourself, eat and drink well to keep up your energy.

It may help to breathe with your partner. When you focus on her breath and on your own, you may become centred and calm.

- If you have practised visualisations you may be able to talk her into a peaceful place.
- If it's appropriate, take a break and have a stretch or a short burst of exercise or a shower.

Towards the end of this stage it's common for women to become frightened and many show anger or struggle to carry on. You'll need to summon all your stamina and energy. Try not to take any abuse personally – you are a vehicle to help your partner to release her tension. The whole experience may be intense, and can be most difficult when you see your partner expressing pain or crying out.

- Breathe with your partner, encourage her and let her know she's doing well, and help her to let go of all her tension so she can relax fully between contractions.
- If she does not want to be touched or has put her trust in one of the midwives, try not to take it personally.
- Now may be a time to dim the lights, change the essential oils you are burning, wet the cloth you are using to stroke her forehead or replenish a jug with fresh cold water.
- It may be difficult just to be there, especially if you are used to being active and doing things, but your presence, love and commitment are immensely powerful.
- If you are overwhelmed or freaked out you'll need support from the midwives who will probably encourage you to take a break, perhaps to have a drink and something to eat, so you can return with new energy. When your partner looks at you she'll feel energised.