

Hypnobirthing eases way for mother and newborn

By Linda Hatley

Main Line Life Correspondent

Giving birth is one of the highlights of a woman's life. For the first-time mother, it's also a time of apprehension, uncertainty and fear — thanks in part to well-meaning friends and relatives who relate war stories from the labor and delivery suite. Even the current trend toward natural or prepared birth with minimal assistance from drugs does not allay the apprehension and fear. This is why Robin Frees recommends hypnobirthing, a technique which allows the woman and her birthing partner to employ the techniques of self-hypnosis to ease the tension of delivery.

Frees, a Malvern resident, explains that she personally used hypnobirthing techniques for the delivery of her third child. "I had natural birth with my first two children and I realized I had used what I had learned in [birthing] classes," she says, adding that her husband had studied hypnosis as part of his public speaking preparation and she was intrigued by the idea of using the mind to calm and control the body.

A lactation counselor since 1995, Frees adds that she wanted to expand her practice to include prenatal counseling.

Hypnobirthing is not hypnosis,

rather it is self-hypnosis. The technique was developed by Marie F. Mongan, author of *Childbirth without Fear*. One of the basic tenets of Mongan's work is, she explains, "Fear causes tension, tension causes pain."

Frees says, "prepared childbirth is not really the mother's option but what's available to be medically managed."

According to Frees, "Hypnobirthing recognizes the connection between the mind and the body. The body is the robot of the mind." She offers the example of the "scary" movie that, while the viewer knows it is fiction, sets off all the classic fear responses — racing heart, adrenaline surge and feeling of terror. "Hypnosis fosters positive changes in the body," she explains. "Hypnobirthing creates a very relaxed, hypnotic state where the mind is receptive. We remove the analytic, conscious mind through guided imagery to create a relaxed state where the mother can control her reactions."

The guided imagery, Frees explains, is a series of prepared scripts or scripts written by the mother and her partner. These take the woman to a special place — a beach or favorite spot that she

has always found to be relaxing. "When they reach this place," she adds, "the body will start to relax."

"But," she reminds, "They have to practice every day to have the body go there. These are not stage tricks. I don't wave the wand and make it work. People have to go home and practice."

Hypnobirthing has its own vocabulary. Contractions are called "surges," so, Frees explains, "The mind can interpret the surges as energy — as pushing the baby out."

Frees' course covers five sessions and includes videos, scripts and practical tips. The birth companion attends the classes because his — or her — voice reading the script is the anchor that the mother relies on to reach relaxation. Frees teaches "rainbow breathing" — the practice of inhaling imaginary healing colors which can heighten a sense of well-being. The sessions also include instruction in light touch massage because, Frees explains, "Physical touch can release endorphins which help achieve a deep sense of relaxation." She adds that anxiety — the fight or flight response — causes an increased release of adrenaline which

"Hypnobirthing recognizes the connection between the mind and the body. The body is the robot of the mind."

Robin Frees,
prenatal counselor

in turn deprives the uterus of oxygen which can slow down and prolong labor leading to more anxiety. Frees says that 50 or so couples have taken the hypnobirthing course and have delivered at all the Main Line hospitals and birth centers. For the most part, healthcare providers are amenable to working with them. "It's important for healthcare providers to be supportive," she stresses.

"These classes empower the couple to be informed consumers of healthcare while not being adversarial with their providers. They learn to ask the question: Is this medically necessary?"

Frees' devotes the fifth session to infant characteristics so new parents will have an idea of what to expect during baby's first year. Granted, there are myriad books devoted to the subject but, Frees says with a chuckle, "The baby didn't read the book."

Frees teaches hypnobirthing on Monday nights in Malvern. The techniques are not intended to take the place of medications during birth, rather they are intended to enhance the experience. Says Frees, alluding to the stories that have been handed down through the generations, "The birth process shouldn't be so terrible." For the skilled hypnobirthing mother, it won't be.