

"Birth is one of those rare life experiences where power and vulnerability live side by side. That is all! To touch that. To touch others who touch that, is my great pleasure and honor."

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Your Comprehensive Checklist of Comfort Measures for Birth!

This comfort measures checklist is based on my experience as a doula and a facebook thread that received over 90 responses to the question **“if you’ve given birth, what was one of your favorite comfort measures during labor?”** What emerged were over 30 distinct comfort measures that I am excited to share with you here. I’ve added some insights into the benefits and uses of these methods as well in an effort to explain why and how these techniques are helpful for so many women.

To start, many of these comfort measures work as a function of the Gate Control Theory of Pain. Introduced in the 1960’s, this theory proposes that non-painful input can close the “gates” to painful input, blocking pain sensations from traveling to the central nervous system. In theory, a person’s nervous system can only register a certain amount of sensation at once (painful and pleasurable alike). By saturating a woman’s nervous system receptors with the sensations of things like counter-pressure, water, aromatherapy and even music, we can block, in part, the sensations that might otherwise feel painful.

Additionally, you will notice a few other themes. Some comfort measures will help a laboring woman connect with something rhythmic or consistent in nature. Rhythm, routine and consistency are known to be calming for our nervous systems. So movements, sound, touch, etc, that are repetitive can help to create a relaxed internal environment.

Comfort measures that support bonding are also woven throughout this list. Throughout the animal kingdom, bonding is sought out to create a sense of comfort and safety. The hormones of birth and the hormones of bonding are one and the same. Oxytocin is often called the “love hormone” or bonding hormone, and its production may be supported through touch, eye contact, and the presence of a partner, to name just a few of the comfort measures listed below.

You’ll notice a checkbox located next to each comfort measure. Check off the ones you feel most likely to use, or mark an ‘X’ by the ones you feel least likely to use. By the end you will know what comfort measures you want to explore further as well as discuss with your birth team. In the end, my hope is that this list will help you and your birth team be prepared with the tools and resources you want to have around to support you when the special day arrives.

Let's begin!

Warm water: (tub, shower)

This one is a clear winner for top of the list. The majority of women who responded shared just how helpful water was during labor. From the comfort of a warm shower on their backs to full body immersion in a warm birth tub, the benefits are immense. Warmth makes your muscles expand and relax and the buoyancy of water helps support your body weight so you don't have to work as hard just to hold yourself up.

Cold water: (to drink, especially through a straw for ease, and as a compress)

Temperatures tend to fluctuate during labor so while warmth may feel good at some points, a cold compress, especially during active labor, transition and pushing can really help cool a hot mama down when she's working so hard. Drinking cold water can be cooling at this point as well. Bendy straws are a perfect accessory to make sipping effortless.

Movement: (dancing to music of all kinds, rocking, pacing, etc.)

Many different forms of movement made the list because movement can help women work with the sensations of labor. Rocking or swaying of hips, pacing, circling a birth ball, dancing of all kinds, offer a way to self-soothe, as movements can create internal shifts that a laboring woman may be instinctively drawn to. In my experience, a woman's intuition is especially heightened during labor so she often knows just what she needs to do with her body. Movement can also facilitate the progress of labor, making it easier for a baby to make its way through the pelvis. Lack of movement is one the biggest drawbacks to getting an epidural.

Epidural:

Many women find the use of an epidural to be an obviously powerful comfort measure. While it may limit movement, most of the time it works unlike any other comfort measure to block the sensations of pain, though most women will still feel pressure as the baby descends. In my opinion, every medical intervention has an appropriate time and place. Every woman should be trusted to determine the birth experience she wants to have and if and when she chooses to use an epidural.

Deep breathing:

Deep breathing is another one for the top of the list. In particular, slow deep breathing sends the message to the body that we are safe. Think of the relaxation conjured by a deep inhale and the sound of a long slow exhale, "ahhhh!". Some relaxation methods utilize specific deep breathing techniques, such as imagining you're inflating and deflating a balloon, or counting breaths. This can give women a calming thing to focus on as they move through contractions.

Vocalization: (deep moaning, repetitive chanting of mantras (like “surrender”), singing, praying, screaming into a pillow, etc.)

These are just a few of the vocalizing techniques that bring laboring women comfort. Not only do they keep you breathing, but they can also provide a source of deep focus, and the vibration itself can reverberate throughout the body, creating comfort and diffusing tension. And depending on the mantra, it can help encourage supportive emotions such as confidence and trust.

Music:

Music is often useful in labor to set a mood. Sometimes to get a mama up and active, at other times to help her relax, whatever is needed in the moment. Many women I’ve worked with have used music to dance during labor or even sing along at various points.

Quiet: (no chatter)

While distractions can sometimes be helpful, chatter in a birth room can be distracting in an unsupportive way when you want to be able to focus during contractions without distraction. Side chatter can make you lose your focus, which you may need to cope with the intensity of contractions. Hopefully you will be encouraged to let everyone in the room know the kind of environment you need and the people on your support team will help to enforce and respect these wishes.

Counter-pressure: (hip pressure, sacral pressure, back pressure, etc.)

You name a body part attached to the pelvis and most women will love the feeling of strong counter-pressure in that area. Anything that squeezes or presses into the spot they need it most will work to help dilute the intensity of the pain and pressure of labor itself. Often women say they wouldn’t have made it through without it.

Being touched:

In addition to counter-pressure, many types of massage are a welcome comfort during labor. Women often love having someone shake their hips and pelvis and the use of acupressure points can also help release tension and induce a relaxed state. Besides relaxation, an added benefit of comforting touch is the intimacy and warmth it offers.

Not being touched:

Some women actually prefer not to be touched during labor. Sometimes touch feels overwhelming or increases the intensity of what a woman is feeling. Regardless of why, touch is simply not always welcome and it’s good to know so no one takes it personally if that turns out to be your preference. You may still want people nearby, but the touch itself might be too much or simply not what’s needed.

Warm compresses:

Like hot water, using a warm compress such as a heating pad or hot water bottle can be extremely useful. Warmth relaxes tense muscles and counteract tightness in the body.

Birth ball:

Birth balls are the same as exercise balls, and many women find them to be an extremely useful tool during labor. First, they are comfortable to sit on as they are soft and easy to move around on. Providing a perfect seat for bouncing or making hip circles, this can help women better manage the stronger sensations of labor as well as making space in a woman's pelvis for babies to descend. Birth balls are also one of the most comfortable things to lean on in labor. If you end up not wanting to sit on it, you may just want to use it as a tall pillow! Since forward leaning is such a helpful and comfortable position for most women in labor, having something soft to hug while kneeling can make resting between contractions quite accessible. It is also more supportive than putting pressure on your wrists for a hands and knees position.

Rebozo:

A rebozo is the Mexican name for a long shawl often used in childbirth. Any long and wide scarf or even bedsheet will do the trick. There are many things you can do with this tool in labor, many of which provide an easy way to lift up the weight and pressure of a woman's pregnant belly. In prenatal visits and classes, I often show people a few simple ways to use this fabric to support a woman during labor. Rebozo videos and resources can be found online if you look for them.

Sitting on the toilet:

Many women find sitting on the toilet to be remarkably comforting during labor. Sensations of needing to poop during labor are common so sitting on the toilet can feel like an appropriate place to be. People are also so used to relaxing their bottoms on the toilet that it's second nature to relax there in labor as well. Anything that helps you go with the sensations of labor as opposed to fighting them is a winner.

Squatting:

This position is a very natural position for many women in labor because it has such an opening effect on the pelvis. That is the goal after all, so women will often move into this position naturally, especially toward the end stages of labor as they start to feel an urge to push their baby out.

Eye contact: (with a partner and/or other members of the birth team)

For some women this kind of contact can feel reassuring and grounding. Eye contact becomes a focal point that feels anchoring especially during contractions. Eye contact can also increase feelings of intimacy and closeness, encouraging oxytocin production. Oxytocin, the hormone that causes uterine contractions is also referred to as the "love hormone". All things that increase feelings of bonding, connection, and pleasure increase oxytocin production and as such are wonderful for labor. Alternately, keeping eyes closed works better for some.

Positive self-talk:

During labor many women reach a point where they encounter feelings of self-doubt and lose faith that they can keep going, that they can do it. Positive self-talk is one way to replace and reverse a self-doubting inner dialogue. It might be something as simple as telling yourself, "I can do this", "I am strong", "I am made to birth my baby", etc.

Focused relaxation techniques:

(hypnobirthing, hypnobabies, mindfulness practices, mental focusing on deep relaxation, pairs well with deep breathing)

Women who choose unmedicated childbirth often turn to mindfulness or self hypnosis techniques to produce a state of inner calm and focus. Not all, but many of these strategies require some practice in advance of labor to master a certain level of proficiency. Regardless, the idea here is to help you stay open, relaxed and present to the sensations of labor without tension or resistance. Trust of self and trust in the natural process of birth are a big part of what these practices are designed to foster.

Mellow lighting:

Bright hospital lighting is often undesirable during labor and usually can easily be dimmed. The message of bright lights is one of potential emergency and can trigger different hormones than the ones that are most supportive of labor's progress. Alternately, the tone set by mellow lighting conveys a sense of calm and safety, both feelings that encourage an undisturbed birth process,

Hanging onto someone for support:

From something as simple as having a hand to hold to having someone hold your whole body weight, the act of leaning on someone and physically being supported is a tremendous comfort.

Presence of a doula:

A doula is a member of your birth team who is there to provide continuous emotional, physical and informational support for your birth. This person is trained and experienced to varying degrees in the birth process and as such will help you implement many of these strategies, as well as guide you throughout the prenatal process to prepare for the birth you want. Time is spent prenatally to get to know your personal preferences. The evidence as well as anecdotal accounts offer proof that doulas improve birth experiences and outcomes.

Presence of a partner:

Many of the women in this post referenced their partners as an enormous source of support. Whether by presence alone or tireless physical support, having a loving partner present is an obvious comfort when going through something so significant. In partnership, you're birthing a family as well as a child.

Presence of care providers who believe in you:

Having a care provider who believes in you and the kind of birth you want to have can make all the difference. If you and your care provider are misaligned, you may end up having a less than empowering or supportive birth experience. Women in labor and pregnancy can be especially vulnerable to the opinion of a care provider, so if someone is telling you, "you CAN push out your 9 lb. baby" and another is "concerned and doubtful", without any evidence based information, you can bet this will impact your confidence level! Mutual respect, shared decision making, and evidence based care make for an ideal experience regardless of outcome.

Being listened to:

An obvious offshoot of being cared for during labor is being listened to. You may find like many women that it helps to speak out loud what's going on inside. To be heard without judgment or correction can be tremendously comforting. Also if reassurance and encouragement are welcome, knowing when you are having a hard time can help your support team know how to help. Sometimes venting what you're feeling is just the thing that's needed to move through a block or challenging spot.

Reminders: (to breathe, let go, stay present, you can do it, etc.)

Anyone on the birth team can offer this one. Verbal encouragement and reminders to stay present and not get ahead of yourself can help you remain focused on what you need to do, one contraction at a time, to bring your baby into the world. If you lose faith or focus, your team can remind you how well you're doing and how close you are to meeting your baby.

Relating to baby:

Visualizing your baby descending or opening you, or remembering the purpose of the pain is for your baby and a sign of baby coming closer, offers a helpful way to cope with the most intense feelings of labor. Associating the pain with a purpose connected to your baby being born helps shift perceptions away from the notion of pain associated with something being wrong. Nothing is wrong, in fact, everything is right! Also, remembering you are not alone in this, but your baby is going through the experience together with you can make the journey feel less isolating and add to a sense of bonding with your baby. Finally, of course, knowing the end is near would bolster anyone in the thick of a challenge.

Relating to the power of all women who've given birth before you:

This is pretty straight forward. Women draw strength from connecting with all the women who've come before them who successfully crossed over into motherhood. When it gets hard, knowing your body can do it just like them offers a tremendous boost of confidence and can connect you with a power greater than yourself alone.

Visualization:

Whether picturing your baby's descent, your cervix opening like a flower, or other positive images of your birth process, visualizations can help support your ability to relax into the sensations of labor without losing focus or hope. Seeing your progress clearly and focusing on a well functioning process will help keep you in a positive, trusting and calm inner space. Hypnobirthing as well as other birth preparation classes teach these mental practices in advance of labor so any imagery you'll want to connect with during labor is well rehearsed.

Being left alone, yet supported:

Sometimes women want to be left alone at some point during labor. The solitude can be comforting and offers an opportunity to focus inwardly without any distraction. Still, there is a comfort in knowing you are not alone if you need something.

Giant maxi-pad:

I love the addition of something so practical to this list. It can actually make a huge difference. You may not realize how many fluids can come leaking out of you during labor (from amniotic fluid to urine, mucous, and blood). This wetness can feel really uncomfortable, so simply having large maxi-pads handy to catch any leaking fluids will relieve this discomfort.

Alcohol:

Believe it or not, alcohol can come in handy in early labor to help you relax. The goal in early labor is to rest up so you have all your energy for when things get active. But it's too exciting!! Many women have a hard time relaxing enough at this stage to go to sleep. Alcohol is one way to help you wind down so you can try to get some sleep while contractions are still spaced far apart. It may help calm your nervous system down so labor can pick up pace on it's own when the time is right, undisturbed by anxiousness or restlessness. Warm water and a massage might also be helpful for this purpose.

Aromatherapy:

Essential oils are known for their ability to generate a strong shift on a person's energetic state. In labor this shift in mood might help energize you or induce relaxation depending on the oil and what you need at the time.

Permission and Freedom:

(of movement, of expression, to make choices, to eat, to move freely, to be "bossy")

Perhaps the most important of all comforts is the permission and freedom to be you. To labor however makes sense for you, whether it has to do with how you sound, look, move, speak, or act. To be unfettered and empowered to make informed choices as they arise is a tremendous comfort. No one wants to feel forced, or feel bad for how they need to behave in labor. Hopefully everyone around you agrees not to take anything personally. Women can't be bothered to take care of anyone else's needs during labor. Short, quick replies are common, so if anyone wants to know what you need, yes and no questions are ideal. On this day, you are the boss. After all it is your body, your baby, and your birth!

I hope you enjoyed this list. Consider me an ongoing resource on your path to birth (or birthwork). It would be my pleasure and honor to support you anyway I can. If you have any questions or comments, please message me at yiska@yiskaobadia.com and visit me at <http://www.yiskaobadia.com> for more on bringing comfort to your birth (or birth practice)!

If you liked this, [please share it!](#)

Thanks,

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