HypnoBirthing is a naturally self-induced state of relaxed concentration. HypnoBirthing is as much a philosophy of birth as it is a technique for achieving a satisfying, relaxing, and stress-free method of birthing through guided imagery, visualization, and relaxation breathing. Participants learn how to call upon their bodies' own natural anesthesia and thus lessen, or even eliminate, discomfort and the desire for medication.

There is no magic to achieving success with this method; almost anyone who chooses to can learn to relax deeply. When a woman is properly prepared for childbirth, and when the mind and body are in harmony, nature is free to function in the same well-designed manner that it does with other mammals.

When learning HypnoBirthing, participants view HypnoBirthing films showing laboring mothers awake, alert, and in good humor as they experience the kind of gentle birth that they, too, can experience when they are free of the Fear-Tension-Pain Syndrome.

HypnoBirthing teaches moms to release prior negative programming, how to trust their bodies and work with them, as well as how to free themselves from harmful emotions that lead to pain-causing fear and unyielding muscles. HypnoBirthing teaches the art of using one's own natural birthing instincts. HypnoBirthers are not in a trance or a sleep state; they are aware and fully in control, but profoundly relaxed.

Participants learn techniques of deep relaxation to achieve a safer, easier, and more comfortable birth; the source of the myth that pain is a necessary accompaniment to labor; how their bodies are designed to create their own natural anesthesia; how, with their companions, they can create a birthing environment that is calm, serene, and joyful; to birth with confidence, calm, and comfort; other techniques to produce a shorter, more comfortable labor; how the mothers' bodies are designed to work in neuromuscular harmony with nature throughout labor; and birthing techniques that allow HypnoBirthers to bring their babies into the world consciously and without violence.

I first heard about Mickey Mongan and HypnoBirthing in September of 1998 from several of my clients. I called Mickey to find out more about her program and I was intrigued by what she told me about HypnoBirthing, as well as her own personal story about consciously birthing her four children in the 1950s and 1960s, when everyone around her was drugged up and knocked out. Mickey and I made arrangements to meet in person a few weeks later.

A few weeks before our meeting, one of my midwifery clients went into labor. Bonnie had worked with Mickey privately, learning about HypnoBirthing and practicing faithfully. Having taken my childbirth classes as well, she said she was struck by the compatibility of my philosophy of birth and hers.

She was planning a homebirth VBAC (vaginal birth after cesarean). There came an extremely difficult point in Bonnie's labor that required extraordinary strength and concentration on her part. I watched as she used her HypnoBirthing techniques to relax her body and assist her baby into the world. Greatly impressed, I thanked Bonnie for her ability to respond so well to the situation. She said, "Thank Mickey!" So I called Mickey to thank her for having developed those particular techniques and for having taught them to Bonnie.

Soon after, I met with Mickey. We had so much to talk about! I quickly voiced a deep concern to her (based, I now realize, on ignorance), "I don't want women to be have to be hypnotized for birth." I told her, "I want them fully conscious." "Rest assured, my dear," she said to me, "they are fully conscious. Fully."

I also voiced my concern about people under hypnosis who pretended to be opera stars or jump up and dance the hula whenever they heard a specific word. Mickey patiently discussed the differences between "stage hypnosis" and "the real thing." She assured me that laboring women weren't going to quack like ducks every time they heard the word "obstetrician." I learned a great deal about hypnosis and the subconscious mind that day. It was an introduction, and it was clear that Mickey was an excellent
teacher—organized in her thinking, devoted to her work, and eager to share what she knew with others.

Mickey told me that birth did not have to hurt at all. But isn’t experiencing the pain and overcoming it what produces much of the joy (along with the baby, of course) and power of a natural childbirth? Isn’t it the mastery of pain that is important? No, said Mickey emphatically. She said that each woman could actually decide how much pain she wanted to feel. She then proceeded to teach me about individual “pain control valves.” I realized as we spoke that I had created my own valve twenty years back: I had felt no pain, only release and power, as I had VBAC homebirthed my daughter Andrea.

Intrigued by many of the things that Mickey said to me that day, I went home and read Mickey’s book. I wrote in the margins and called her with some ideas. I shared with her my thoughts about perineal massage (absolutely not necessary, maybe even a waste of time) and how to help ensure that the woman’s perineum—even a first time mom—was intact after birth. In this area, we still differ. Mickey said to me, “Because I attend hospital births, I believe there is benefit to softening the perineum before a not-always gentle attendant, often unaware of how to keep the perineum intact, quickly applies unrelenting fingers or even scissors.”

I explained to her the tremendous advantages of delaying the cutting of the umbilical cord—for at least an hour after birth! I told her about the research that shows that fetal monitors actually adversely affect the uterus. We talked for a while, and decided that we had much to offer one another. I decided to take the full HypnoBirthing course that Mickey was teaching that month. I then spent many weekends at Mickey’s office, taking both semi-private and group classes. I was certified in HypnoBirthing in February of 1999.

In May of this year, I got a call from a woman in my area who was due to have her baby within two weeks. She had just heard about HypnoBirthing, and wanted me to teach the class to her right away. She said she felt sure that relaxation was
her key to an easier birth, and was intrigued with what she had heard about HypnoBirthing "via the grapevine."

A few days after the class, she went into labor. She did her HypnoBirthing, and a few hours later went to the hospital. Upon arriving, she announced to staff members that she was in active labor. "You aren't in real labor, Honey," said one of the nurses. "Come back when you are in real labor." "I am in labor!" Nina insisted. "It's just that I'm very relaxed—I'm a HypnoBirther!"

One nurse laughed. "Don't care what you are," she said, "you aren't in real labor." Nina asked how she would know when she was in "real" labor. "Oh, you'll know, Sweetheart, you'll know," was the reply.

Nina went home, but not long after she knew it was really time to go back to the hospital. Continuing to do her HypnoBirthing, she arrived on the labor and delivery floor and was once again told she needed to go home. She said "I am not going home—this baby is coming!" One of the nurses checked her cervix—it was nowhere to be found—and a 9 pound 4 ounce baby girl was born within a few minutes.

Within the past two months, I have been involved with five other HypnoBirthing births—two at home, two at birth centers, and one in a hospital. A small database, perhaps (I teach my next HypnoBirthing class in a few weeks), but impressive, and more testimonials to add to the many that Mickey and her other instructors have witnessed.

Jennifer, a homebirth mother, had her first baby in four hours. Lisa and Mandy, also first time mothers, had their babies within five hours as well. Marcy, a VBAC homebirthing mom, did her own version of HypnoBirthing and had her baby in five hours. Megan, also a VBAC mother, had her baby in six. Megan took HypnoBirthing classes to help rid her of her terror of birth (her own words). The moment her son was born she proclaimed, "That wasn't hard at all—in fact, I'd actually say it was easy! And fun! I had fun!" What of snot in her vagina? Many of you know that when I began using the term "baby gel" instead, so many women wrote to me and told me how delighted they were to be using that term!

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I have long held that the words that we use to describe birth are extremely important and influential.

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I also find it difficult when midwives say "I did her birth." As a midwife, I attend the woman and assist her, but I do not "do" her birth. She does her birth. Words make a difference. A big difference. Mickey reminds us that products are delivered; babies are not products—they are birthed.

Mickey does not use the word "pain." Neither of us use the word "contraction." To contract means to get small and tight, but the exact opposite is happening in labor! We want the exact opposite to happen! However, when we tell the woman we want her to contract—or that she is contracting—that's exactly what happens.

Look at the million women a year in this culture who are sectioned for cephalopelvic disproportion (CPD) and failure to progress (FTP), or who are told they have to have vacuum extractions or forceps deliveries—they were just responding to the commands they were given! Mickey uses the terms "surge" or "wave" instead of contraction, and although at first it is unfamiliar and may feel uncomfortable, the more it is used, the more it works. The body is in an energy surge! I also use the word "expansion." You are having an expansion, you are expanding with each sensation. You
allow yourself to expand and open gently and easily. I don’t use the term dilate, either. Women don’t dilate—they circle. They circle to seven, then to eight, nine, and ten. Without exception, all of my mothers have said that listening to these new words helps them greatly.

One of the areas that Mickey and I have talked about at length was how belief influences experience. I wrote about this back in the early 80s. One of my mentor midwives, Valerie El Halta, often remarks that her mothers have short labors, even though they aren’t Hypnobirthing moms, for two reasons: because she herself believes that women can have short, active, productive, and absolutely tolerable labors and therefore her beliefs influence her clients; and she pays particular attention to the exact position of the baby in utero from 34 weeks on and assists the mother in “lining up” her baby so that it will birth easily. I always taught in my classes that the mind and the body work together. Mickey teaches that the mind is the body and therefore the mind works the body.

Either way, birth does not does not have to hurt the way that we have been conditioned to believe that it does, nor does it have to look the way we have been taught it should look; for example, keep your eyes open, get a focal point, move around and walk—that’ll get things going.

But wait! Watching the tapes of Mickey’s Hypnobirthing moms, I realize that none of the moms are moving. They are sitting in rocking chairs or upright in beds, or lying on their sides, and not moving. Just closing their eyes and Hypnobirthing. They are so relaxed, they look as if they are sleeping. But they aren’t. They are actively and consciously participating in, allowing, and promoting the arrival of their babies. My Hypnobirthing moms moved very little during their labors, except to get up to urinate or to get into a pool.

Hypnobirthing saves physical energy on the part of the mothers—it energizes rather than depletes them. It questions—shatters—many of our preconceived notions about how labor works. One of the great benefits of Hypnobirthing is the reduction/elimination of fear around birth. Decisions that are made out of fear are not decisions at all—they are forced reactions. Women are then free to make real choices—about where they birth, how they birth, and with whom they birth. Fear also produces tension that increases muscular tension and creates discomfort that grows into pain and then increases the fear. An old concept, but very important to Hypnobirthing.

I enjoy teaching my natural childbirth classes very much. I am as enthusiastic and passionate about them as I was when I started teaching them over 20 years ago. My goal is to help the participants to become confident, relaxed, peaceful, and excited about the birth of their babies and about parenting. Mickey states it simply, “Prepare them, don’t scare them.” The classes are upbeat, fun, informative, dynamic, irreverent, informal, silly, relaxing, but not always calm.

The Hypnobirthing classes that I have now begun to teach are as different from the original classes in some respects as night and day. They are very, very quiet. They are structured, relaxing, and calm, very calm. The relaxation and visualization used in Hypnobirthing is different than the traditional visualization and relaxation that most of us have been taught to use in our childbirth education classes. I find that, somewhat unconsciously, I am beginning to integrate material from one class into the other. It’s interesting to me that as different as the classes are, how incredibly well the material fits together. I imagine that’s because Mickey’s and my vision about birth is so complimentary.

Mickey Mongan has given—is giving—the birthing world something profoundly important—a course that can radically change our perspective about pain in childbirth. We need to pay attention. More and more women are seeking Hypnobirthing. More and more labor assistants and childbirth educators are learning it to assist their clients as well as themselves during labor.

I see Hypnobirthing as a wonderful technique to help reduce the unnecessary, inaccurate, expensive, sometimes dangerous technology and drugs that have insidiously become the “natural” way to birth in America. I am delighted to know Mickey Mongan and excited to be offering her excellent program.

I want to make it clear that the women who Hypnobirth are not “out of it”—they are alert, relaxed, and absolutely conscious. When their babies are born, they are excited, proud, and absolutely—and naturally—“high!”

—For the name and address of the Hypnobirthing Childbirth Educator nearest you, contact: Marie F. Mongan, Director, Hypnobirthing Institute, 146 Sheep Davis Road, Pembroke, New Hampshire 03275 USA; or e-mail: emongan@chi.tds.net

—Nancy Wainer Cohen’s Vaginal Birth After Cesarean, VBAC (pronounced “vee-back”), is now used all over the world. Her books include Silent Knife: Cesarean Prevention and Vaginal Birth After Cesarean; and Open Season: A Survival Guide for Natural Childbirth and VBAC in the 90s; and she is currently working on her third book, entitled Birthquake: A Childbirth Book for Strong Women and Women Who Want to Be Strong, to bring attention to “The Cesarean Epidemic,” and to support women who had difficult or upsetting births.