



CONSCIOUS TRANSITIONS

The #1 Skill to Help You
Prepare for Motherhood

Sheryl Paul, M.A.

Our culture propagates a widespread and faulty belief that says it's impossible to prepare for motherhood. Not only is it possible, but if you're going to create the best possible environment in which to welcome your baby, you *must* do the work of preparing emotionally and psychologically for the transition.

However, neither the Western medical model nor midwives help you prepare for **your birth as a mother**. The focus is, understandably, on the physical care of your body and the health of your baby. You might take classes on childbirth, newborn care, and breastfeeding (all important), but nothing is offered on preparing for your own transition. Like the marriage transition where the focus is exclusively on one day – the wedding – the motherhood transition funnels your preparatory energy onto the single day of your baby's birth.

This leaves you in a void of support without the tools or guidance that will help you prepare internally **for your birth as a mother**. As Pam England writes in *Birth From Within*:

“Given adequate nutrition, a fetus grows without effort from its parents. However, the development of your parent-identity is not necessarily an automatic process of nature. If you want to help this happen, you'll have to play an active part.

“Your successful evolution to parenthood depends largely on your accommodation to the vast changes which are unfolding beyond your control. Learning to accept loss of control is an integral part of both birth and motherhood/fatherhood.”

While it's true that you can't prepare for the shock of having a little one in your care 24/7, I've repeatedly seen that when a woman understands **follows a psychological roadmap** and receives **the support of a community of conscious mothers**, she's better prepared to absorb the shocks of her new life and she can bond beautifully with her baby.

I offer this roadmap in my [Birthing a New Mother Course](#). But for now, I'd like to share with you an essential skill you need to learn in order to lay the groundwork so that your identity as a new mother is planted in healthy soil.

I'm going to backtrack a bit because if you're reading this and you're not yet pregnant, you might be thinking, "That's great for women who are pregnant or new mothers, but what about me? I've been trying to conceive for months and I'm going out of my mind. Why should I be thinking about preparing for motherhood?" First off, if you're struggling through the emotional minefield of **trying to conceive**, please download my free report called, "[Seven Secrets for Managing Fertility Anxiety](#)".

Next, it's essential to realize something that very few people understand: each stage of becoming a mother builds on the preceding stage, so even if you're not yet pregnant you have an immense opportunity to learn essential skills that will help you birth yourself as a mother as healthfully and joyfully as possible.

I'll say it another way: what you learn when you're trying to conceive helps you manage the challenges of pregnancy; what you learn during pregnancy readies you for childbirth; and what you learn during childbirth opens you to become the mother you're meant to be. Mothers, like

babies, are grown in stages, and the more consciousness you bring to each building block, the more gracefully you can enter the next stage.

The #1 Skill

There is one test that appears at every stage, from preconception to pregnancy to birth to new motherhood: **feeling out of control**. When you don't conceive right away, you feel out of control. When you're suffering through morning sickness or exhaustion and your body is taking over in a way it never has before, you feel out of control. When you're nine days past your "due date" and you're doing all the "right" things to bring on labor, you feel out of control. Labor, of course, is the ultimate test in feeling out of control, and the challenges continue when your precious bundle arrives and you cannot, for the life of you, figure out how to soothe him enough so that he stops crying.

The truth is that at the heart of every transition is the feeling of being out of control. Transitions, by definition, push us out of the comfort zone of the familiar life and send us tumbling into the great unknown of the future. But what distinguishes the motherhood transition from most others is that the test of control continues throughout your life as a mother. When you get married, the feeling of being out of control peaks during the engagement and tapers off after the wedding. When you move, the chaos settles down when you unpack your boxes and find solid ground in your new home. But when you become a mother, you're a mother for life – and I promise you that you will come face to face with your control issues as long as you're in relationship with your kids.

And this is why it's crucially essential that you learn as early as possible how to work with the feeling of being out of control. This is the central opportunity of motherhood and why many have likened it to a spiritual path. Like a meditation, the transition of becoming a mother asks that you observe your mind, your thoughts, and your feelings and develop a practice for how to handle the sense of being out of control.

The Practices

When you're feeling out of control, one of the following practices might work for you. And like any practice, the more you do it, the more effective it becomes. That's why it's called a practice!

1. Turn Your Attention From The External to the Internal

The most common response to feeling out of control is to try to avoid it or distract from it in some way. Instead of turning inward and dealing with this highly uncomfortable feeling directly, you might decide to go shopping or eat some ice cream. While these actions might momentarily abate the feeling and make you feel slightly more in control, within a few hours the drug will wear off and you'll be right back where you began.

Because our culture fails miserably in offering real support and guidance around life's major transitions (graduating, moving, first job, getting married, becoming a parent, buying a house, etc), at the first sign of discomfort, most people turn their attention to the external "solutions". This tendency is even more pronounced around transitions like getting married and becoming a parent because of the overt expectation our culture transmits that says you're supposed to be *only* happy during these times. So when the grief, fear, or feeling out of control hits – as it

always does – the first thought is, “What’s wrong with me?” and the next thought is, “I better do something about this.”

For some women, “doing something about this” often means buying a book, taking a class, or signing on to a message board. Instead of turning inward and trying one of the suggestions below to start to practice this most important skill, you turn outward and focus on your baby’s growth or your body’s changes. I’ll be showing you in the free video training (available August/September 2011) why most books, classes, and forums actually reinforce your anxiety and often make you feel even more out of control. But for now, the next time you feel out of control, just notice the impulse to avoid or distract, turn inward, and try one of the following practices.

2. Pray

Prayer opens your heart and sends an instant message to a Higher Power that says, “I need help.” Perhaps you’re in despair because you’ve been trying to conceive for a year and terrified that you’ll never become a mother. You’ve read every book about fertility and been on the forums until you’re blue in the face, but you still feel like you’re on a the brink of losing it. You realize in a moment’s clarity, that everything you’ve been doing – the charting, the testing, the eating “right”, the reading – has been an attempt to control this fundamentally out of control experience. On your knees, sobbing, you finally cry out, “Help me let go. Help me surrender. Help me remember that this is out of my hands.” It doesn’t matter who you’re talking to; someone or something will hear you and help you loosen your grip and finally sink into the truth that, other than have sex, *there’s nothing you can do.*

Or perhaps you're suffering from weeks of debilitating nausea and feel like you can't take one more second of this hell. You're eating saltines and ginger, taking B6 and forcing yourself to eat "green leafies", but nothing helps. You complain and moan and cry about it and then, finally, in a heap of tears, you surrender to it. You realize with crystalline clarity that *there's nothing you can do*. This experience is fundamentally out of your hands, you're not doing anything wrong, and it's not your fault. You're pregnant and this is how your body is responding to the influx of hormones. For the moment, you surrender. And for the first time in weeks you feel a moment of relief.

And as a mother, you might find yourself in a tizzy of anxiety about your newborn's well-being. You might check her breathing several times a night or wake up in a cold sweat that something tragic has happened to her. There's not a mother in the world that doesn't worry about her baby's health. This worry most likely began in pregnancy, as each trimester carries its own core fear: in the first trimester, the fear is about miscarrying; second trimester: what if something is wrong with my baby; third trimester: what if something terrible happens in childbirth.

You may have tried to manage the fears by focusing on the externals of ultrasounds (a monthly and temporary reassurance) and eating right (if I eat right I'll surely have a healthy baby). But these are really just momentary distractions from the fundamental truth that your baby's wellness – unborn or born – is largely out of your hands. Other than basic prenatal nutrition, *there's nothing you can do* about your child's ultimate destiny, and most actions in this culture arise from a misguided attempt to control the outcome.

As a new mother, when you're up in the middle of the night worrying about any number of what-if scenarios, one of the most potent prayers you might say is, "Please help me surrender. Please protect my child. Please help me be the best mother I can be. Please help me let go of this anxiety." In the *Birthing a New Mother* program, I include a phenomenal interview with a woman named Lisa who struggled with such terror about her own and her daughter's health that it eventually led to severe anxiety and panic. It was only through developing a relationship to a Higher Source and starting to pray that she found her way through – and became stronger because of her harrowing journey.

3. Breathe

When you feel out of control, the first thing you probably do is stop breathing properly. Your breath becomes shallow and you start to feel light-headed, which only exacerbates the sense that you're falling through space untethered and without a space suit. When you can bring attention to your breath, you can consciously attempt to deepen it.

There are many wonderful breathing techniques out there, but my favorite (and the one that has helped me through many anxious episodes) comes from Dr. Andrew Weil:

The 4-7-8 (or Relaxing Breath) Exercise

<http://www.drweil.com/drw/u/ART00521/three-breathing-exercises.html>

This exercise is utterly simple, takes almost no time, requires no equipment and can be done anywhere. Although you can do the exercise in any position, sit with your back straight while learning the exercise. Place the tip of your tongue against the ridge of tissue just

behind your upper front teeth, and keep it there through the entire exercise. You will be exhaling through your mouth around your tongue; try pursing your lips slightly if this seems awkward.

- Exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound.
- Close your mouth and inhale quietly through your nose to a mental count of **four**.
- Hold your breath for a count of **seven**.
- Exhale completely through your mouth, making a whoosh sound to a count of **eight**.
- This is one breath. Now inhale again and repeat the cycle three more times for a total of four breaths.

Note that you always inhale quietly through your nose and exhale audibly through your mouth. The tip of your tongue stays in position the whole time. Exhalation takes twice as long as inhalation. The absolute time you spend on each phase is not important; the ratio of 4:7:8 is important. If you have trouble holding your breath, speed the exercise up but keep to the ratio of 4:7:8 for the three phases. With practice you can slow it all down and get used to inhaling and exhaling more and more deeply.

This exercise is a natural tranquilizer for the nervous system. Unlike tranquilizing drugs, which are often effective when you first take them but then lose their power over time, this exercise is subtle when you first try it but gains in power with repetition and practice. Do it at least twice a day. You cannot do it too frequently. Do not do more than four breaths at one time for the first month of practice. Later, if you wish, you can extend it to eight breaths. If you feel a little lightheaded when you first breathe this way, do not be concerned; it will pass.

Once you develop this technique by practicing it every day, it will be a very useful tool that you will always have with you. Use it whenever

anything upsetting happens - before you react. Use it whenever you are aware of internal tension. Use it to help you fall asleep. This exercise cannot be recommended too highly. Everyone can benefit from it.

4. Practice Tonglen

One of the most effective practices I've found to process the strong feelings that arise during transitions is the Buddhist practice of Tonglen. The in-the-moment practice is very simple: breathe in what we normally think of as "not wanted" – like feeling out of control –and breathe out what's wanted. Or, as the Buddhist nun Pema Chodron says on her site, "When you do tonglen *on the spot*, simply breathe in and breathe out, taking in pain and sending out spaciousness and relief."

What's so powerful about this practice is that it goes against what how habitually respond to painful feelings, so when we practice it over time we re-train our mind to accept and even welcome pain and fear (in all their manifestations).

Pema explains the roots of the practice in the following video. But again, when you're utilizing it on the spot, it's a very simple practice of breathing in the pain – or feeling out of control – and breathing out relief:

<http://conscious-transitions.com/pema-chodron-on-tonglen/>

5. Repeat a Mantra

There are many explanations about why repeating mantras can help create a sense of calm, but I won't go into them here. Suffice to say that when you remind yourself of a great truth, you turn your habitual "what-of" negative thinking into grounded, in-the-moment thoughts. When

you're stuck in "what-if" thinking, you're projecting the worst-case scenario into an imagined future: i.e. "What if I never get pregnant?" "What if I miscarry?" "What if something is wrong with my baby?" "What something terrible happens during childbirth?" "What if my baby never stops crying?" "What if I never fall in love with my baby?"

Let me also say that repeating a mantra is different than repeating a positive affirmation. Affirmations tend to promise a certain outcome – "I know my baby is healthy" or "I will never miscarry" – whereas a mantra aligns with the truth of the universe without making any promises about the future. In other words, affirmations are akin to magical thinking and can set you up for unrealistic expectations because the truth is that we never know what the future holds (which is exactly why we feel so out of control during transitions), whereas mantras bring a sense of calm when they remind you what is inarguably true *right now*.

Here are some mantras that might be helpful:

- It's out of my hands
- I trust in the timing of the Universe
- There's a divine plan and it's not my plan
- Let thy will be done
- The time is NOW
- I'm handing it over to You
- I can't control the outcome
- I lay myself in Your hands
- Whatever happens, I will find the resources to handle it.

6. Get Support

Sometimes the feeling of being out of control is so extreme that you cannot handle it alone. You feel like you're going out of your mind and the fear of a negatively imagined future brings you to your knees. You try the above techniques but you're too deep in the anxiety to find your way out alone.

In these times, you must reach out for support. Call a trusted friend that can throw you a lifeline. Lean into your partner. Again, pick your support person or system very carefully, as most people will say something like, "Oh, don't worry. Everything is fine. And you have so much to be happy about it!" While this is ultimately true, what you need is a safe space to talk about your fears so that you can release them and then find your way back to solid ground.

Remember, learning to let go of control is a lifelong practice, and you will have plenty of opportunities over the course of your life as a mother to hone this skill. When you remember that the motherhood transition from preconception onward is an accelerated course in learning to let go of control, it will help have compassion for yourself as you struggle with this most central and honorable human challenge.