

Hi Zana

I just wanted to write to you and say thank you for the great Natal Hypnotherapy course you taught! My husband, Tim, and I took it with you in Romsey back in December, and we came away from the day feeling really confident and positive about using the NH techniques in the home birth we were planning. But still, it's so hard to know if something will really 'work' for you until you actually have to put it into action in the moment.

Well, Josephine Rose arrived a bit earlier than we'd expected at 37 weeks and 5 days on Friday, the 8th of February, and she was born at home on our bedroom floor just like we'd hoped she would be. I listened to the Relaxing Birth Music throughout most of my labouring and used lots of the NH techniques to help me manage any pain or intensity that I felt, including just repeating "3,2,1 Relax" to myself and some of my positive birth affirmations (which have been hung around the house on post-it notes for weeks before this!), as well as turning down the dial. The pushing bit was hard work (and lasted nearly 4 hours!), but I really can't say I felt much 'pain'; it was more just intensity and power. The first stage was pretty easy for me though. I was already fully dilated when the midwives even arrived to check me because I just felt like I was managing well and didn't need to call them. I really think Natal Hypnotherapy played a big part in why our birth was so positive and empowering. So I wanted to say thank you for helping us along our way on this journey.

Here's my *very long* birth story if you'd like to have a read.

Many thanks  
Karen (and Tim and Josie!)

Our Birth Story:

The story maybe starts a few weeks earlier. When I was around 34 weeks I started getting *really* emotional about having the house in order right away and also about stopping work earlier than I'd planned. I was scheduled to have my last day of work on the 8th of February and my instinct just told me that this was leaving it too late and that I *needed* to be done early. I was really upset and emotional about it for several days because I felt like I wanted to work longer and had projects I needed to finish (I'm self-employed) but I felt like I'd somehow be cheating my baby if I kept pushing myself and didn't take time to prepare for her arrival, if that makes sense. So I decided I'd stop a week earlier at 36 weeks and 5 days, making my last day Friday the 1st. I had some mild cramping and low back ache that Sunday after I stopped work, which convinced me I really needed to get things in order. We were planning a home birth and I'd picked up my birth pool, but I had nothing else I needed. No extra

towels, nothing to protect the floor with, no food stored up in the house for the first few days, no maternity pads, and I hadn't even thought about packing my 'just in case' hospital bag yet! But that cramping I had on Sunday convinced me I needed to get my bum in gear and get this stuff ready in case she didn't decide to wait until 41 weeks like I thought she would. I got everything in order over two crazy days of shopping and cleaning and booked myself in for a day at the spa for a massage and facial a few days later. My husband and I kept joking that considering how convinced I was that she wasn't coming soon and how much I wanted to go to my day at the spa, it would just figure she'd come really early! Well, I did get to have my day at the spa, but on the drive home that afternoon, I just started getting really emotional and teary. I cried most of the way for no reason! I thought I was being silly and, of course, the thrush I assumed I was getting, because I was having so much mucus-like discharge, on top of all that wasn't helping either. In retrospect, I think this 'thrush' must have been the last of my mucus plug coming away.

A few hours later, at 2am on Friday the 8th of February, when I was 37 + 5, I shot awake to a weird feeling that I'd wet myself. It was just a warm, wet feeling between my legs and I couldn't stop it from coming out. I laid there in bed and just thought 'oh shit!'. Surely, these couldn't be my waters, right? I was only 37 weeks and 5 days with my first baby. First babies don't come this early and I was convinced I'd go late! I was actually terrified to get up and check because I almost didn't want to know it was happening so soon and I worried it meant something might be wrong! I finally got up and went to the bathroom and my panties were literally soaking wet. I went back to the bedroom and checked the bed and there was a definite wet spot and it wasn't urine! I woke up my husband and told him that I think my waters have gone and that I had no idea what to do now! I'd been so prepared for birth and put so much time and heart into planning how this baby would be born, but I was in complete shock that it was happening so soon.

Since my waters had gone first and I hadn't had any contractions that I knew of, I decided to stay up and try to get things going. I did some exercises on all fours and some bouncing on my birth ball in the bedroom. Within the hour, I started to get some mild contractions and had a bit of a bloody show. Then I think it really hit that things were going to happen! I sent my husband downstairs to start getting the house ready. I took some paracetamol and had some porridge with milk and honey and some RLT [raspberry leaf tea] and then sent some emails to my friend and a text to my mom back in the U.S. to let her know we were having a baby! We then chatted a bit over email until I decided I needed to start getting into my birthing frame of mind. I took myself back upstairs and set myself up in our bedroom with my birth ball, lavender oil in the aromatherapy diffuser, dimmed the lights and put on my relaxing birth music. I'd been practicing Natal Hypnotherapy (the Maggie Howell method) for most of my pregnancy, starting with the Pregnancy Relaxation CD and then with the

Birth Preparation CD from about 30 weeks. The Birth Music CD is just the background music from the birth hypnotherapy tracks that is supposed to trigger relaxation and a calm, positive state of mind about birth. I really enjoyed practicing my hypnotherapy in pregnancy and I think it helped tremendously during birth!

I stayed upstairs for probably about 3 hours just chilling on my ball in the bedroom. I could feel the cramping getting a bit stronger, but still pretty manageable. Eventually, I felt I might need some extra help with pain relief soon, so I had my husband hook up my TENS machine. I bounced on the ball and used the TENS machine for a bit. I generally wasn't interested in timing the contractions or knowing how far along I was, preferring instead to trust my intuition, but I know I would need to call the midwives eventually, so I decided to start timing them. They were about 50 seconds long and coming every 5 1/2 to 6 minutes. I knew this was approaching 'active labour' and the time when I should call the midwives, but it all felt so manageable that I just thought it was too early still. I eventually decided that I wanted to take myself downstairs to the lounge, which is the room I planned to give birth in, because I didn't want to get to the point where I was too uncomfortable to want to get up and move. I bounced on the ball in the lounge, used the TENS and timed my contractions a bit more. I became aware that even though I was coping just fine with the TENS and repeating '3, 2, 1 Relax' from my NH [Natal Hypnotherapy] practice to myself that the contractions were getting closer and closer together. I decided around 6:30am that probably we should call and give the midwives a heads up that we might need them soon. My husband called and about 20-30 minutes later, someone called back to let us know that the midwives (including the one I really liked) would get to me a little after 8:30am. I answered the phone and talked to the receptionist and she was a bit surprised that I was actually in labour from how I sounded!

The midwives arrived around 9:30am and sat in the lounge with me to see how I was doing. They wanted to do a test to see if my waters had actually broken, but it would have involved me lying on my back for 30 minutes to let the waters pool so they could be collected and tested. I was like, um, hell no! I did agree to have a vaginal exam then, something I wasn't really sure I would want when I was thinking of the kind of birth I'd like to have. I really felt like I was doing fine and things were progressing, but they were still so manageable and well, almost easy, that I wanted to know how far along I really was. I was aware that my contractions were coming pretty close together (maybe every 2 minutes?) and even the midwife remarked how frequent they were. So I was aware that maybe I was further along than we all thought I might be. I laid down on the sofa for the vaginal exam and ouch, ouch, ouch! *That* was by far the most painful part of labour for me! Next time, I'm definitely going to stick with my instincts and as long as all is progressing normally, decline any vaginal exams because that seriously hurt. I started getting a contraction just as she was finishing the exam and literally jumped up and threw myself over the back of the

couch just in time to avoid having one lying on my back. The midwife was a bit surprised but announced that it appeared I was in fact fully dilated. I had the last few contractions been getting just the slightest urge to push at the peak, but really thought it was just my body bearing down a bit because of the TENS machine. But apparently that was the start of second stage.

So I made it all the way from my waters breaking and through transition just with TENS, aromatherapy, and my hypnotherapy practices bouncing on the ball and it seriously wasn't that hard at all and I wouldn't have described it as 'painful' even at the time. I really think that learning how to breathe and relax through NH and using some positive affirmations helped make this possible, as did just being in a comfortable, relaxing environment where I didn't feel observed. I don't think I would have progressed as quickly and easily to being fully dilated in a hospital environment because I know I wouldn't have been able to let go and let my body do its thing as easily. Through what must have been transition when things got a bit more intense, I just kept repeating '3, 2, 1 Relax' to myself and letting the positive affirmations I had focused on in my hypnotherapy practice replay in my mind, especially that all I had to do was breathe and relax and that any sensations I felt during birth would simply be ones of warmth, pressure and power. I actually kept saying 'warmth, pressure and power' over and over in my head during a contraction.

After it was determined I was fully dilated, I wanted to get in the birth pool immediately. It took a bit of time to get the water temperature sorted out because we live in a 200 year old cottage with a really crappy boiler, so it's hard to get hot water quickly and we thought we'd have so much more time than we did. The midwives were fussing over the thermometer trying to get it to 37C and it stubbornly just kept going down to 35C. I remember just being like I don't care! I want to get in!! The contractions were getting pushy enough that I wanted to benefit from the water as much as I could before they got more than I felt I could manage on dry land. At some point, I must have gotten the all clear and pretty much bounded over the side of the pool in time for a contraction. I don't think the water was as great as I had hoped it would be. I'm oddly enough not a water person; don't like swimming or the beach or taking baths. And I think I didn't find it as soothing as I'd hoped, maybe because it wasn't as warm as it should have been. My poor husband kept trying to top it up and make it warmer, at one point pouring a bucket of searing hot water a little too close to my back during a contraction and I just remember being able to rouse myself out of my own little space enough to proclaim 'Too hot! Too hot!'. He said he felt so bad about that after and that the midwives must have thought he was an idiot for faffing around with the pool so much and not being able to get it right. Poor guy!

After a little bit in the pool, the midwives said that they thought maybe things were

slowing down and I should get out and walk up and down the stairs a bit to get them moving again. At first, I was like, 'What? You seriously must be crazy! I'm actually pushing and you want me to go up and down the stairs?!?' but actually it felt good to get out and move rather than just sit there in the pool. I went up and down the stairs a few times and walked up and down my upstairs hall between the bedroom and bathroom. I actually found this felt a bit more right than being in the pool and decided I'd stay up there a bit. When a contraction would start to come I would hurry back to either the bedroom or the bathroom if I was in the middle. I started just standing leaning over the side of the bed with one foot on the floor and one leg tucked up under me on the bed. It was a weird position but it felt right. For the next 3 hours (yes, 3 hours, 2nd stage lasted 3 hours and 51 minutes according to my notes!) I just went back and forth between doing this on the bed, and kneeling on the step around our bath tub in the bathroom or doing a deep squat with my husband supporting me, and then walking in between. This is totally not how I envisioned I would want to birth because I didn't think that much movement so late in labour would be comfortable, but it felt so much better than just sitting around in the pool. 2nd stage was definitely the hardest for me. Funny enough, I kept thinking at this point, why aren't they giving me the gas and air?!? I completely forgot that I'd specified in my birth plan that I wanted it available but that they shouldn't offer it to me unless I directly asked for it. Duh!

So the pushing bit was definitely tough and the 'hard part' if there was one. I thought the contractions building up to it would be because that's what everyone always seems to say. But that was easy in that I just had to relax and breathe and let it happen, but for the pushing stage, I actually had to work. I don't think it helped that this was the part the midwives showed up for either. I wasn't aware of being observed (consciously at least) but I was very aware that some contractions were really productive and intense and I felt like I could really do some work to move her down and others just fizzled out and didn't do much. My husband said after the fact that the ones that just fizzled out were when the midwives were in the room waiting to monitor me. They did mostly leave me to labour on my own, which was my preference and also I think they probably realised it was working better that way. I spent most of the 2nd stage in my bedroom, either squatting on the floor or leaning over the bed, with my husband and my doula. Oh, and I should mention as well because it's one of the more hilarious parts of my birth story, but my doula had been in Kenya visiting her family for the previous month and wasn't even on call for me until the following week. She literally flew back that morning and when my husband called to tell her I was in labour, she was just stepping off the plane at Heathrow and had to bolt out of the airport and drive the 2 hours to us to get there in time!

Having her there to help me through the pushing was really great though and I'm glad she was there for the part where I really needed her. She helped to keep me

breathing deeply and using my vocalizations to move baby effectively down. She breathed with me through each bearing down and helped me to remember to keep my throat open and my vocalizations deep. I could tell that the pushes were so much more productive when I did this. At some point, I reached down and could feel the baby's head just inside my vagina and that really spurred me on because I felt like we were getting somewhere. I could sense the midwives were starting to set up and get things ready and I was like, 'Yes!! We're getting somewhere!'. It still seemed like it took forever to actually get to the point of pushing her out though. Eventually I could feel her crowning and I just wanted to push as hard as I could so I would know she was out safely, but everyone kept me breathing her down slowly and easily. I definitely felt her head come out as there was a noticeable stretching and burning and then it felt like everything slipped back down to something more comfortable, which must have been her neck. Then another sensation of needing to bear down came along and I just pushed with all I had and the rest of her slithered out as I knelt leaning on a chair over a towel in the middle of my bedroom floor! Our baby girl, Josephine Rose, was born at 1:55pm, exactly 12 hours after my waters broke, at home, just using a TENS, the pool (however, briefly) and hypnotherapy techniques. I was 37 weeks and 5 days by my scan date and just 37 weeks and 2 days by LMP.

I rolled myself backwards and scooped her up. She was so slippery and tiny! We hadn't known her sex and after I got over the initial shock that I actually just had a baby, my husband and I had a look to see what she was. I really thought we were having a boy and it didn't click at first what I was looking at. I actually asked the midwife what she was! She had to confirm that, yes in fact, she was a girl! So not only was going into labour so early and unexpectedly kinda a shock, it totally through me for a loop to have had a little girl. I was completely astounded and I think I actually said, 'I'm so in shock, I have no idea what to even do and say!' Everyone laughed at me.

All that followed was just the boring (and less pleasant) parts. I wanted to have a natural physiological 3rd stage if all was otherwise going well. We left the cord to stop pulsing and empty on its own and finally after about 45 minutes, my husband cut it so I could get in a better position to encourage the placenta to come out. I had skin to skin contact with her for that first hour and then after a little over an hour, the midwives asked if I would be willing to have the injection to deliver the placenta because it seemed like nothing we were doing was encouraging it to appear on its own. I agreed as I really wanted it done at that point so I could snuggle with my baby. I handed her off to my husband for skin to skin and they gave me the injection. It took another 20 minutes, but it eventually came out intact and perfectly fine, just a bit on the delayed side. I did have some grazes inside my vagina and a 2nd degree tear to my perineum, and the midwives stitched that up for me as I lay back on my bed with my head resting on my husband's lap while he had skin to skin with our baby. I think

second to the vaginal exam, this was the other painful part. The actual stitching wasn't so bad, but them fishing around in there to find where they needed to stitch was a bit unpleasant! But at that point, I didn't even care, because I did it! I had my baby, she turned out to be a beautiful baby girl, and I did it the way I felt was right for me and had her at home. I then just spent the rest of the day lounging in our bed with her while everyone tidied up around me (oh, the poor carpet in our bedroom, I hadn't planned for a birth on dry land and didn't have enough shower curtains for the floor!). I ate dates and drank coconut water and everyone joked about how I was like a goddess just lounging and feasting.

It's now been a week since her birth and I'm still amazed that we actually did it! I trusted my gut, even when she decided to make a slightly earlier than expected appearance, and listened to my body and believed in both of us to do it - *and we did!* We had a beautiful, peaceful, empowering home birth and I'm so proud of us. I'm rarely someone who thinks I do things very well, even when other people think I do. I tend to be very hard on myself and think I could have always done something better than I actually did. But with this, I am just so proud of us and feel so great about all the hard work we did together (and with my husband too!) to make her entrance into the world what it was. I don't think we'll be planning another anytime soon (in fact, I'm pretty sure I announced this to the room right after she was born!) but when we do, assuming everything goes just as well as in this pregnancy, I'll definitely have any future babies at home too if I can. Maybe then I'll actually take more advantage of that pool that my husband so painstakingly got ready for me.