

Birth Control

The "Tupler Technique" of Maternal Fitness prepares women for the "marathon of labor."

By Ayn Nix

While teaching a prenatal fitness class at a health club four years ago, Julie Tupler, R.N., B.S.N., certified childbirth educator, personal trainer and fitness instructor, realized a need for personalized instruction for

mothers-to-be. "I had jocks and novices who had never exercised taking the same class," she says. "It wasn't a good mix." It was also clear to Tupler that women at different stages of pregnancy had different exercise needs and required more preliminary information. To offer the best possible instruction for expectant moms at every stage of pregnancy and all fitness levels, Tupler "conceived" Maternal Fitness.

Tupler's successful New York City-based company now employs more than 25 nurses/certified personal trainers, and plans are in the works to expand nationwide. The registered nurse turned savvy businesswoman is also working on three exercise videos and has written a soon-to-be published book, *Maternal Fitness: Preparing for the Marathon of Labor* (Simon and Schuster).

The Maternal Fitness program prepares women for labor both physically and psychologically. Referred to as the "missing link in childbirth education," Tupler and her staff work one-on-one in clients' homes, teaching specialized exercise along with massage, visualization and relaxation techniques. The program, modified for each stage of pregnancy, is

taught in five sessions, after which women are encouraged to continue on their own. Small group workshops of eight-10 are also an option.

BAKS to Basics

The cornerstone of Tupler's program is the BAKS Basics, an acronym for Belly breathing, Belly dancing, Aerobics and Abdominals, Kegels (exercises for the pelvic floor muscles), and Squatting, Stretching and Strengthening. The specially tailored exercises help prevent back problems, and urinary tract incontinence, and help women return to their pre-pregnancy condition faster.

"Working with Julie Tupler was one of the best decisions I've made," says Tisha Saffa, who was seven-and-a-half months pregnant with her second child before trying the Maternal Fitness program. "I couldn't have gotten the same benefits from an exercise video—they're done by pregnant women but they're not all for pregnant women," says Saffa. A self-proclaimed "non-exerciser," Saffa reports the BAKS Basics put her in touch with her body.

One-and-a-half hour sessions focus on stretching and strengthening—par-

ticularly the transverse muscle, the innermost abdominal muscle used for pushing during labor. "Students call me Ms. Transversite, and it's not because I wear men's clothing," quips Tupler. Women are taught how to push back against the uterus during labor using the transverse muscle while keeping the pelvic floor relaxed. The transverse muscle is also used in upper body and leg work, taught after students have mastered the BAKS Basics.

"The exercises made a big difference in my strength, how I looked and my ability to carry," says one client who worked with Tupler while pregnant with twins and postpartum. "I never got a stretch mark."

Precautions

Safety is a primary concern. Tupler's exercises are designed in accordance with guidelines set forth by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. "My first concern was, is this going to hurt the baby?" recalls Saffa. "But every exercise is mindful of the fact you have a life inside you."

Maternal Fitness clients undergo a medical and fitness evaluation, checking for diastasis recti (a separation of the rectus abdominus which is normally together), and must have a doctor's approval. Additionally, women are counseled in nutrition and given a resource directory for any other services they might need.

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BIRTH CONTROL

Continued from page 40

although her doctor told her it would probably be a Cesarean delivery like her first.

Breathing

Doctors have told women to hold their breath and bear down for years, but this actually impedes labor, according to Tupler. "Pushing is like squeezing toothpaste out of a tube, and when you don't inhale or exhale it's like keeping the cap on," she says, explaining how breath holding makes it impossible to relax the pelvic floor. "It can cause fetal distress because the baby's not getting enough oxygen."

Tupler instructs women to continue to breathe while pushing with the transverse muscle and relaxing their strengthened pelvic floor muscles. "When that first pain hits, everything you've learned can fly out the window," says Saffa. "But, I remembered to breathe while pushing." She delivered in 20 minutes.

Relaxation and Visualization

Maternal Fitness sessions conclude with relaxation and visualization exercises. Women are encouraged to listen to Tupler's "Coming Contractions" relaxation tape nightly and bring it with them to the delivery room. It's so relaxing, in fact, clients have been known to fall asleep to the sound of Tupler's voice.

Visualization involves seeing the baby in the womb and imagining having the power and strength to give birth and nurture the baby. "You acknowledge the power and control you have and need," says Saffa.

Mentally preparing for birth is an important aspect of the program. "We prepare women earlier for the emotional challenge of childbirth," says Tupler. "The women we train are prepared because they know what's going to happen, and they know how to push because they've practiced and used visualization techniques."

Service with a Smile

Humor is another psychological tool Tupler believes can help alleviate stress and pain. With a background in dramatic arts and comedy, incorporating humor into her teaching technique comes naturally. She once performed comedy shows at The Comic Strip in New York in which she had women in the audience pelvic tilting to the hokey pokey while she sang a "Laughing in Labor" song and used vagina-shaped hand puppets as teaching tools. While in nursing school, she gave entertaining educational lectures on prenatal fitness, and currently, she does an annual Mother's Day show. "Julie has a great sense of humor," says one client. "She is concerned but upbeat, and keeps her audiences mentally up."

Tupler's slightly unorthodox methods seem to work. "I was unprepared for my first birth even though I'd read so many pregnancy books I felt I knew more than the doctors," says Saffa. "My second birth was an exhilarating experience. I didn't need drugs. It was wonderful."

Another client agrees. "I felt terrific," she says. "The exercises really helped relieve my terrible backache."

Tupler has no children of her own, but is "hoping soon." You can bet she'll be using the "Tupler Technique."

For more information, call Maternal Fitness at (212) 213-6949. ■

Ayn Nix is editorial assistant of American Fitness.