Easy Life

Rachael McNamara delivers calm to mothers to be.
Hypnosis has been kind to Rachael McNamara ’00 and her family. Her mom used it to quit smoking. McNamara used it to overcome fears of falling when she was a kid gymnast. And now, at least a decade later, McNamara has twice used hypnosis to give birth without even breaking a sweat.

That, she knows, is no small accomplishment. A health educator in the Office of Counseling and Substance Abuse Services, McNamara knows the difficulties of giving birth. In fact, it was the protracted and uncomfortable birth of her first
child that prompted her to investigate alternative methods of childbirth when she became pregnant for the second time.

It was the nerve-calming, self-composing aspect of the hypnosis she practiced as a competitive gymnast that eventually convinced her to look into birth hypnosis. In particular, McNamara became a student of Hypnobabies, a six-week childbirth education course that is meant to create not just an easier, more comfortable birth experience, but a relaxing, more peaceful pregnancy on the whole.

“The immediate benefit was within a couple of weeks I wasn’t worried about birth at all,” says McNamara. “The anxiety was gone.”

Of course, the real test would be at childbirth.

To achieve a calm, comfortable delivery for mothers, the Hypnobabies method involves relaxation techniques, breathing exercises and birth visualization. Mothers are expected to be mobile, alert and communicative during labor, yet still remain relaxed while in a state of self-induced hypnosis. Hypnobabies is also designed to prompt women to tap into their body’s natural ability to provide anesthesia, with cues to change an uncomfortable sensation, for example, into a more pleasurable feeling of tightness or pressure. For McNamara, it all worked perfectly.

“When the birthing time came, it was completely comfortable,” says McNamara, who didn’t even lie down in bed during this delivery (which, by the way, took half the time of her first child’s delivery). Although she credits her husband for being a firm, reliable birth partner and the hospital for providing alternative delivery devices, including a tub and a birthing ball, it’s the freedom and control she had during the process that she thinks were so critical. “There was no stress, no bright lights, no machines. It was all about me.”

It was, in a word, empowering.

In fact, McNamara’s hypnobirthing experience was so empowering that she not only used it for her third pregnancy as well, but she also became a Hypnobabies instructor, teaching the technique to expectant mothers in and around Charleston.

“I decided this was so amazing that women in Charleston needed this class,” says McNamara, who has taught 16 students in five sets of classes since she earned her Hypnobabies certification in April 2011.

McNamara says she is delighted to work with people who are unafraid to question traditional childbirth techniques and who demand a birth experience that is healthy, natural and satisfying. Among her students there is little tolerance for a “because that’s how it’s always been done” attitude when it comes to pregnancy. Instead, they want as much information as possible about what might happen to their bodies and their babies’ bodies, and to be told of safe childbirth alternatives.

“Both women’s and men’s confidence increases substantially when they learn as much as possible about a major event happening in life,” says McNamara. “My students are incredible at knowing how to, and when to, ask the important questions, which for health are usually, What are the benefits? What are the risks? What are the alternatives? And what happens if I do nothing?”

And even though McNamara is in the teaching position, she says interaction with her students has given her new insight into the mind’s vulnerability to fear, and how to overcome it.

“Fear definitely creates stress, but it can also create pain,” says McNamara. “Hypnosis is extremely powerful at addressing fears. The mind is powerful, and, with training, you can learn how to adjust your expectations – and those adjustments can change the result.”

For more information on Hypnobabies, contact Rachael McNamara at 3.3650 or mcnamarar@cofc.edu.