



Episode 3: Hypnobirthing  
with Melissa, the Founder of Hypnobirthing Australia

## Hypnobirthing

**Tiffany:** Hi everyone. Today I'm excited to welcome my guest, Melissa Spilsted. Melissa is an author, clinical hypnotherapist, teacher, and the director of Hypnobirthing Australia. She teaches hypnobirthing techniques to parents and practitioners throughout Australia and internationally. In this week's episode, we'll be discussing, you guessed it, hypnobirthing. What it is, along with its benefits. Thank you for taking the time to join me today, Melissa, it's so lovely to have you on.

**Melissa:** Thank you so much for having me on the show. I just love having the opportunity to talk about hypnobirthing because I wish that all women had access to these techniques for labor and birth.

**Tiffany:** Wonderful, I think it is so great to just be able to connect with people and give people information. I believe that knowledge is power, so it's always great to be able to connect with people. So, thanks again, I'm really looking forward to our chat. I didn't use hypnobirthing when I had my babies, but I've heard a lot about it. So before we jump right in though Melissa, could you start by telling us a little bit about why you decided to get into hypnobirthing and I guess why you are now the director of Hypnobirthing Australia? I think it'd be really interesting to know a bit more about your history there.

**Melissa:** I used hypnobirthing for my first baby, and my first baby is now 16, so it was a while ago. But I was actually holding a lot of fear leading up to birth. I knew that it was something that women have been doing since the beginning, and I knew all of that, but it didn't stop me from fearing the pain of childbirth. From a young age I'd been told, and you're told by the media, your friends, family about birth being the most painful thing in the world. And so, as much as I really was so excited about having a baby, there was this cloud hanging over me because I was thinking, "Yes, but I have to birth this baby, how can I do this?" And I'm a chicken with pain, I've got a low pain threshold.

I recognized that going into birth with this sort of attitude was not going to serve me well, so I did everything. I did a lot of research, and then I came across hypnotherapy and I saw a hypnotherapist. My husband and I learned how to use self-hypnosis and deep relaxation techniques in combination with building my knowledge and my partner's support et cetera, to have a really awesome, beautiful birth.



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**Melissa:** (cont...) And then I went on and I used these techniques and I kept building my knowledge and I added more techniques for my second. And then for my third, like by the time I had my third baby, I was a pro at this, I was 40 minutes at the hospital and he was out.

But that's not to say my whole labor was 40 minutes, but I was really comfortable staying at home because I had confidence, I really felt empowered, and it was a loving, beautiful, calm experience. It was a connecting experience, it was an expansive experience. I came out of each of my births on an absolute high, and that's actually not the norm. And even the midwives at the hospital were getting me to go in and talk to their antenatal classes because it wasn't the norm, so by the time I'd used it for my third birth, I thought, "It's wrong that women don't have these tools, that women don't have access to childbirth education without the fear." And so, I did some extra training. I'm already a registered teacher, I also have further qualifications in adult education and I'm a clinical hypnotherapist. I wasn't when I used it for birth, but I am a clinical hypnotherapist and have been for a long time now.

I used all of those qualifications and my own experience to create a program, a positive program. And so our Hypnobirthing Australia course is called the Positive Birth Program, and it's for all types of births, natural if possible, but sometimes nature needs a little helping hand, and that's cool. As long as we are going into this feeling calm and empowered, and we have good support, and we have our knowledge base, and we can keep ourselves calm if things start spiraling. I think if we go into birth with all of that, really we are setting ourselves up for success.

So I created Hypnobirthing Australia. I didn't call it Hypnobirthing Melissa, because I knew that this was much bigger than me, and I knew that there were other childbirth professionals out there and other people who wanted to teach this and who had use these techniques themselves to help women and their partners to bring their babies into the world in a calm, positive, empowered way.

And so, I started with just me with three little babies basically, and the kitchen bench was my desk, but we grew, and now there's nearly 300 practitioners around Australia teaching our programs. We're Australia's leading, largest, most widespread childbirth education course. More parents attend our courses than any other childbirth course in Australia.



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**Melissa:** (cont...) We're taught independently, mostly by practitioners, and geographically, we really cover Australia. We're in the country towns, we're in the rural areas, we're everywhere, baby. So mostly independently, but also there are a number of health services that also teach our course, so there's probably about 20 odd hospitals that also teach our program.

**Tiffany:** That's so great. Well thank you so much for sharing a bit about your journey, it's fascinating. It's always lovely to hear the passion that comes with these, I guess, life experiences that you've had yourself and then how you've brought that into your life and then assisting others with your experience as being that, I guess, driving force behind what it is that you do. So, that's so wonderful, thanks so much for sharing.

So, I guess the first obvious question though Melissa, is what is hypnobirthing in a nutshell? Because you've explained a little bit there in the intro, but I think it'd be great to know a bit more about exactly what it means to the average person.

**Melissa:** The whole hypnobirthing word, it can be an attractor and a deterrent, honestly. And I have often deliberated over this word and whether we even should call it hypnobirthing, but look, it's a fancy word for a positive birth, that's how I call it. However, yes, there is hypnosis involved, but self-hypnosis. It's deep relaxation, and that is totally up to the individual, no one has any power over you or anything like that. So, the hypnosis part of hypnobirthing is one of the many tools and techniques that we teach, that's why I think it's a little bit misleading as a name, but anyway, it's out there now and everyone knows about it, so we're sticking to it.

So, we use self-hypnosis, and it is such an effective tool to help us to remove unnecessary fear and reservation leading up to birth so we can actually enjoy our pregnancy. We should be, we're approaching the birth of our baby, this is actually something to be celebrated in life, not feared. And so it's really wonderful when we can utilize these techniques to remove unnecessary fears which can have a physiological effect also on our baby, on our bodies, it flows through to our baby, and it can cause all sorts of issues during birth too when we are very fearful because we tense up, so it can slow down labor, it can stall labor, it can make labor more painful for us.



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**Melissa:** (cont...) So, it's such a wonderful tool to have during labor as well and afterwards, so you can use it when breastfeeding, you can use it even when your baby is the terrible twos and they're having a little tanty on the floor at Woolworths or something, you can still use your self-hypnosis and be nice and calm. So, it's a wonderful tool, but it's one of many that we cover.

**Tiffany:** Well it's so great to know that your main focus is about having a positive birth experience. Who doesn't want to have a positive experience anywhere in life? So it makes so much sense and it's so great to know it's not some whack idea of getting a pocket watch and swinging it in front of someone's face when it comes to hypnotizing them, et cetera. I mean, of course, like you said, the word could be a bit deceiving, but I think the way you've explained that there really makes so much sense. So, what are some of the key benefits of hypnobirthing, Melissa, just so that everyone understands a bit more about some of those key benefits to look out for?

**Melissa:** Well, it's a reduction in interventions, that's the main one. Another benefit is it's a calmer, more positive experience through your pregnancy, because it's not just about the birth. Your baby doesn't suddenly become a baby as soon as they're born, your baby is here now whilst you're pregnant. And when you're calm and when you're able to regulate your emotions and your hormones by staying more positive and calmer, even when, look, crap happens in life, and we don't always have control over that, we don't have control over a lot of stuff, but we do have control over how we react, and I think this is another very powerful part of hypnobirthing of using it as preparation, is we really learn that.

And these are skills that we take through life. We're able to utilize our tools during birth and through the intensity of birth, because there's a real furphy out there about hypnobirthing that you're going to be all silent and that you're going to have this pain-free birth and all that. And I never say that, because look, I mooed like a cow, I was not quiet, and here am I, the director of Hypnobirthing Australia, and tell you what, it sounded like a barnyard in there.

So, you don't have to be quiet. It's not about pain-free, it depends on how you want to describe the sensations that you're experiencing. And if you give it the label pain, then guess what, that's what you're going to get, right?



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**Melissa:** (cont...) But if you really tune into your body and your baby, and you've got the tools to stay calm and to stay really connected, you might actually find that what you're experiencing you could actually give it a different label. And it's productive, it's actually doing something, it's not like the pain that you feel when you hurt yourself or when you're injured, or when you're poisoned, you've got food poisoning or something, it's not like that. It's actually your uterus having a massive workout, and of course you're going to feel it. So, that's another thing, anyway, I know I'm kind of digressing here.

I wasn't really answering a question, but I think it's an important thing for people to see, and I think it's a benefit to learn the difference between pain as in being hurt or being injured and the intensity of childbirth, I think that's a massive benefit.

And another thing that is not even realized, most people when they sign up, it is so wonderful to do this course with your partner, it's really bonding for the partner. And the partners, they often feel so left out of things, they don't know what to do, so they end up going on just looking at their phones and that, and then the birthing mothers are like, "Oh, my partner was hopeless through labor and all that, they didn't do anything." Well, they didn't know what to do, they didn't know how they could help. Whereas when they attend the course, they are so part of this and they love it, and then they see us birthing with empowerment and they just see us through these new eyes. They see our strength, and they're part of the whole process. We're going through the physical intensity, but they're supporting us, we're doing it as a team, and what an awesome way to start your parenting journey when you are really doing it as a team. So, I think that's another benefit, which is often underestimated.

**Tiffany:** For sure, and you do hear people who are there in that birthing suite and who have never been at a birth before, just say how incredible it is to be a part of a birth and to witness that person that you love or you're there to care for. You have a new respect for what they can do and what they can achieve, and the human body, I think as well. And like you said, just having that education and having them involved or that other person involved, I think does make a huge difference to not only the birthing mother, but their relationship, and like you said, that bonding between the parents, if it is both parents there.



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**Tiffaney:** (cont...) So, are there some techniques you can talk about today, or a little bit about how hypnobirthing is performed, Melissa? Because I think that, again, we have gone into it a bit, but it'd be nice to have a bit more of an explanation about exactly how it kind of is performed.

**Melissa:** Sure. Well we prepare ourselves in both body and mind leading up to the birth. So, this is where a lot of people kind of miss out if they don't have this sort of preparation. We want to be healthy in the body, but we also want to be healthy in the mind. And so, when birth comes along and the intensity of birth, we're going to go into automatic mode, and instead of us automatically going down a fear-based path which releases stressor hormones, catecholamines, which causes fear and tension, and then it stops the hormones of birth from working the way they're meant to, and this can have adverse effects. So, we make sure that we've got our mind right and that we can bring ourselves back on track.

So, you've heard of endorphins and oxytocin and that, we were to keep those flowing because they are going to keep our labor going nice and strong. And the endorphins are up to 40 times more powerful than morphine. They are a natural painkiller, but we don't release them when we are scared, when we are fearful. So, our hypnobirthing mamas actually can have a different physical experience of birth, literally a different physical experience. And part of the reason for that is because we are releasing those endorphins.

Then we have our birth partner totally on board. They know what to say, this allows us to release and let go. And we've really thought ahead in regards to our birthing preferences, and we've discussed them with our caregivers in advance because knowledge is power, and we want to be making informed decisions along the way.

And we also have tools, we have wonderful tools, and they can actually help reduce the intensity of labor and keep us calm. So, some of the tools that we go through in our positive birth program are breathing, oh my gosh, do not give birth without our breathing techniques. They are awesome, they really make a difference. Acupressure, visualization, light touch massage, self-hypnosis, and other deep relaxation techniques; movement, upright positioning, vocalization, there's lots of different techniques that we also cover.



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**Tiffany:** So when you mentioned breathing techniques, I know that I was taught some just in a basic class that I attended, and I found that worked extremely well for me. Are there certain techniques that you have found work particularly well when it comes to breathing? Because I'm just such an advocate for that myself just in my own experience, and I haven't even done the hypnobirthing course, but just if you could take us through a little bit about the breathing, because I think that is, like you've just mentioned, such a huge part of that birthing process.

**Melissa:** I'll tell you a little story actually. For my third birth, I was having such great births, I'm not saying that they were easy, that they were much easier than it seems for most other women. And I really thought that it was all the preparation that I was putting in, and my mindset, and the breathing techniques and that, but I was thinking of teaching this to others and I really had to kind of prove it to myself that it was indeed these techniques that were making the difference and not some superpower that I may have had. So, for my third birth, I stopped using the relaxation and the breathing techniques for, I even called them contractions instead of surges, and I just reacted the way I would if I knew nothing. And as soon as the intensity started up, I found myself tensing up, just naturally tensing up kind of like you do if you kick your toe and I sucked my breath in, its a quick intake of breath and my hands tensed up. I stopped breathing, so I held my breath, and then I thought about what was happening, and it was all about pain, and I was thinking, "Ow, ow," and I knew that it was going to get worse because contractions they're like a wave and they build in intensity. And because I knew this, I was preparing myself for pain, it was hurting and I'm thinking, "It's going to hurt even more." And so, I was really focusing on pain, and it killed. Going through the contractions in such a way that they really hurt, and I came out of it and I thought, "Oh my goodness, no wonder women are screaming for drugs, no wonder, I would be." If I didn't have these techniques, I would've been.

But these techniques are fantastic, and then I can remember thinking, "but why would a breathing technique, why would that make such a difference to my physical experience of that contraction?" And then I remembered why. Okay, so when you're breathing, the oxygen is getting through to the uterine muscles and they're having the biggest workout of their life when we're having surges. In hypnobirthing we call contractions surges. So, from now on I'll call them surges, everyone knows what I'm talking about.



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**Melissa:** (cont...) Okay, so during the surges, if we continue breathing, we're sending the oxygen to those working muscles when they're having the biggest workout of their life. So, if you can imagine going for a run or swimming or something like that, and holding your breath, you're not going to be able to work to your optimal capacity, your muscles are not going to be working, they're going to get fatigued, right? So, when you're birthing, it's very physical, your uterus is having a big workout. So we need to keep breathing so that we oxygenate the muscles. When the muscles are oxygenated, they're going to be able to work properly.

And I'm kind of going through this in my head, it's like, "Why does it hurt so much when I don't do the breathing?" Well, that's one of the reasons, the other reason was the visualization. So, instead of me visualizing and thinking about pain and clamping and tightness, instead when I'm using my hypnobirthing, I'm actually visualizing something like going over a wave, or I'm visualizing the uterine muscles working, or I'm taking myself to a beautiful place in nature. And so, the visualization, when we use strong visualization we're using up more receptors in our brain. So, when we're using up so many receptors, our brain actually uses some of the receptors from the area of our brain that perceives pain. So, there's less pain receptors available when we use strong visualization. So, there's a bit of science behind what we do here too.

**Tiffany:** Absolutely, it sounds like it.

**Melissa:** Now the breathing and the oxygen, obviously, that's also going to have an effect on our baby. Because if we're in pain and we're holding our breath, and when we are in that fight or flight response, it actually sends the blood away from our uterus. So, with hypnobirthing, because we're calm, the oxygenated blood is still getting to our uterus and it's getting to our baby, and so that is going to have an effect on our baby too.

So yes, we teach breathing techniques, it's diaphragmatic breathing, so if anyone's ever done singing or yoga, lots of people are already familiar with diaphragmatic breathing, it's a very efficient way of breathing. But go to a course, go and do a course. Even if the only thing you get out of the course is breathing, I tell you what, you'll thank me for it, it really does make a difference.





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**Tiffany:** Absolutely, so when it comes to other things like you've said, visualization is a really huge part, do you also encourage affirmations and that sort of thing in partnership with the visualization, Melissa?

**Melissa:** Oh, absolutely, and the affirmations are great leading up to the birth too in creating and maintaining that positive mindset. So, I know that the affirmations, and I used some for my own births too, the affirmations are a really important tool, they're a major tool, and a lot of birthing mothers love using them.

**Tiffany:** Wonderful. So where can people learn a bit more about hypnobirthing techniques? Do they have to attend the classes, is that really what they need to do or are there other ways in which they can find out a bit more about hypnobirthing techniques, Melissa?

**Melissa:** Well, come to our website because there's heaps of free information on the website. It's [www.hypnobirthingaustralia.com.au](http://www.hypnobirthingaustralia.com.au). Look, even if you just go through the birth stories, because parents all over Australia and the world send in their beautiful birth stories and we upload them, and we have just heaps of free resources, so have a good look around.

Birth is personal, and so it's really so worthwhile to go to a class where you have that relationship with your practitioner. You can ask them questions directly, you and your partner go to the classes together. It's time away from the real world where you're completely focusing on your upcoming birth. There's nothing more important, there really isn't. You can go and invest money on fancy prams and cots and things like that, and yeah, sure, your nursery will look good and whatever, but you can rebuy a pram if you get the wrong one, you can change the decoration in your nursery if you don't like the look of the cot, but you can't redo your birth. Childbirth education is the best, the most important investment that you can make into your birth. I am so thankful that I did it for my own births. I'm still thankful to this day, and my youngest, my eldest, I should say, is 16, so I'm still banging on about it.

So attend a course, if you can. If you can't attend courses though, we are all about making this accessible to the masses, so there's other options.



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**Melissa:** (cont...) Some practitioners also run the full course via webinar, which is really nice, because you can sit there in your UGG boots at home, you and your partner on the couch, and just have Zoom on the TV, and you can still attend live, and it's still interactive and everything, so that's an option. Another option is online versions of our courses. So, we've got our Positive Birth Program, our Positive Cesarean Birth Program. So, for the Positive Birth Program, we have a fully recorded online version of that. So, I know that's also a really effective way of learning if you can't attend classes.

You can still really learn a lot, and I guess with the online, you can go back and you can revisit stuff too. So, for the breathing techniques, for instance, you can go back and watch the breathing techniques again. So, there're your options. It's worth investing in it, but you can also just go and knock yourself out with the website, there's so much information there, there's some free resources there as well.

**Tiffany:** Absolutely, I totally agree with that, and I think it is a huge investment and probably the best investment you'll make, because you'll talk about your birth forever, you remember them forever, they're a huge experience in your life, and I totally agree with that. So, have there been some scientific studies done on hypnobirthing and what are the key findings there? If you could briefly take us through that, Melissa, it would be great to know a bit about that.

**Melissa:** There are a number of scientific studies, they're all listed on our website, so go to [hypnobirthingaustralia.com.au](http://hypnobirthingaustralia.com.au), and there's actually a research tab, so you can see the evidence and that. But the most recent, most relevant evidence, is actually the outcomes that have recently been released by Bunbury Hospital in WA. They have been teaching our program exclusively as their antenatal course since 2018. And so, they compared parents who didn't do our course with those who did do our course. And the actual outcomes will blow you away. So, the epidural rate for those who attended our course was down 32%. Gas, the use of gas down 22%, the use of morphine down 40%, inductions down 15%, spontaneous vaginal birth up 22%, but here's the biggest one, a 52% reduction in nonelective caesareans for parents who did our course, how's that?

And that was all collected through a public hospital, it was nothing to do with us, and I just got this very pleasant surprise when they sent me the outcomes. But if that doesn't speak volumes, I don't know what does.



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**Tiffany:** That's amazing stats. Clearly releasing fears and sort of conditioning ourselves to release these endorphins during birth, along with learning skills like this is greatly reducing the need for intervention and that sort of thing, which is so wonderful. What are some of the benefits of positive birth experiences, even if things don't go well, Melissa? Because obviously we know that we don't know what's going to happen on the day, things can happen, do you have some tools or some tips there around still trying to create that positive birth experience as best possible?

**Melissa:** Absolutely. Well right from the beginning, we are preparing for a positive birth, and that's all types of births. We always have this focus from when we first start doing our training, so the tools are used regardless of whether we need some medical intervention or not. The main thing is we feel empowered in our choices, we're calm, and the birth experience is positive, and this then sets us up so well for positive parenting.

**Tiffany:** That's so great. It's great to know that it's all about that positive birth experience, like you said, no matter whether you have a natural, a vaginal birth, or whether you have to have a caesarean, I think that's great, it's so inclusive. I know that myself, I've had a few different births and I have had to have a caesarean, and it's great to know that you're so inclusive. I think that's wonderful, promoting positive birth experiences and however it looks is so great to know that that's really the focus there. So, what's involved with the classes, Melissa, you've been through a little bit, 12 hour course, what are some of the things that you do receive?

**Melissa:** Well, we cover tools, and I've already mentioned a number of the tools, partner support knowledge, and knowledge is power. It's just a method of preparation. So, as part of the class you get a booklet when you attend the class, and your practitioner will go through all of those aspects in 12 hours, and then you go away with online resources as well. So, you've got practice albums that you'll be listening to leading up to the birth, and also lots of other online resources, extra practice videos, things like that. And if you do the online version of the course, it's all online for you.

**Tiffany:** Well that's great to know as well, I think it's good to know you don't just do the course and then you're left on your own, you've got all the other resources there to support you along the way.



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**Melissa:** Absolutely. I don't want you to just do the course and then drop it and then leave it for months and then kind of rely on that prior training. You actually need to just be practicing it on a daily basis, but it's not hard, it's actually not hard, we integrate it into our every day. So, it doesn't mean that you have to listen to a track every day or something like that, but we just have stuff around us so that we're keeping that positive mindset and we're bonding with our baby and our partner's a bigger part of the journey.

**Tiffany:** That's so lovely, it's nice that it becomes a bit of a ritual, a routine that you do all the time. And like you said, though, it's something you can use moving forward into your parenting journey as well, those techniques and the resources that you have and the tools that you learn over time, it sounds like very much life skills.

**Melissa:** Absolutely.

**Tiffany:** Wonderful, thanks again for coming on and sharing your incredible knowledge about hypnobirthing and all its benefits, it's been so interesting to find more out about it, particularly since I've had babies myself, so it's always fascinating to learn a bit more about the birthing process and how to make it more positive. So, thank you so much, Melissa.

**Melissa:** Thank you so much for having me on the show, Tiffany.

**Tiffany:** I hope you've enjoyed listening today and learned a bit more about the benefits of hypnobirthing. For more information about hypnobirthing or to book in for a class you can head to [www.hypnobirthingaustralia.com.au](http://www.hypnobirthingaustralia.com.au), or you can follow them on their socials at Hypnobirthing Australia.