The emerging state of mindfulness during labour and its association with the experience of labour pain

Laura Y Whitburn, Lester E Jones, Mary-Ann Davey, Rhonda Small

Mother & Child Health Research, Faculty of Health Sciences, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia

Introduction

The pain associated with labour is unique and complex. It is highly variable between women, and is influenced by the social setting and cultural context in which it is experienced. Thus, it is a challenge for both women and their caregivers. Whilst pain is accepted as a multidimensional experience, the approach to managing labour pain continues to focus primarily on the sensory dimension. In order to gain a more sophisticated understanding of labour pain, we must examine how the experience emerges in the woman’s mind. Gaining a better understanding of the complex and multidimensional nature of labour pain, including how cognitive and social processes shape the experience, will inform and enhance approaches to managing the labour pain experience.

Methods

The phenomenology method was employed to understand the essence of the conscious experience of labour pain. Nineteen women who gave birth in a large maternity hospital in Melbourne, Australia were interviewed in the month following labour. Ethics approval and participant consent were obtained. Interview transcripts were analysed to allow for the identification and description of themes.

Results

Mindset emerged as a key theme that influenced women’s experience of labour pain. Two categories of mindset were identified. The first category was characterised by the mind remaining in the present moment. This was achieved with focus and concentration. In this state women attended to direct sensations and acted with awareness. Women were open to, and accepting of, their inner experience, including being accepting of pain. The pain itself was experienced as a positive component of the process. This state of mind appeared to encapsulate mindfulness.

The second category was characterised by the mind not being in the present moment. This was associated with distractions – generated externally by the labour environment or internally by women's own thoughts. Women did not attend to direct sensations; rather, they reacted to their experience. Thought processes featured helplessness, judgment, pain magnification and rumination, and this was associated with a negative relationship to pain. Whilst these two mindsets appeared to be distinct, women could shift between them during labour, suggesting a mindset continuum. A lateral shift could result from aspects of the labour environment – either facilitators of a mindful state, or distractors of a mindful state. States of mindfulness tended to be accompanied by a positive labour experience.

Discussion & conclusion

This study identified a mindset continuum apparent in labouring women and describes how mindset is associated with women’s experience of labour pain. During labour women have an inherent capacity to engage a state of mindfulness. During such state they are open and accepting of perceptions, and experience labour pain as a positive pain. The labour environment plays a key role in enabling women to sustain this state. Developing interventions that cultivate a state of labour mindfulness, as well as targeting aspects of the environment that can sustain mindfulness, may improve women’s experiences of labour pain.

References