

CAROLYN COWAN

Psychotherapist and breathwork teacher



**Breathing
for
Pregnancy**

How to find calm through
the four trimesters

Breathing for Pregnancy

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How to find calm throughout
the four trimesters

CAROLYN COWAN

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Vermilion
LONDON

Vermilion, an imprint of Ebury Publishing
 20 Vauxhall Bridge Road
 London SW1V 2SA

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Penguin
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First published by Vermilion in 2023

www.penguin.co.uk

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9781785044441

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
 Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68



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*To all mothers bringing forth children
who will create change in the world.*

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Introduction

Let us sit down together under this wonderful, generous, patient old oak tree and discuss. Get comfortable. I have brought a blanket and a small pillow for you to sit on.

You are here, we meet, because you are pregnant.

Being with child is a miraculous process, but it is also an intensely internal experience, physically and emotionally, deeply rooted in our survival instincts: we have an urge to reproduce, to improve the human race. The hormonal changes that take place from the moment of conception are rooted in our primal instincts to create safety, to nest, to make a safe place in which to bring up the child, and to protect ourselves and the child during and after the gestation process.

Pregnancy and beyond can take myriad different forms, and each pregnancy, every child born, is unique. There are so many ways in which the process can unfold, grow and emerge from within us and for all those around us.

For many, getting pregnant is heavenly bliss: the 40 weeks are divine and the birth experience is a net of professional safety around us, as we trust the midwives, the doctors and the guided

process. For others it might be a magical home experience with a birthing pool and a midwife all to yourself, or held deep in a forest ...

Picking up this book, you may be absolutely fabulously well, feeling great, blossoming into pregnancy, loving every moment of this time and just wanting to enjoy breathwork as a way to be present and peaceful. If this is you, then throughout this book I will talk you through the many ways in which you can work with your mind and body to stay relaxed and calm using the breath.

For some, discovering they are pregnant can be initially overwhelming, unexpected, even terrifying. It may be all that you ever longed for and, even so, that moment of knowing it is real, that the embryo is within you and growing, can open up so many previously unthought processes, feelings and changes to your reality.

Holding the pregnancy for 40 weeks as your body meets the growing embryo's demands, the changes to your physicality and thoughts, and, week by week, counting down towards labour can feel like the last great voyage into the unknown. *Who will this child be? Who am I creating? Who are we creating?* These are all lovely questions that are perfectly normal to ask at this time. You will find that you will adapt, settle into the 40 weeks and find your particular rhythm, and your fears and overwhelm will subside.

You may also be here because you want me, and the breathwork and stretching I will teach you, to help you manage anxious thinking, worrying thoughts, deep fears. I cannot stop these thoughts and feelings forever; however, what you will learn in these pages is how to calm yourself down. The wonderful news is that you have the ability to change how you think and feel, and the fastest way for that to happen is through movement and the breath.

'Attunement' describes this ability to become aware of when your nervous system is in the stress response. You will learn to attune to your own state of being, notice if it is not serving you,

change how you feel and, in this action and choice, become present and gentle. This will then be felt by all those around and within you, and in turn they will become calm, too.

This book is about finding calm in pregnancy through ‘conscious breathing’ in the first three trimesters – the gestation period, while the child (or children) grows within you – and the fourth trimester, the postnatal phase.

WHAT IS CONSCIOUS BREATHING?

To breathe consciously is to take over, when you choose, the body’s unconscious breath patterns. These can be easily understood by noticing how many times you breathe in a minute. There is an ideal breath length, for both the inhale and the exhale, for being present – right here, right now – and in this conscious breath pattern your mind and body are safe enough for all functions – mind, heart rate and hormonal flow – to be in their optimal state.

As you will learn in these pages, this optimal state of being has a profound impact on the child both within and, post-labour, outside your body. In Chapter 5 I will take you through breaths that invite you to breathe more slowly and take you into deeper states of stillness, presence and calm.

Set a timer on your phone for one minute. Without judging yourself or trying to do it perfectly, sit up and count each inhale and exhale until the timer goes off.

You may be calm, peaceful and gentle when you try this and arrive at around ten breaths per minute, or perhaps fewer. Try again when you notice you feel stressed or rushed or have just had a moment with social media or the news. You may find that, by paying attention to your breaths,

you breathe faster; the count may be closer to 16 breaths per minute. This is OK; it is not bad or wrong but a perfect example of *unconscious* breathing. Your mind and body will have been mobilised by the situation so, in response to your thoughts, your unconscious breath pattern will have automatically sped up.

Over the course of reading this book and the different scenarios I will invite you into, you will learn how to notice your unconscious breathing and change over to conscious breathing. You will also learn the breath length you are aiming for.

I want to bring you to a good understanding of why you should breathe consciously, particularly in pregnancy, without blinding you with science at an already complex time. We will explore how your body and mind work together, and I will share with you the best of breathwork practice to facilitate your need for a kind space in which to find yourself, for yourself, by yourself, as a pregnant woman, no matter what your pregnancy journey looks like.

Conscious breathing is a highly accessible practice and has so many benefits in pregnancy:

- The act of breathing deeply and slowly sends more oxygen to the growing foetus and improves your whole system, changing hormonal flow and thus calming the baby, too.
- Conscious breathing brings a sense of awareness and – particularly in the afterglow, when I ask that you take two minutes to be still, calm and gentle – it is an opportunity to connect deeply to the child within you.
- You will find that you have more energy for your day and your mood will be good.

- Breathwork facilitates better sleep. Finding calm also helps to manage blood pressure.
- It is a personal practice, and my hope is that you will find this for yourself by making space in your day and taking downtime away from screens and other stressors.
- Breathwork in pregnancy allows you to be calm and centred, making a very real difference to the child inside you, your sense of self and how much you can enjoy being pregnant.

Just a few minutes of conscious breathing makes a big difference to the mind and body.

You may have already done a lot of breathwork, particularly if you like to practise yoga. Many yogic forms include similar breathing practices – particularly the type I teach, Kundalini Global – but nowhere else is there a specific adaptation of these techniques to allow for the rapidly changing body that you find yourself in charge of as a pregnant woman. What we will do here is unique, well researched and taught in the thousands of Kundalini Global classes and yoga teacher training courses that I run.

I have also included a specific chapter on stretching in this book (Chapter 4). Stretching and sitting in silence is a work of building intimacy with yourself. Over time, you will begin to notice that it becomes easier to bear yourself, by yourself, for yourself. This will, in turn, change how you experience yourself in your daily life and in personal interactions. These practices are the foundations for good boundaries and they foster the ability to recognise when self-care is more useful than being reactive.

Conscious breathing combined with stretching is yours – entirely yours. It is a superpower, a magical portal into transformation and change. It is a glorious practice that gives you agency over yourself. My hope is that you will take on a personal daily practice in your pregnancy that will serve you for the rest of your life.

Throughout your pregnancy and into the postnatal period, you will be able to share this ability to manage and hold your emotional being with the next generation. This is the amazing gift of all that we will be doing together. This is work that you will do for yourself but that your children, your family and all those around you can also benefit from.

WHO AM I?

My task is to show you how to change how you feel, to assist you in beginning to trust the process you are going through and to teach you that, at any time, you can simply, quietly and all by yourself change how you feel. This is what I do; it is my job. You could even say that this is who I am: the breath teacher.

I know how to do this, how to teach you, because I have been a version of who you are now. I was a pregnant woman, a while ago now. My children are now adults, but for me, getting pregnant, going through multiple losses and being in an unhappy relationship combined with having a ‘tall dark history’ made my own experiences of being pregnant quite stressful.

(A tall dark history is a euphemism for the word ‘trauma’, which is too much in common parlance right now, and generally used without thought. ‘Tall dark history’ allows for all manner of events to have been there in the past, without them having to also be in the present.)

I was overwhelmed, scared and, at times, very difficult to be with. As I landed in the postnatal phase, depression and overwhelm took hold and I knew I needed tools to cope. I needed to change my relationship to my fears, my stress and my anxiety.

At that time I worked alone to find a way through, to change the way I felt, and the breath came to me, almost as gently as you now find me. Little by little I learned to work with, not against, my stress system – to stretch and, from there, to consciously breathe.

This led me to being able to calm myself, to stay relaxed and to be present. The rest is history – herstory. Both my children and our relational processes, informed by my ability to attune to myself and find calm, have benefited from my emotional growth.

Alongside and because of this life-changing awareness, I trained to be a psychotherapist and a yoga teacher, specialising in the pre- and postnatal phases. I have worked with the issues around making babies for almost three decades now.

As you read about and begin to practise the many concepts, tools and breaths in this book, perhaps you could allow me to be a friend who has their hand on your back. A mentor, walking beside you. Someone who is ‘on your side’.

I AM NOT A GURU

I cannot define your route through pregnancy and beyond. I wish to be, in a writerly way, someone who sees you, can speak to you and with you, and can help you to move through this time in your life with more ease than you had before you picked up this book. But I am not a guru. Not a doctor. Not a midwife. Not an obstetrician. Please remember that. I am your breath teacher.

In my experience of being a teacher, I have found that it can be easy for those I teach to assume I know far more than I do, that somehow the very lovely experiences we can have together will negate or replace medical advice, that you can give all responsibility to me. Yet medical intervention might be needed for some issues.

I have good boundaries; I know when medical advice needs to come to the fore. If I know there are edges to my usefulness, I will name them.

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

As a therapist I understand the link between mind and body, stressful thoughts and feelings, and how we are affected by and can affect others. How we think profoundly impacts how we feel. When you are upbeat, smiling, laughing, full of the joys of pregnancy, your physical body is in tune with this mindset. In daily life much can knock us out of this centred place and, when our mind and thoughts become constricted, repetitive or judgemental of ourselves or others, our body changes accordingly. This is why I have focused Part 1 of this book on understanding how the stress system works, how it is activated and how to release it. The knowledge I share in these specific chapters will assist you in learning how to use the power of the breath and stretching to find calm.

In Part 2, I bring you the stretches and the breaths. As a breathwork and yoga teacher, my learning has been deeply rooted in how the mind and body can be profoundly altered by conscious breathing and specific stretching movements, prior to breathwork, which bring their own benefits to the mind–body axis, and add depth to the effects of conscious breathing.

In Chapter 4 you will learn to stretch before breathing to make it easier for you to be calm and centred. I will encourage you to understand how to stretch to get the most from the breathing options, alongside helping you to be comfortable in the constantly changing form that is a pregnant body. I encourage you to use props to help you get confident with the movements you can do so that you can make the most of your commitment to a regular practice (see page 10).

You can stretch without breathing afterwards, just for the sheer pleasure of the release and equally, you can breathe consciously without stretching. What I can tell you, though, is that the two work together beautifully.

I have dedicated a whole chapter – Chapter 5 – to gifting you a variety of breaths to use in pregnancy and beyond. I have been teaching these techniques for 25 years at the time of writing, and I am in love with each of the breaths I have chosen to include for you. Each has its own personality, its own character, if you will, and they individually bring you to different states of being, surprisingly quickly.

In all the teaching I have done, I have noticed that it is really easy to limit a breath to a specific issue or desire, but this closes off so much potential. Just because you have tried one breath and found it useful for morning sickness, like ‘The Straw Breath’ (page 150), that does not mean you cannot also use it if you want to relax before bed or take some time when you are overwhelmed. The breaths all work for different people in different ways. My hope is that you will play with them, over time, in a variety of contexts. This way you will build agency for yourself, to know which breaths work best for you, when and where.

Part 3 explores each trimester individually, focusing on the challenges you may face and the individual breathwork and stretches that will support you in your journey.

It may be that you want to skip all the chapters leading up to the breathwork and, of course, you are free to do so, but in the decades of teaching these techniques I have become aware that understanding how the stress system works, and how the breath changes it, is extremely helpful. The pregnant body is a wonder of the first order, with myriad different changes taking place. I am a fan of understanding why you are taking on these practices in order to better facilitate the experience. This understanding has a positive impact on the experience of stretching and sitting to practise. Holding the knowledge I will share opens you up to all that is available to you. Of course, I suggest reading it all.

My writing style is gentle, and each chapter opens with some reflections, written as if I were in the midst of a moment with you. It may be a stressful or challenging moment that I will use to help illustrate what I want you to know, to understand how your mind, body and feelings are linked and to show you how much you can do to turn this to your and your baby's advantage by taking over your sensations of stress through these practices.

This is a deep intimacy, a generous space that we can drop into together. You may read a section and think, *That is not me, I cannot imagine you*, but I will do my best to create a scene, a feeling that you can perhaps identify with – so could you allow the details to be imperfect but in the right area? This will open up the different breaths for you to try in various states of being, as well as just for the sheer pleasure of conscious breathwork.

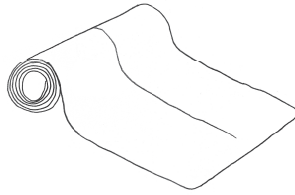
PROPS ARE YOUR FRIEND

You may have previously practised a form of yoga that eschewed any kind of assistance in terms of sitting, standing or stretching. If this is the case, I invite you now to explore a landscape of adjustments to facilitate your changing and, later, recovering body.

If you can purchase or borrow the few key items listed below, they will be an investment in this entire experience.

If you are discovering yourself – body and mind – through this book, please do take a look at everything that is described here. It may be that in early pregnancy your body is compliant to the stretches, needing little or no support from props, but over the months you'll find that your needs will change.

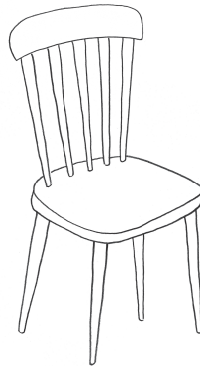
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A yoga mat

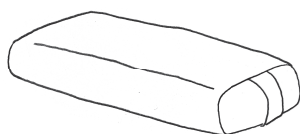
The ritualistic action of rolling out the mat will make your practice habitual. Each time you unfurl this mat, you are choosing to make and take time for yourself, to give yourself back to yourself. You can do this even if, through pregnancy, you place a chair on top of the mat rather than getting down on the floor. The yoga mat also provides non-slip support for stretches, standing or seated.

I would avoid using a foam mat. Even though they are cheaper by far than a high-quality yoga mat that could cost you £60–90, they are profoundly annoying because they dent and will not lie flat, are easily damaged and take up a lot more space in their stubborn unwieldiness. A foam mat robustly refuses to play nicely. You can use a towel instead of purchasing a mat, but please be aware that it will not provide a stable surface.



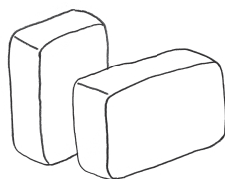
An upright chair with good stability

A kitchen or dining chair is a good option. Sit with your spine straight, tailbone untucked, rather than leaning back into the chair.



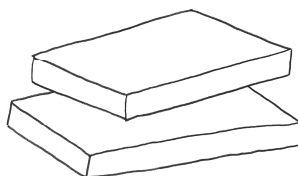
A bolster

A bolster is a wide, low, firm support, either for your pelvis, to raise the hips higher than the knees, or for tight hamstrings, to help the tension in the back of your legs when they are straight, either standing or sitting wide-legged. You can use a sofa cushion or a pillow instead. A large, folded blanket also works well.



Two brick-shaped blocks

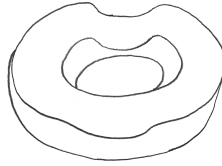
Blocks are good for propping up stiff knees, and if tight hamstrings make it uncomfortable to sit with your legs out straight, they can be used flat beneath each knee when sitting on the bolster. Postnatally, one block is comfortable under the head for post-stretch or breathwork relaxation. Make sure your blocks are cork (not foam or wood).



A flat, high-density foam block

This helps to give a small lift to the pelvis when seated and can assist in forward folds in standing postures, taking the pressure off the lower back and artificially raising the floor in front of you for your hands to rest upon. You can use a couple of large books instead.

INTRODUCTION



A donut pillow

If you have postnatal pain or discomfort in the labial area and/or anus, then this ring of cushioning will help you sit anywhere.



A yoga strap

This is a long, cotton webbing strap with a pinch buckle, which means it can be adjusted to hold itself in different lengths. It is most often used to facilitate stretching out. A cotton scarf is an easy replacement here.



A broom handle or similar pole

I know it sounds mad, but this can come in very handy for helping you get up from the floor, rather than heaving yourself up. In standing postures the pole gives balance.



A blanket or shawl

In the chill of the dawn light, when sitting to breathe, post-stretching, during breathwork or in relaxation, having a soft shawl around your shoulders or over your whole body is a lovely thing.

Two cushions or bed pillows

Cushions help with lying on your left side in relaxation during the last few weeks of gestation. Use one folded between the knees to ease the pelvis, and the other under the higher elbow to lift pressure off the breasts. Add a brick block or a thick book beneath your head to straighten the spine and this becomes a comfortable resting position. Pillows are also lovely under the head if you are relaxing with a bolster under your knees.

DO YOUR COMFORTABLE BEST

You can begin working with this book at any stage in your pregnancy journey. You can do the breathwork that is included for pregnancy at any time during gestation (the breaths only suitable post-birth are clearly labelled as such).

Later in the book we will look at taking on a daily practice. If you're new to breathwork, I would suggest that you begin by choosing a stretch or a breath and reading through the explanation a few times. Try it out for a couple of rounds and then get comfortable and set a timer for one minute. This is a good way to get started and feel more confident.

If you feel you are ready to try for longer, three minutes is a good practice time and allows you to become aware of how you respond to the transformations that conscious stretching and breathing practices bring to you. Take this on for three minutes per day, perhaps for a week to get familiar with it. Set aside enough time to get comfortable (choose some music if you would like) and to sit, in stillness, for a few minutes afterwards.

If something doesn't feel right – in the unlikely event that you feel lightheaded, for example – please slow down your practice and mention your experience to your midwife and/or doctor.

Be careful not to stand up too quickly after sitting for a long period of time; take it slowly and gently and if you have high blood pressure notice if this feels wrong or uncomfortable.

It is easy to think that you need to be perfect and that you must instantly master breathwork. This is not true. There will be interruptions, from other people, your own mind, the child inside kicking, a relentless need to pee. So many people, places and things can trip up your drive for perfection.

You are with me so I can teach you. Learning is a process; it takes time. There will be instant responses, awarenesses and changes in your mind and body – instant payoff! But as you become more familiar with the various practices in this book, they will begin to resonate differently. This unfolding never stops. It is a big part of the learning, particularly in how you will become more able to recognise the experiences of stillness, gentleness and peace.

What I ask is that you always do your comfortable best. You can facilitate this by limiting distractions where you can, like your phone. Of course, you may choose to use your phone as a timer, but if you do, put it on silent and turn it face down so you will not see it light up with notifications – these create an imperative to action, and we are stretching and breathing for stillness.

There are so many ways that the techniques in this book can help to create time, space and calm around and within you. Over the coming chapters, we will look at different emotions and situations that may arise in which you can choose to take a moment, stretch the tension out and take a breath break. When you do this you will facilitate seeing and feeling more clearly.

YOUR PREGNANT IDENTITY

Were you gifted this **Copyrighted Material** by your partner? Maybe you have had a breath practice for a while and wish to continue with

breaths appropriate to what you are going through now. Or perhaps the title called out to you from a bookshelf and here we are.

I want to welcome you on this journey by saying that, however you found yourself reaching for this book, please know that I am highly respectful of all the different iterations of fertility, pregnancy, birth and parenting.

My own experience of being pregnant was that I felt as though so much of my identity was lost, swept under my bump. My career, interests, desire to dance, thoughts, sense of humour, politics and needs sometimes felt as though they were lost in the expectations of others, alongside my swiftly changing body.

I would like to say, before we begin the journey through this book as companions, that I walk with *all* of you, not just the you in your pregnant identity. Your identity as a person is not lost.

When I work as a therapist, I go on adventures that are not dissimilar to the one we are about to begin, with an array of interesting, unique and individual humans. I get to know each person well – as well as they allow me to – and our dialogue becomes as unique as they are. The intimacy we create is important to the work, and so, in writing this book, I reflected enormously on how we could develop that intimacy between us, too.

You will notice that I address you as my companion. *You*.

You are an original. In that, you are complex. I aim to represent a rich tapestry made up of individual pregnant experiences, and so it is unlikely that I will get *you*, your feelings, thoughts, preferences and responses perfectly every time.

I cannot think, on any level, that I know you or your circumstances – whether you have a partner, previous children, stepkids or how you arrived at being pregnant. I know nothing, but I aim to be inclusive and encompassing in all the ways I know how to be.

If you are someone who does not sit within expected cultural, religious or gendered boundaries, I hope I understand. If I could write a book that reflected the richness of humanity, I would.