



Module 3

The Masculine and Feminine Dance of Birth






Based on his experience of men entering the birth room and his understanding of the evolutionary biological adaptations of birthing women, **Dr Michel Odent says that men should stay out of the way when women give birth.**

I get where he is coming from. One of the most important decisions you will ever make is whether you want to be in the birth room when she gives birth or not, though let's be honest: these days it's expected of you. However, lying to yourself and others when you are really feeling like you would prefer to be outside will backfire big time.

Given what we've said about the multi-level nature of communication, you can be sure that if you don't want to be there she will know, subconsciously or consciously. You can't hide fear, discomfort and anxiety, no matter how hard you try, and because she knows you so well, she can smell it.

If, in the midst of the birthing process, she senses your discomfort, it will inhibit the process of her losing herself in the flood of oxytocin if she will worry about your wellbeing. If she doesn't mother you already she will start doing it then, at a time when her baby needs all of her. What she needs from you when she is giving birth is not much different from what she wants on day-to-day basis: she wants a sense of connection, and this felt sense of connection stimulates a flood of oxytocin.



Being orgasmic is a fabulous source of oxytocin. (Pornography has a lot to answer for: women should get more orgasms than they do. It should not surprise us that a masculine- influenced birthing system is goal-orientated, as when it comes to sex most men think that way too.) If she is lucky enough to climax when you have sex, great, but don't suggest sex when she is feeling stressed. She is likely to hurt you! What she needs is a reservoir of oxytocin to even feel like getting it on with you in the first place. You doing the washing up, putting out the rubbish and listening to her without trying to 'fix' the problem she is sharing creates an environment in which her oxytocin levels can rise.

As we have already said, female orgasm and birth can be viewed as one event separated by time.

When she is birthing she wants you there, doing only the things that will enhance the felt sense of connection between you. She is your lover, you are the man she has chosen over others to spend her life with, and to start or grow a family with. During birth the sense of connection she has with you, along with the process of birth itself, will cause her oxytocin levels to soar.

As men we should constantly be asking **'Will what I am saying or doing have an impact on her oxytocin levels? Will my actions and words create a connection?'**

Don't get me wrong, you're not responsible for her biochemistry. Every man and woman in the world has the same set of hormones, but how these interact and work in men and women is different. I'm not wanting to stereotype, but it's worth noting that the stereotypes originated as a result of this gender-specific hormonal balance resulting in certain types of behaviour.

‘Present at birth’ - ‘Participating in the birth’

Dr Odent acknowledges that in his experience men went from being **‘present at birth, to participating in the birth’**.

He suggests that early in his experience of men being present in the birth room births seemed to go well, and he explains why he thinks women started to want their partners to be present. He outlines key changes in how birth became industrialised, and centred in big maternity hospitals, at the same time as a sociological downsizing of the extended family occurred.

Birth moved from being **a family-centered activity** that happened at home, to being **an impersonal process**, measured by men, that was managed in a large factory (hospital).

Of course women wanted someone in the room that they felt close to, and to start with having the father present worked: his presence was what she needed as a kind of antidote to the birth machinery around her.

But then something changed: men began to get involved in the nitty-gritty of the birth process.

The Masculine Dance of Birth

Men, like their largely male obstetrician brothers, began to think of pregnancy and birth as a **problem needing a fix**.

They started to lose themselves in obstetric detail, and being men they could empathise with the medical model on show. This **objectification of childbirth** put up a wall between men and women and their important connection was lost.

His knowledge of what could go wrong (which is emphasized in a medical model) led to fear-induced activity. This does not foster deep connection, because she senses the fear. Some neurophysiologists claim that because a woman has more connections between the two hemispheres of the brain (corpus callosum), this leads to her being able to process many more subjects at once, while a man, with his limited connection points, seeks to focus on one issue in order to settle his sense of overload. This physical phenomenon may be an explanation for the idea that men can't multi-task and women can, as has long been believed in popular culture.

The Masculine Dance of Birth

As a woman watches and listens to how her lover is responding as the dance of the birthing process begins to unfold, consciously and unconsciously, if she has a man in the room that needs her, her deeply embedded maternal instincts are evoked in his interest.

She is shaken out of the deep trance needed for oxytocin release, and, as Odent reports, the birthing process is slowed.

However, Dr Odent has observed that often, when the man leaves the room for some reason, the woman promptly finds her primeval self again and the birthing process proceeds very quickly to the birth of the baby.

As men we can be forgiven for making this mistake. But we need to recognise how birth has, to some extent, been hijacked by men. **The 'system' of birth has been designed by men.** We recognise, and are reassured by, the pattern of problem solving. It's deeply unconscious and written into our genetic coding. It's no wonder we are afraid of birth: people we respect, and masculine-orientated information that we trust, have been telling us it's dangerous for years. We can be forgiven for not knowing better until now.

But now we know what it takes to truly support her, we have no excuse for not acknowledging our responsibilities as lover and father-to-be.

Why Doulas Matter

What if she needs or wants support from another woman? What if you need help to support your lover? A doula might be the answer.

In her book *Why Doulas Matter* (Pinter and Martin, 2015) Maddie McMahon explains how Dads and doulas can be a 'dream team':

When I work with a couple, I try hard to get across the message that, in fact, the partner has a crucial part to play. His feelings about his role, and what she wants and needs from him, are important to share. If they are a loving couple, the oxytocin they can produce together, as they gaze into each other's eyes, kiss, cuddle and touch, is more powerful than any artificial hormone drip. He can be home, safety, privacy, labour progression, lover, advocate and protector all rolled into one. But he doesn't have to always be by her side to give her exactly what she needs. ...For a woman, having her significant other there with her on this amazing day can be incredible. The love and connection that put the baby in there, can really help to get the baby out. But equally, I've known fathers who do not wish to be there, or at least not in an active role. I've met women who love their partner dearly, but laugh at the idea of having him present, or know that it will be beyond his capabilities to support her in the way she needs. There is no judgement in that knowledge; why should there be? You may encounter people who have strong opinions about men in the birthing room. I think it's time we moved away from old-fashioned notions of gender. Instead we should ask, **'Will this person bring oxytocin or adrenaline into the room?' and 'What do the parents want?'**

During my years of doulaing I've met many fathers. Sometimes it's the father who makes the initial call. The myth that doulas are only there for the mother and can even have a negative effect on the ability of the father to support his partner persists. But it isn't what I see.

Take the father who remembered trying to support his wife first time round in the hospital. He had no idea how best to comfort and support her, and they had been left alone for long periods of time in the busy delivery unit. No one offered him drinks or snacks and he didn't feel he could leave his wife. Frankly, he'd been terrified and, after a long labour and birth, was faint with hunger and dehydration. This time, he wanted a help-mate and companion. I tended to them both when she went into labour. I fed and watered them, fetched and carried, made the tea, showed him how to massage her back, to dance with her during the contractions, to love and care for her through each surge until the baby made his entrance.

Why Doula Matter

...Of course, it's often the woman who wants the doula. It's not uncommon for the father to not really understand why. Usually they just want their partner to be happy and comfortable, so will happily welcome the doula into the birth space. It's my job to make sure his fears and anxieties are addressed and that he feels supported too.

It can sometimes be a challenge for a father to understand his wife's preferences and choices. Why would she dream of a normal birth after the frightening labour and emergency c-section last time? Why would she risk planning to stay at home to have the baby? Why does she want to invite this strange woman to share our private journey? Isn't formula-feeding a simpler, more controlled and measurable way to feed the baby, that will enable him to help her?

Inviting a doula to participate in these discussions can help facilitate effective communication, and allow mutual understanding to grow and concerns to be put into context. A doula may provide the father with evidence-based reading material, or suggest a health professional to talk to so that he understands the risks and benefits of his partner's choices.

The result is a **birth 'dream team'** – two sets of hands to support her, two loving companions to hold her birth space and have faith in her ability to birth this baby beautifully.

If you've read this and think a doula might be for you, talk to your partner about it. You can find out about hiring a doula on the Doula UK website (details at the end of the book). Cost isn't necessarily a barrier – if you're strapped for cash there are schemes that aim to make doula support accessible to everyone.

What it takes to truly support her

How do you prepare to give this kind of presence to her as she gives birth?

The same way you keep your relationship with her rocking and rolling on a day-to-day basis. If you are not having sex very often and self-pleasuring is losing its appeal, stimulating her oxytocin levels will be the biggest gift you can give yourself and her.

Take every opportunity to cement your loving connection with her. Remember that she is living in a world that is testosterone-saturated. **Testosterone is an antagonist to oxytocin and increases her stress.** After a day at work, the activities that would ordinarily boost her oxytocin levels, like cooking, eating and keeping her home environment how she likes it, become just more 'things to do'.

It needs to be said again at this point that gender stereotypes are nonsense, but an understanding of the way our endocrine (hormonal) system runs the show can lead to enlightened behaviour in both men and women. Equality is not at issue here. After 70 million years of evolutionary development, you can bet that biochemical forces are shaping our actions at an instinctive level.

Because of our neocortex we imagine ourselves to be superior animals, so we tell ourselves stories about our behaviour and the reasons behind it, when the truth is that it is largely down to involuntary processes.

‘Masculine presence’ → a sense of safety and connection

Back to our goal: for her to experience our ‘masculine presence’ and a felt sense of safety and connection.

This will enable the ‘feminine’ to express herself with abandon, to surrender to the pulsations of life as the baby is born. The unfolding narrative will be unhindered by fear.

Today **male partners are present at 95% of all births**. What men need is an understanding of how they can use their masculine presence in such a way that the women they love do not feel observed. Masculine presence can act like a ‘cloak’, covering her so that the freedom of darkness can be unleashed.

Masculine and feminine ‘energy’ are not only physical body issues; they are rooted in a physiological, endocrine system-driven hormonal dance that profoundly influences our human relationships.

Being able as men to create an environment where she feels safe and connected to others – and us – relies in part on the physical environment, but our focussed attention on her, which encourages oxytocin, is even more important.



The behaviours that have been characterized as ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ operate as a directional force, influencing how life is being experienced from moment to moment. We see life through our neuro-physiological filters.

There are obvious differences in how these hormonal forces express themselves. Dr John Grey popularised this understanding in his book *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*. He has since updated his work in *When Mars and Venus Collide*, adding this foundational physiological understanding of our endocrine systems.

Men and women respond very differently to stress, and this is borne out by current research.

When a woman gets stressed she produces higher levels of testosterone, which stops our old friend oxytocin from doing its work, not just during birth, but in all aspects of life.