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The Role of the Shy Hormone in Breastfeeding by Michel Odent

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There is no breastfeeding without oxytocin, since the milk ejection reflex is dependent on the release of this hormone. The mechanical effects of oxytocin have been well known for a long time, not only for inducing contractions of specialized breast cells during the milk ejection reflex, but also for inducing uterine contractions during childbirth and orgasm, and for inducing contractions of the prostate and seminal vesicles in the sperm ejection reflex. The behavioral effects of oxytocin are also well understood; it is commonplace today to summarize these effects by using the term "love hormone."



[photo by Michele Anderson, www.pinkletoes.com]

We have still a lot to learn about oxytocin release. However, we have a sufficient amount of physiological and observational data to conclude that the release of oxytocin is highly dependent on environmental factors. The best way to summarize what we already know is to claim that oxytocin is the "shy hormone": it behaves like a shy person who does not appear among strangers or observers.

This is the kind of knowledge that is not easily digested where breastfeeding is concerned. I have heard many stories of mothers who required guidance to overcome breastfeeding difficulties. The advice they received almost always focused on the position of the baby when latching on. Common recommendations would be different if it were better understood that many difficulties in breastfeeding are related to the release of the shy hormone. Instead of being guided to find the right postures, the mother might be first advised to stay with only her baby in a small dark room with the door closed and the guarantee that nobody will enter. It is well demonstrated that the shy hormone does not appear in situations associated with a release of adrenaline. This implies that the room must be warm enough to make comfortable skin-to-skin contact between mother and baby possible. I know from experience that such simple suggestions can help break a vicious circle during a critical phase of lactation.

An analogy to breastfeeding is possible with childbirth. In the framework of natural childbirth, I have often heard stories of very long and difficult labors. A common comment was "We tried everything," when the meaning of this comment was, "We tried a great diversity of postures, nipple stimulation, massage, acupuncture, a birthing pool, etc." It is not common to hear that the baby's father, grandmother, and second midwife, for example, had been sent away so that finally the laboring woman was left alone, save for an experienced, silent and low profile midwife.

Interestingly, the role of the shy hormone is understood during sexual intercourse, another event highly dependent on oxytocin release. Anthropologists have noticed that in all cultures, including those where genital sexuality is uninhibited, couples usually isolate themselves to make love, as if they knew about the shy hormone.

These considerations are of paramount importance at a time when the difficulties of breastfeeding are increasing all over the world. There are probably many reasons for such common difficulties. Some of them are explained by the strong connections between birth physiology and lactation physiology. In the age of synthetic oxytocin and simplified cesarean techniques, a great proportion of women do not rely on their natural hormones to give birth. In this context one cannot expect good breastfeeding statistics. The only way to break vicious circles before it is too late is to improve our understanding of oxytocin release.

Michel Odent, MD, has been influencing the history of childbirth and health research for several decades. As a practitioner he developed the maternity unit at Pithiviers Hospital in France (1962–1985). With six midwives, he was in charge of about one thousand births a year and achieved excellent statistics with low rates of intervention. Odent is familiarly known as the obstetrician who



introduced the concept of birthing pools and home-like birthing rooms. He later founded the Primal Health Research Center in England.

His approach has been featured in eminent medical journals such as *The Lancet* and in TV documentaries such as the BBC film *Birth Reborn*. After his hospital career he practiced homebirths.

Odent is a contributing editor to *Midwifery Today* magazine.

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