

All About Doulas

by Sandy White

Doula is a Greek word referring to a woman in the service of another. Today it refers to a female birth assistant who provides physical and emotional support during labor, without medical assessments of fetal or maternal well-being.

Childbirth can be a positive and rewarding experience for a woman or it can be a negative experience which makes a woman feel out of control and even victimized.

A doula who is allowed to care for the woman in labor according to her training and instincts, can make the difference between feelings of joy and fulfillment or feelings of fear, lack of control, and disappointment.

What is a doula?

- * A doula understands and believes in the birth process and a woman's ability to birth.
- * A doula helps a woman work through and with the pain of labor.
- * A doula stays with the laboring woman and her partner without making technology the focus of the birth.
- * Being a doula is not a profession for someone who wants to be in charge or manage birth. Rather she is there to serve women and their families and to help them find their own individual ways to give birth.
- * Doulas are often mothers themselves and thus are able to provide a laboring woman with the vital, emotional support of someone who knows what labor feels like. The doula can often offer needed support even before the woman asks for it.

What if the woman has her partner with her as a "coach"?

- Many partners want to take an active role in childbirth education and in the labor and birth process, but most do not feel qualified to act as a labor authority.
- Partners, too, need the support, guidance, and relief that a doula can bring to labor, especially to long labors. The doula's trust in the birth process and objectivity gained from her experience help keep both parents calm and balanced during this emotional time.
- A doula needs to be sensitive to the couple's relationship throughout labor. When they are working well together, the doula can step back and be unobtrusive. When needed, she can help involve the partner, thus complementing and strengthening his/her role as the coach and allowing them to participate at their own comfort level.
- The doula's knowledge and acceptance of pain as a normal part of the process can help some partners cope while seeing their loved one in pain.
- Every laboring woman needs a nurturing, experienced person who can provide continuous reassurance and practical suggestions. A doula can fill this role as a model for the partner.
- Partners often have a feeling of relief when there is also continuous support provided by a doula. This allows them to be much more relaxed, loving, and emotionally available than when they feel totally responsible for providing all of the labor support.

What about training?

- Some doulas are mothers who because of their own birth experiences may feel motivated to help other women have a positive birth. Some are also childbirth educators.
- Some doulas may be nurses who want to focus more on the physical, spiritual, and emotional comfort of women in labor than on the medical, legal, and political issues that their role as a hospital nurse often dictates.
- Doula training emphasizes quiet reassurance and enhancement of the laboring woman's natural abilities.
- Training may include observing a series of childbirth education classes, educational seminars, birth observations with trained doulas, on-the-job training, written reports, and a paper on the individual's philosophy of supporting women in labor.
- The practical training involves a lot of the hands-on skills of labor support and is all nonmedical in nature.
- Doulas receive training to be an advocate for laboring couples and to provide them with information on options so they can make informed choices.
- Doulas must know or learn communication skills, how to convey empathy, and how to provide comfort through touch, words, and actions.

The doula communicates with laboring women at a feeling level; she breathes, feels, and tends to the emotions and the physical comfort of the woman. The nurse, out of necessity, often communicates at a more intellectual level. She is responsible for medical outcomes and must monitor for possible risks and be familiar with the techniques available for complicated births. Both roles are important and can complement each other. Even though she doesn't perform any clinical assessments on the mother or baby, the doula can be of help to the nurses, doctors, and midwives.

Does Labor Support really make a difference?

Klaus, Kennell, and Klaus (1993) reported many benefits of having labor support:

- Results of six different studies were calculated together to show that the presence of a doula reduces the overall cesarean rate by 50%, the length of labor by 25%, oxytocin use by 40%, and requests for epidurals by 60%.
- The use of doulas also showed a major reduction in the length of labor due to fewer stress hormones being produced in the laboring woman's body and more upright, out-of-bed positions being used.
- Studies showed that mothers who have had the continuous emotional support of a doula showed more affectionate interaction with their baby with more smiling, talking, and stroking than the mothers without doulas. These same studies also showed that this initial contact made mothers less willing to be away from their baby.
- The cycle of nurturing and empowerment that occurs through the process of labor support makes a woman feel better about herself. Mothers who feel better about themselves and are less anxious create a more positive environment for their baby.

With training and experience, the doula often develops an intuitive sense of how and when to mother and nurture the laboring woman. In some situations, if a woman has had inadequate or inappropriate mothering herself, the nurturing provided by her doula during labor and birth may provide an opportunity to re-mother the mother and bring a type of healing to her earlier experience. The doula's nurturing may somehow be internalized by both new parents and become a model as they care for their own baby. Facilitating family bonding in the newborn period may be one of the most valuable services a doula can

provide for individuals, as well as society in general. Though birth can be a difficult experience, often testing one's strength, patience, and determination, it is infinitely easier to do with an experienced doula offering continuous support and guidance.

What do doulas do?

- Doulas help and encourage each mom to deal with labor the best she can. They take time to assess how each woman is working with her labor, then build on her success.
- The doula wants to help each woman call on her inner strength to cope with labor. She demonstrates her confidence, through her words, touch, and expressions, that the mother can deal with labor and birth.
- Doulas encourage, praise, and reassure the mother. When labor is intense, the mother may need constant reminders that she is experiencing the normal sensations of labor, not something to fear.
- The doula reminds the laboring woman that she is coping well, to work on one contraction at a time, and use the break between contractions for a rest.
- The doula helps the mom stay focused on the present, not how long it's been or how much longer it will be. She helps the laboring woman to deal with just the pain of the moment. The pain is rarely so intense at any given moment that it can't be accepted.
- The doula may create a visual image for the mother to focus on. She may describe briefly what's happening with the woman's contractions. She may tell the laboring woman that lower backache may be a good sign as the baby's head moves down lower into the pelvis. She may compare the cervix to a turtleneck and have the mom imagine her baby's head slipping through the turtleneck.
- The doula can remind the mother that labor pain is pain with a purpose and that it's normal for labor.
- If the laboring woman feels lost or overwhelmed during a difficult contraction, the doula can help her focus with eye contact, an anchoring touch, and reassurance. She may use massage and stroking to encourage the mom to release any tension between contractions.
- As labor progresses, the doula keeps communication simple and direct and watches for nonverbal cues from the mother. She knows not to be offended if the laboring woman is less than polite as labor becomes more intense.
- It is essential for labor support people to acknowledge when pain exists. The doula will acknowledge and accept a woman's feelings if she shows or tells her that she is hurting. She can remind the mom that "it is pain with a purpose and your uterus is working very hard."
- The doula needs to give the laboring couple her undivided attention. She can minimize distractions and help them both to focus on the process. Emotional support can take the place of drugs for the laboring woman.
- The experienced doula stays calm and relaxed, focusing on the couple's needs, not her own. She maintains a positive attitude and models supportive behavior for the partner to use at his comfort level.
- The doula knows the importance of being diplomatic with other hospital staff members. She knows that her role does not involve giving medical advice or interfering with the staff's care of the mother in any way. She encourages the couple to communicate their needs to the staff when appropriate.

- The doula may take pictures of the birth and initial bonding so that both partners can participate fully with their newborn. She may also help the mother with the initial breastfeeding experience and help the new family settle in.
- A doula needs to be flexible and to be able to adjust her support to each couple's needs.

References

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