

Introduction to Doulas and Doula Support

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The Professional Doula's Role:

Provide emotional support, physical support, and informational support during labor to a woman and her intimate family. This may extend throughout the perinatal period. The doula's role is to empower a mother to speak for herself about what she desires not to speak for her. Doulas facilitate a partner's or father's involvement by making suggestions when needed and taking care of housekeeping tasks. Doulas work to become experts to enhance dilation and descent, and to reduce a mother's pain and discomfort.

What motivates a woman to become a professional doula?

Research shows:

- Birth memories last a lifetime and don't diminish over time
- Birth experiences positively or negatively influence parenting and perinatal mood disorders.
- Involvement in decision making (not the outcomes or the particular issue) leads to a significant increase in birth satisfaction.

In addition, doulas often feel that there is no substitute for one-on-one personally focused care during labor and the immediate postpartum period, and that no one else is available to provide it.

Core beliefs espoused by DONA International, CAPPA, and ICEA (the main certifying organizations):

- Belief in the mother's ability to birth her own baby
- Belief in the mother as the best decision maker for herself and her baby
- Best advocacy is when the mother and her partner are empowered to speak up for what they want. The doula's role is to remind them they can ask questions and explore alternatives.

A "Good Doula":

- Is accepting and empowering of the mother at all times.
- Makes the nurse's job easier by working alongside her and doing housekeeping tasks whenever possible.
- Helps the nurse to get to know the patient
- Knows that her own ideas and values about birth don't matter. It's not her birth, it's the mother's birth.
- Facilitates communication between the mother, father/partner, and medical staff/caregivers.

What are doulas paid?

Volunteer doulas may get up to \$200 (grant funding) for four weeks of being on call and attending the birth. New doulas may charge only their costs or up to \$200. Expert doulas in Madison, WI charge \$600 - \$1050 for three prenatal visits; two postpartum visits, being on call and continuous labor support during the birth. Doulas in metropolitan areas may charge double that amount. Each visit usually lasts 90 minutes to two hours. A full practice is usually 4-5 clients a month for 10 months out of the year. It can take several years to build up a full practice.

Why do people hire doulas?

- The doula is a predictable presence when the doctor or midwife, nurse, and the kind of labor she'll have is unpredictable.

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- To support the father or partner in their chosen role as “coach, teammate or witness”.
- To help them ensure they have the information they need to make health care decisions.
- To help the mother have an unmedicated birth.
- To help the mother or couple overcome their fear of hospitals.
- When they have a medical model oriented physician but have a woman centered philosophy themselves, people hire doulas to help them get what they consider to be a more desirable birth.

Conflicts in Doula Care:

Anyone can call herself a doula, even if all she did was read a magazine article. In addition, almost every doula community has had an experience with a ‘rogue’ doula who has an agenda, has spoken for mothers, interfered with nursing care and got between careproviders and patients. Unfortunately, negative stories about untrained and rogue doulas are the ones that are remembered by staff.

Beginner doulas make beginner mistakes. Some of the more common ones are being loud, focusing on her own needs, and asking a lot of questions. Sometimes an eager doula may make a suggestion that isn’t appropriate or that ought to be checked with the nurse first. (Ex: suggesting a mother get into the tub without seeing if a VE is needed or resident is coming to discuss a procedure.) Once doulas get past the initial four or six births, few stick with doula work. So nurses may tend to see more beginners rather than experienced doulas.

Patients may have a philosophy that is more compatible with a home or birth center birth, yet their insurance stipulates they see a physician who has a more interventionist philosophy. Rather than paying out of pocket for a different careprovider and location, they hire a doula. Their expectation is that the doula will be able to influence the atmosphere and staff to help them get the kind of birth they want. Usually this means not following usual hospital procedures and interventions, which is unrealistic.

Working with Doulas:

1. Introduce yourself and ask her name. Have an inner attitude that you are both on the same team.
2. Feel free to ask if she has taken a training workshop and from whom. This may be confusing as there are many small training organizations. But a quick Google query if she has taken a training will net you some background on what she has been taught. Alternately, you might want to ask, “How did you two meet?” or “How do you know each other?” This may reveal whether the relationship is a professional one or based on friendship.
3. Asking, “Is there anything that would be helpful for you to know right now to enhance your care?” can also help to reveal the nature of their relationship. A professional doula may ask about shift rotations, locations of towels, etc. This also communicates that you are open to working *with* her.
4. If she hasn’t taken a training at all, it’s fair to ask how she sees her role and what you can expect. Friends may like to doula for their friends. However, they may not realize how their actions may undermine the relationships that *professional doulas* have worked to build in their communities.