

The Value and Purpose of Labour Support – By Danielle Kavonic



“If a doula were a drug, it would be unethical not to use it.”

-John H. Kennell, MD. Marshall Klaus MD

For centuries, women have always given birth with other women in attendance. Mention of midwives goes as far back as the bible. When Pharaoh decreed to have all the Jewish male babies put to death, he ordered the Jewish midwives, to kill the male babies when they delivered them. The Midwives told Pharaoh that the Hebrew women are “vigorous” and give birth before the midwives even arrive, sometimes giving birth to six babies at a time.

This story is not only about the miraculous birth of Moses and eventual exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt, it is a testament to the woman’s natural ability to give birth with as little intervention as possible. Women are often the best birth attendants because they understand and are comfortable with the process of birth. When women are supported and feel safe due to the presence of someone like a doula during labour and birth, they tend to have fewer medical interventions, the need for use of synthetic hormones is reduced, fewer C-sections, shorter labours and fewer cases of epidurals.

Labour support can be provided by a number of people. The woman’s partner, a family member, a close friend or midwife. However, there are often limitations having these people as sole labour support. Birth is the only time a loved one (partner, family member, friend etc) is expected to provide a significant role where they are not experts in the field. We don’t offer family support when having to have an appendix taken out! Fathers are also not as in tune with the labour and birth process as having gone through it yourself brings a whole new dimension to giving good labour support. Whilst female family members or friends may have gone through labour and birth themselves, they lack the ability to be completely objective because it is very difficult to watch your loved one be in pain. They also may not be able to answer all the mother’s questions she may have, and being in this position can cause more stress to be brought into the labour room which is what we want to avoid.

There are some private midwives who are able to give continuous labour support, but this is generally not the norm. More often than not, medical care givers are not able to be present the entire labour. While they may have all the medical answers and best techniques to help a labouring woman, if that support is not constant, it can adversely affect the labouring woman. As Klaus, Kennel and Klaus

mention in The Doula Book, if the mother's support person leaves for even 5 minutes, she can take up to 30 minutes to get back into the zone of labour.

Pam England says it very matter of factly in her book *Birthing from Within*, naming chapter 37, "Don't Give Birth Without a Doula". Doula is a Greek word which means "woman who serves". It describes a woman knowledgeable in childbirth who provides a continuous emotional and physical support to the mother and her partner before, during and after childbirth.

A doula provides the best of all worlds. She centres herself before joining the labouring mother, leaving any personal issues or preconceptions at the door, allowing herself to hold space for the couple completely without judgement. She is experienced and knowledgeable when it comes to the anatomy of the woman's body when it comes to pregnancy, labour, birth and post-partum. She has a vested interest in the labouring woman but is able to remain objective which allows her judgment to remain unclouded. The care she provides is continuous. She has no other commitments to the hospital/birth center, no other distractions that will take her away from the labouring woman. She is there solely for the well being of the birthing mother.

The doula is also able to be sensitive to the needs of the family, knowing when more privacy for the mother is needed, or how much or how little physical touch to give her. The doula is also a great relief for the woman's partner as he is then able to take on his role in providing his love and support without the added stress of not being able to fulfil all her other needs. Having a doula can greatly reduce the amount of stress in the room which enables oxytocin to flow more freely and as described earlier, greatly reduces the need for synthetic hormones. The doula also does not take it personally if the labouring woman gets upset with her where the woman's partner may feel hurt or inadequate if his wife is being short with him or appears frustrated. Here the doula can also provide great support to the partner by encouraging him in different ways so he can still be a part of the birthing process and encouraging the woman to feel her partner's love and concern.

A doula is often familiar with the hospital environment and staff working therein. She serves as the voice for the couple and can verbalise items outlined on the mother's birth plan to medical caregivers to ensure their desires for the outcome of the birth are kept to, and that the mother is not pushed into unnecessary interventions. On the other side, the doula can recognise when these interventions are necessary, and she can reassure the mother that she has not failed in her childbirth journey should things not play out how the mother was hoping. It can be very upsetting and traumatic for a mother who had high hopes for a completely medication free waterbirth, to land up with an emergency c-section. The doula helps the mother reframe her experience by telling her client how strong she was and reminding her that any interventions were not her fault.

Mothers also need help and guidance post-partum. Often everyone's main focus is on the labour and birth, and the new parents are left to fend for themselves once they have their baby. Doulas are also available to provide post-partum assistance, such a help with breastfeeding, encouraging good bonding habits and can answer lots of technical questions such as concerned mothers wondering how many wet nappies their baby should be making in a day, or asking how they should take care of their baby's umbilical stump etc. Knowing that the doula's support does not end abruptly once the baby is born is a great reassurance to parents and knowing that they have that extra bit of support is invaluable.

The positive effects of having labour support continues well after birth. Women experience less post-partum pain. They are often better bonded with their babies and have fewer breastfeeding issues. It has also been shown that the infants themselves are generally in better health and there are fewer cases of depression, anxiety and low self esteem in the mother. The mother is more likely to be able to take better care of her baby if she herself has been taken care of.

There are reams of research that have been done that show the benefits of having a doula at one's birth, whether it is a completely normal birth with no interventions or a pain medicated birth, or even a cesarean and the statistics are overwhelming in favour of having one present. There were studies done where just having a doula in the birthing room but not speaking to the mother, nor providing any hands on support, still reduced the number of births that needed interventions. Just knowing that the doula is in the room with her quiet presence can positively affect the outcome of a woman's birth.

To quote a poem I read on the Living FULL Facebook page:

Hold the mother, not the baby.

...So it's the mother who needs your love.

And a mother will remember who held her up.

...Because a mother needs to be held more.