

5 Doula Myths Debunked Doula Care

June 2008 by Jessica English, BD, CCE

As doulas become more common on birth teams around the world, I get fewer blank stares when I tell people what I do. Most people have at least a nominal sense of what a doula does, even if the lines are a bit fuzzy for them.

Over the years, however, I've noticed some common misconceptions about doulas and their role in birth. Since I hear these myths again and again, allow me to debunk a few for you.

Myth #1: A doula would interfere with the bond between me and my husband or partner in labor.

Your partner in life makes an ideal birth partner. He (or she) knows you best, and that bond can't be replaced by a doula—or anyone else—in labor. Doulas don't come into a birth and take over.

A good doula actually facilitates involvement. We can remind your partner about what you learned in class. Hips hurting? Here, I know a great technique for that. Dad, try this. We can also complement a partner's strengths. I've been to births where the dad fell into a really natural role as mom's physical support, and I offered more verbal reassurance. Even with great prep beforehand, he just might not know what to say.

Because we've studied and often seen a lot of births, doulas can be invaluable in unexpected situations. Has labor slowed down? Dad might not think about nipple stimulation, stair climbing, acupressure, visualization or thumb sucking (yes, thumb sucking). We also carry a great bag of tricks. My own doula bag includes goodies like tennis balls for counterpressure, peppermint oil to combat nausea, a gardening knee pad for kneeling dads, and mouthwash to refresh anyone on the birth team when mom's senses are incredibly heightened.

Doulas make sure dads take care of themselves too, with comfort measures and breaks during a long birth. Even the most amazing birth partner needs to eat and pee every once in awhile! We can reassure him when things are going normally, and help interpret and demystify hospital protocol. We're his doula too.

And finally, if the two of you are working beautifully together, we're skilled at backing off and letting that happen. I don't feel lost in moments of just observing. There's still real value in simply honoring and protecting a couple's birth space.

Myth #2: If I have a midwife, I don't need a doula.

Most of my clients birth with midwives. While it's true that doulas and midwives do share some common skills and goals, their roles are actually quite different.

A doula is your sounding board from the minute you hire her. Unlike your midwife, you can call her at home or e-mail her any time you need to chat. She'll help you process your hopes and fears about the pregnancy and birth, answer questions and connect you with resources. If you just need to talk every day for a week, she'll be there. You never have to wait for your next scheduled visit.

And unless you're having a home birth, even the best midwife won't meet you in your living room and support you through early labor. Doulas often connect with their clients at home, laboring with them there and helping them with the transition to the hospital or birth center. After arriving at

your birth place, a midwife can't guarantee you'll be her only patient in labor. Your doula is there for you, and only you.

Midwives offer birth knowledge and suggestions for coping with labor, as do doulas. However, a midwife's final responsibility rests with the health of mom and baby. At a certain point in almost every birth (and sometimes at many points), a midwife must turn her attention from support to the medical aspects of birth. She watches for complications, advises on interventions or approaches, and serves as medical guardian.

A doula doesn't perform any clinical tasks and stays focused solely on support. We nurture you in the calm and beautiful spells, but also if there are any frantic, scary moments. "You're doing such an amazing job, this is normal." "I trust your decision making process." "Stay strong, you're almost there." "Listen to your body." "Don't be scared, we're here with you."

Myth #3: My doula will protect me against the hospital staff.

Not even the best doula can "save" a couple from an interventionist doctor, midwife or hospital. It is up to you to advocate for yourselves, and make your wishes known to the staff.

First of all, a doula can be kicked out of a birthing room very quickly if she steps on any toes. Second, we might have to work with these same people again next week or next month—to serve our clients well, it's best not to have an antagonistic relationship.

That's not to say that a doula can't play a more subtle advocacy role. The first thing we might do is to help you figure out if the practice you're with is a good match for your birth goals, and if not, help identify another provider who might be more complementary. We'll also encourage you to talk with your provider about all your hopes and expectations beforehand, so there's less chance of any surprise at the actual birth.

And during the actual birth, we can remind you of your birth plan, share what we know about options, suggest questions, and help you sort through your feelings and priorities. I've also given couples a gentle "heads up" when I've seen a medical intervention about to be performed without their consent. And when the pressure is on to make a medical decision, assuming it's not an emergency, a doula can suggest some time alone to think and talk. Just removing the pressure of someone standing over you waiting for an answer can help a couple think through their options and priorities with clearer heads.

Myth #4: I can't afford a doula.

We spend incredible amounts of money on preparing for a baby in this country. Dare I say it, many of those dollars go toward unnecessary accoutrements. Pretty much, for a newborn, you need diapers, some clothes and a place to sleep. A sling is handy. That's it. Your baby will never miss that fancy diaper stacker, sticker-shock crib or those adorable matching baskets. By comparison, women process their births for their entire lives. And unnecessary interventions can have long-lasting emotional and physical effects for mom and baby. We get one chance to birth our babies. So for some couples, affording a doula is merely a matter of shifting priorities.

In almost every community, if you truly want birth support, there is a doula in your price range. Doula work is demanding, and professionals are generally underpaid. Still, many are willing to adjust their fees on a sliding scale for low-income mothers. Bartering and payment plans are also common. If the doula you first approach doesn't do pro bono work or has reached her limit, she can usually help connect you with a new doula who will work at a very low cost as she gains experience. Call doula certifying organizations like DONA International (www.dona.org) for a list

of doulas working toward certification, or visit BellyWomen.net for connections to free or low-cost doulas.

Myth #5: All doulas wear patchouli and long skirts, and they only like natural birth.

This one's easy to debunk, since I'm living proof. Patchouli gives me a headache, and I can't remember the last time I wore a skirt. There are certainly doulas who fit into this more "granola" stereotype. There are also doulas who look a lot like your grandma or your banker, and those of us more of the sensible shoes, soccer mom set.

As for going natural, you can find doulas who themselves had medicated births or cesareans. Many doulas feel comfortable supporting any couple, no matter what kind of birth they're hoping for.

Others, and I include myself in this sect, have a true love for natural birth but also a strong sense of compassion for women faced with challenging situations or true medical complications. We're not in your body, and we can't completely know what the labor experience is like for you. Medications and interventions, while vastly overused, certainly have their place. The core of a doula's role is support—support for your decision making process, and your innate wisdom about the best path for your birth. I've witnessed some truly beautiful births that included Pitocin, narcotics, epidurals or even cesareans.

A good doula nurtures and supports you on your birth journey, wherever it leads you. One of my clients told me after her VBAC that during her birth she felt surrounded in love. That's much more important to me than whether someone experiences my idealized version of a "perfect birth." If every family I work with feels surrounded in love, I've done my job.

Jessica English is a doula, natural childbirth instructor and the owner of Birth Kalamazoo. Her two boys were both born naturally into their daddy's hands, one in the hospital and one at home. She had doula support for both journeys, of course. Jessica moonlights in freelance writing and public relations, but feels lucky to call birth her day (and night) job.