

What Is A Doula?

The word 'doula' comes from the ancient Greek meaning "woman caregiver" and now refers to "a woman experienced in childbirth who provides continuous physical, emotional and informational support to the mother before during and after childbirth."

Lisa Butler

Lisa Butler has been a certified doula (through DONA International) since August 2001. She lives in Pittsfield, Massachusetts with her husband and three daughters ages, 16, 14 and 12. All were born in a hospital with a midwife in attendance. She has always loved babies and childbirth and truly enjoys being able to support women and their partners on their journey to parenthood. When she is not working as a doula, Lisa enjoys theatre, reading, crossword puzzles, hiking and yoga classes. She also loves volunteering for the theatre program at Berkshire Country Day School, and the Berkshire Music School (where her girls are enrolled). A few of her favorite books on birth are: *Birth from Within*, *Ina May's Guide to Childbirth*, *Pregnancy, Childbirth and The Newborn* and *The Thinking Woman's Guide to a Better Birth*.

A DOULA:

- recognizes birth as a key life experience that the mother will remember all her life
- understands the physiology of birth and the emotional needs of a woman in labor
- assists the woman and her partner in preparing for and carrying out her plans for the birth
- stays by the side of a woman throughout her labor, no matter how long it lasts
- provides emotional support to the woman and her partner, physical comfort measures, an objective viewpoint and information to aid decision-making
- facilitates communication between the laboring woman, her partner and her healthcare team
- perceives her role as one who nurtures and protects the woman's memory of her birth experience

History

Throughout history in almost all cultures women have supported women during childbirth. Artists from many cultures have created representations of birth showing the midwife, who is responsible for helping to bring the baby into the world safely and one or two other women who comfort and support the laboring woman. The doula is the modern equivalent of the woman beside the mother.

In our culture, until the beginning of the last century, most women gave birth at home surrounded by the nurturing presence of midwives, close female friends and family. In our culture as birth began to move from the home to the hospital women did not have the constant support of another woman as they labored and birth became a medical event. Women were not allowed to actively participate in their own labors and many were put to sleep for the actual birth thus robbing them of what is one of the most important moments in a woman's life. During the 1970s the situation began to improve as Lamaze natural childbirth became popular. Fathers began to be more involved in the birth process and hospitals began allowing them into the labor room to help support their wives. Although allowing fathers into the labor room was a step in the right direction, many times the couple is left alone in their hospital room with a nurse only checking in periodically. This is where a doula comes in: she stays with the couple continuously for the duration of the woman's labor giving her physical, emotional and informational support. A doula supports the father as well: helping him with ideas of ways in which he can support his partner and giving him a chance to take a break knowing she will not be left alone. Doulas stay with the woman up to two hours after the birth, making sure that she is comfortable and beginning to bond with her new baby. Doulas assist the new mom with initial breastfeeding, and also help to make sure that she and her partner are settling well into their new role as parents.

The day a woman gives birth is not just another day in her life, but is a life transforming event and a true rite of passage for her into motherhood. A birthing woman needs to be nurtured and cared for whether she chooses to give birth at home or in a hospital. As Penny Simkin (a birth doula, and a founding member of DONA International) says, "We cannot control the way a woman's birth will turn out, but we can control the way we care for her." Women remember their birth stories vividly for the rest of their lives, and if they feel nurtured, cared for and listened to during the birth process, they will tend to feel a true sense of accomplishment and satisfaction with their birth experience that they will always carry with them.

There are at least eleven studies that have been done showing the following effects of labor support: (taken from the DONA website)

Effects on Birth Outcomes:

Labors are shorter
There are fewer complications
Cesarean rates are reduced
There is less need for oxytocin to speed up labor
Need for forceps is reduced
Women request less pain medication and fewer epidurals

Effects on the Mother:

Greater satisfaction with their birth experience
More positive assessments of their babies
Less postpartum depression

Effects on the Baby:

Babies have shorter hospital stays with fewer admissions to special care nurseries
Babies breastfeed more easily
Mothers are more affectionate to their babies postpartum

Effects on the health care system:

The cost of obstetrical care is dramatically reduced
Women are pleased with the personalized care doulas offer

The benefit of continuous support in labor is recognized by:

The World Health Organization
The Medical Leadership Council (an organization of over 1200 U.S. hospitals)
The Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists in Canada

How doulas practice:

Privately, hired directly clients
As hospital employees
As volunteers in community or hospital programs

DONA International: A non-profit organization incorporated in 1992, trains and certifies doulas according to strict ethical standards.