



THE ESSENCE OF BEING A DOULA

ABSTRACT

So you want to be a doula!! What will that require from you? You might be surprised by the answers. Read on to get my take on doula from 27+ years of history.

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Essence of Being a Doula

The direct translation of the greek word doula is “of service” or “servant.” This term was originally coined by anthropologist Dana Rafael in the 1970’s in her book *The Tender Gift*. This book extolled the benefits of woman to woman support after birth, particularly with breastfeeding and recovery.

Over the years the role of the doula has expanded. In fact, the birth doula, who attend to a woman during labor and birth, is more well-known than the postpartum doula, who serves the woman and her family after birth. Both roles are equally valuable.

I have been a doula since 1991, when there was no certification. And DONA International, the first doula organization, was just emerging. Then came CAPPA, Childbirth and Postpartum Professional Association. Many women before me had been doulaing for quite some time, and not calling it by that name.

Women have supported women in birth forever. Families are geographically split, and birth moved from the home to the hospital. This has left women to fend for themselves. The village was lost, and we have been grappling with this ever since.

Fast forward to 2020 and the word doula has been in the dictionary for several years now, and there are over 125 organizations that train and certify doulas (birth and postpartum). There are for profit, not for profit, volunteer, hospital, and community based doula programs.

How can you determine which training is right for you?

What is the doula’s role?

Is certification necessary?

Can you be a doula without training?

What do you need to know before you start working as a doula?

It Takes Heart

We hear this a lot these days. There are terms like heartpreneur, and passionpreneur, and soulpreneur. What does it really mean to have an open heart, and to truly be doing something because you are impacting another human being's life with love?

I believe that being a doula is a calling, something that beckons you and won't stop until you heed the call.

The first time I gave birth, I was nervous, for many reasons. I had never been around newborns, and was actually not interested in them at all. As a kid, I was climbing trees, playing softball, and running in the woods.

Ironically, I was not concerned at all about labor and birth, but more about how I would care for a baby. Nobody really told me what to expect, or how to actually prepare for being a mother. On top of that, my now deceased ex-husband left me when I was 7 months pregnant. When I began caring for my first son, Matthew, I felt like I had found home.

When I first started as a postpartum doula in 1991, Matthew was two years old. I was a single mother searching for a job with purpose and flexibility. I knew that mothering was not only intuitive but the most important job in the world, and I had no idea how to earn a living with that. An ad in a local Boston paper caught my eye. It said they were looking for women to care for new mothers after birth.

I found a job that payed me to take care of new mothers!! It was perfect.

In the beginning of my career I took on every client, and I thought it was my job to solve every problem. I made myself available on weekends, Holidays, and spur of the moment. I also took everything personally, and did not set boundaries with realistic expectations. I was headed for burn-out quickly. **This was due to my big heart, and my desire to help everyone.**

This is not a bad thing. It is, however, an unsustainable business model. **YOU CAN'T HELP EVERYONE!!** Believe it or not, the more you open your heart the

more you will learn about yourself, and which clients you truly want to serve. They will find you. Keep narrowing down the characteristics of your ideal client.

I learned that by being open and willing to learn my local resources, and to connect with the other professionals that could provide services beyond my scope I could provide the information and support my clients needed. Communicating with clients about their needs and wants was top priority.

I learned that it was not my job to solve every problem, which allowed me to take on all clients, as long as I knew my resources. I also learned that I had the power to attract the clients I wanted to work with. And, **I could still be leading with my heart and my passion to improve outcomes for the MotherBaby and family.**

If you are a birth doula, or that is what you aspire to, the same thing applies. Your role is in the preparation for labor and birth. This requires you to open up and learn what your client wants for her birth. Being there solely to support, guide and nurture is key. Always sharing what you know, and asking lots of questions.

Two Ears for Listening

This sounds so simple. Listen with your open heart. Listening is a skill. It takes focus and discipline to truly take in what someone shares with you, and not be ready to jump in with a quick fix, or your own story. As a doula, you are there for that woman and family who hired you. **Your story really doesn't matter in this moment. At this point, the universe revolves around what your client wants and needs.**

If you are listening, you will figure it out. Ask questions, repeat back, tell her what you are observing. Voice concerns. Listening takes ears open, and also a willingness to clarify and communicate. It doesn't mean you can't say a word.

Communication is better understood when we consider facial expressions, tone, and body language. **This is why it is so important for you, the doula, to leave all**

of your own problems, and distractions at home. Bringing this with you to work will interfere with you being your best.

Childbirth in the United States is highly interventionist. Many Moms experience trauma and grief after their experience. They want to share their story with you. **Many birth doulas, upon processing the birth with a new mother they assisted during the birth, have different accounts of the same event.** Your listening skills will be essential for this part of your job.

A willingness to validate and acknowledge the new mother's feelings will allow her to let go of the feelings she may be harboring or resenting. Many new mothers feel guilty for grieving over the loss of their anticipated natural birth or feelings of the birth being out of control and not as originally envisioned. Some have physical healing interfering with enjoying the new baby.

Emotional reactions vary for everyone, just as under other circumstances. You will eventually run into similar experiences and circumstances and will recognize that each woman and family perceives their experiences very differently. **Your job is to accept people as they are, and to allow the healing to take place.**

If you listen to the birth story with an open heart, without judgment, you can tune into how this mother is feeling about her experience. You may be tempted to point out what went wrong, and how to fix it for next time. This is probably not the best time to do this.

If, for example, the story you hear is about a cesarean section, and your client is showing signs of trauma or grief, help her to heal within your scope, with all the tools you have. When the time is right, even if it is when your job is over, you can let her know about some of the valuable resources that may help her continue on her journey of recovery, or to heal before a subsequent pregnancy.

Helping Hands

Birth Doulas

Birth doulas are part of the prenatal and birth team. Before birth, you will likely assist your client in developing a birth vision, you might take her to appointments with her care provider, or possibly help her if she is on bedrest.

During labor and birth, you will get physical. You may find yourself helping with hands and legs, and full body. Birth doulas jump right in and labor with their clients. Bringing liquids, cool cloths, massaging, and helping change positions are all within your scope.

Postpartum Doulas

This job is defined differently by doulas. By definition, doulas are non-medical support people who provide practical, physical, informational and emotional guidance. The helping hands could involve a variety of tasks.

New mothers may need you to take out the trash, empty the dishwasher, do the laundry, go grocery shopping or cook a meal. Breastfeeding support, help with other siblings, and answering questions are all part of your job, too. It will vary with every client because everyone is unique, and there is no one size fits all.

The goal is to ease the transition for new families, by pitching in. New mothers will ideally be focused on their newborn baby and all the rest will be taken care of. Sleep is a main priority.

The First Three Months of Motherhood, the Fourth Trimester of Childbirth

Doulas, both birth and postpartum do their best to help prepare mothers and families for the transformational event of becoming parents. It can be challenging

because there is a greater emphasis on preparing for birth. Doulas are focused on the new mother, primarily, though support of fathers or partners is part of the job.

I don't believe you can ever be completely prepared for motherhood, though I do believe there is much you can do to prepare. The army has nothing on motherhood. The toughest job you'll ever love is the job of mother, Mom, Mommy.

No matter what your client's situation is, planning is great, but so is knowing about certain universal truths about becoming a mother. **Honestly, knowing about how to handle stress, and less sleep is important. Most of all, gathering and enrolling a support team.**

These are a few things you can share with your clients to help them prepare before the baby arrives.

- They **will spend many hours** feeding, rocking, diapering, bathing and playing with their baby.
- Sleep **is the most precious commodity** desired
- Find out if they have **any risk factors for a mood disorder** (most common complication of childbirth).
- **Encourage them to create their support team;** line it up ahead of time, and share with their doula
- It is good to **discuss expectations with their partner**, and learn about what they may be experiencing in anticipation of the baby coming.

You can tell them straight up:

You will not get eight hours of sleep in a row.

Your baby's stomach is the size of a walnut and she can only take in a couple of teaspoons at a time for the first few days.

You might wonder why in the hell you just signed up for this.

You might ask yourself why nobody told you it would be this way.

You might feel happy, sad, frustrated, tired, angry; maybe all at the same time.

Doula Training and Certification

Only you know if you are ready to serve as a doula. There is no licensing and regulations for the doula profession. **What began as a woman-centered movement to recreate the lost village has become a career or a business for many.** It is awesome to witness this boom, and to see doulas more well-known and available to serve.

At the same time, being a doula does not necessarily require hours and hours of training. **The original birth doula studies showed significant improvements in outcomes when women were simply being in the room with the laboring woman.**

While we have come a long way, there is a balance between learning, sharing and serving.

The questions I hear a lot are: “Which organization should I train with?” and, “Do I need to be certified?”

The answers are not necessarily black and white. I always say that the training you take is as good as the trainer. It helps if they are backed by a reputable organization. With so many to choose from, it can be very confusing for new and aspiring doulas.

Let’s talk about training. I was a postpartum doula trainer for the two organizations that have been around the longest. DONA International and CAPP. I chose to branch out on my own because I prefer more intimate connection, an option for those that prefer online, and being a mentor throughout the process. This is missing in a lot of larger organizations.

When considering a training, find out about the trainer. Ask her how long she has been a doula, how long she has been training and what her doula philosophy is. Also, find out about the organization, or the people behind it.

Looks can be deceiving. Cost can be a factor, but don’t be fooled by a high or a low price tag. Remember that most organizations require a certification fee, and

require you to recertify, and maintain membership. Some organizations give lifetime certification.

In my humble opinion, what matters the most is continuing education. **Staying current and relevant with the latest research, and what parents are reading and watching will help you as you grow.**

Do some research, ask others, and reach out to talk to the trainer directly. Just like choosing clients and them choosing you, there has to be a connection. Something about the training, or the organization will resonate with you.

Trust your inner guidance system. This is exactly what you want for the women you are or will be serving.

There are many doulas who work without having been trained or certified. Perhaps they have life experience that qualifies them. Clients will ideally be asking questions before they hire anyone, whether they are certified and trained or not.

Mothering a mother still requires an open heart, a listening ear, and helping hands. This is the essence of a doula.