

Postpartum Doula

Ancient Concept, Modern Necessity

Literally translated from Greek, doula means "female slave for the child-bearing woman." Today the word has come to mean "one who mothers the mother."

A pregnant woman will be given excellent prenatal care and classes to inform her about what to expect during labor, but little is said about what to expect at home after birth. Many mothers find themselves leaving the hospital within twenty-four hours with little or no support at home.

In contrast, in many other cultures, there are definite postpartum rituals that go into effect once a woman has given birth. These typically last for two to six weeks after birth and include special foods, drinks, bathing rituals, and relief from normal household and child-care responsibilities. The result? These mothers are successful at nursing their infants and experience little to no postpartum depression.

The reality of giving birth in our modern culture is quite different. A new mother barely has time to absorb the basics of baby care and nursing before she is sent home from the hospital. Many women desire to breastfeed their babies, but the reality of the first weeks of nursing can cause an isolated mom to give in to the 'ease' of the bottle. How does one learn if there is no one to teach and support her through the first difficult weeks? The doula can *meet* this need.

There is also the reality of a mother's other household responsibilities. These demands don't cease because she has a baby. While one can go without doing some chores for a day or two, by the third day, laundry, shopping needs, and a deteriorating home are hard to ignore. Instructions given to a new mom such as "Rest!", "Relax!", and "Don't do too much!" are next to impossible to follow if one has no support. Add a few siblings into the picture and you have the recipe for an overwhelmed, frustrated mother who begins to feel that she is failing during a period of her life that should bring her joy. The solution? A doula.

The doula can help the family ease through the adjustments and the changes a new baby brings by emotionally and physically helping the family during the postpartum period. She is not a baby-nurse, R.N., or a home-health aide. She is a non-medical, specialized support person who, rather than take over baby care, offers instruction in newborn care and breast-feeding. A doula may watch the baby so the mom can catch up on her sleep. More often, mom will mother her baby while the doula brings her meals and drinks, helps occupy the other children, runs to the store, keeps the laundry going, starts dinner for the family, and helps to keep the house presentable.

"A mother's job for the first two weeks after birth is to stay in one place and nurse her baby," states Christie Flynn, R.N. and Certified Lactation Consultant for St. Raphael's Hospital in New Haven. "Ideally, she should be relieved of her regular responsibilities and focus on her recovery and her new baby."

In "Mothering the New Mother", Sally Plackson writes, "Paying attention to and respecting those needs of the early postpartum weeks at home do not make you a weak or self-indulgent mother. They don't make you a wimp". What a revolutionary thought in a culture where many women have adopted the notion that to ask for help would be a sign of weakness! It is, in contrast, wise to recognize the normal limitations of this period.

Some women are still able to come home from the hospital into the arms of a supportive mother or friend. For others, a professional postpartum doula is a good alternative. A professional doula won't have preconceived ideas about you. She is experienced without being opinionated. She will do whatever will make you stress-free.

Whatever type of doula you choose, let go of the guilt of having someone do for you. Remember, all women physically and emotionally need and deserve a modern day "slave", the Doula.

