

MOTHERING THE MOTHERS

Support from a post-natal doula comes in many forms, and its benefits are wide-reaching, writes **Sophie Brigstocke**

In preparing for the birth of a new baby, most parents find themselves compiling lists and will be considered ready if they have the right number of nappies, muslins, babygrows, vests, mittens, hats, cardigans, plus a car seat, pram, sling or carrier, or if they have attended the requisite antenatal classes. Many mothers will go to great lengths to plan their births and will endlessly scour the internet for information. Yet something is missing. It seems extraordinary that at a time when a woman might be at her most vulnerable she finds herself alone.

Up until the birth of her baby a woman might have been working, surrounded by the bustle of the office, by friends and colleagues, with her partner, and with whatever social network she has. And then a baby comes. And her partner goes back to work, often sooner than the couple wish, and the new mother is alone, trying to fathom this new journey without everything she has always relied on – daily contact, banter, mates, and so on.

Sadly, very few of us live in the small, village-like communities that sustained families in times past. We aren't surrounded by extended family and experienced women who can nourish and support us, give us confidence in our abilities and recognise when we need rest or additional care. Many of the post-natal customs that existed are no longer practised, and medical care and attention for women who have given birth is significantly reduced. Gone are the times of 10-day respite in a cottage hospital with midwives at our beck and call.

With suicide identified as the highest reason for maternal mortality in the UK this century, and with increasing rates of post-natal depression, it seems that more focus should be given to the support that new mothers get after birth. Countries that have a cultural tradition of 'lying in', such as Japan, have significantly lower rates of post-natal depression. There a mother is not expected to do anything other than feed her baby in the first 40 days post birth. In the Netherlands, where the statistics are

similarly rosy, women are entitled to a daily visit from a *kraamverzorgster* in the first 10 days at home. This post-natal supporter spends several hours a day with the new parents – fathers in the Netherlands have even less paternity leave than their UK counterparts – helping them to ease into the new rhythms of family life.

In the UK the term 'doula' is still in its infancy, and too few people are aware of the support that is available to new parents, especially post-natally. The word comes from the Greek for 'woman who serves', or 'female servant'. A doula can come to work for a new family for from as little as a couple of hours a week to many hours a day, and in some cases will live in or work overnight. Doulas are employed in equal numbers by first-time parents, parents having multiples, and those with a new addition to an established family unit. However, the post-natal doula is a far cry from the conventional maternity nurse, a title that conjures up images of starched uniforms, strict routines, looking after "baby", and a minimum residential stay of a month. The post-natal doula seeks to "mother the mother", to empower and build confidence in a woman's innate ability to care for her child, so that by the time the doula

leaves she has become redundant – there is little more for her to do.

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On a practical level, she can do a huge amount. It's not about saying that the new mother is incapable of doing these chores for herself, but it is recognition that she has a far more important role in the first few weeks. Her focus and attention need to be on her baby, and even if there are excited visitors (family or friends), they are unlikely to want to wield a vacuum cleaner! Depending on the set-up, a doula might help look after older children, care for pets, or take on some of the domestic chores – cooking, running errands, and so on. She is not a skivvy, but she will help to lighten the load, take the weight of responsibility from the mother.

The doula can help the mother grow in confidence in caring for her baby – can help her recognise the signs for feeding, for nappy changes, for sleep, and so on. She is well-placed to recognise any potential problems, too, and will have access to sources of further support before things get out of hand. Often a doula will give the mother an opportunity to get some more rest and will watch the baby, >

> either at home, or out and about – whatever feels comfortable for the parents. It's not all about the mother, either: if the partner is around, the doula can support him or her too, and be a listening ear for concerns, worries and thoughts.

When the Nurturing Birth community of doulas were asked what they felt was important to post-natal women, the most common response was “a listening ear”. Non-judgement was also much mentioned. How easy it is to underestimate the importance of someone actively hearing what we have to say. Many women after birth need opportunities to debrief – to unpick what happened, with someone they feel safe with. Whether it was the most positive, life-affirming, empowering birth, or one in which things didn't go to plan, or a deeply traumatic experience, to have someone who is there to listen and not to control, fix, devalue or deny is essential. It can be very difficult for close friends and family members to hear a loved one talk about a traumatic experience – they may even be dealing with their own trauma or grieving process – so to have someone one step removed can lighten the load considerably.

Similarly, to have someone there to listen to your thoughts and expectations without imposing her personal opinion can be a relief. There are many well-meaning grannies, aunts, friends and cousins who feel they have the magic cure for whatever issue a new mother might be facing, but often what they are advocating can be at odds with a mother's gut instinct about how she wants to parent her child, and might be outdated. A post-natal doula is there to listen, to reflect back, to offer options and signposts. A doula has access to evidence-based information to help parents make choices about how they want to parent. Many doulas are qualified in feeding, child psychology, babywearing and baby massage and will certainly be able to recommend local support groups, sometimes visiting these with the mother. As one doula says, a post-natal doula is “a listening ear, a helping hand and a shoulder to cry on... not nannying or taking over, but helping parents to find their own way”.

Significantly more research into the benefits of post-natal doulaing is needed, but in 2014 Nurturing Birth asked doulas to complete a survey about birth and post-natal outcomes, the results of which were printed in *MIDIRS*, the midwifery journal. The results were overwhelmingly positive, particularly for breastfeeding success. Using as a comparison the Department of Health Indicators on Breastfeeding from the Quarter 4 report in 2012/13, we saw that 81.4% women were exclusively breastfeeding at 6 weeks, compared to a 47.2% national average. So having a doula, even if she is not further qualified in breastfeeding peer support, results in a higher likelihood of successful breastfeeding. As with anything else, though, a doula won't be judgemental about choices made around feeding, and will know the most up-to-date recommendations for formula milk bottle preparation and will be able to signpost further support.

In short, a post-natal doula can be many things. I'll conclude with a comment from a post-natal doula, which sums it up beautifully: “I think it is important to convey that we are all types of women to all types of women. Many of my clients assume doulas are a 'type' and are surprised by what the reality is. They also sometimes assume we are all about the natural, attached, breast, sling or, conversely, we are just about the cleaning, babysitting, hoovering. We are all those things and more, but importantly we mould to our clients, not the other way round.” ●

To find a post-natal doula visit
www.douladirectory.co.uk
or www.doula.org.uk.
For more information about becoming a doula visit
www.nurturingbirth.co.uk or
call Sophie or Florence on
0121 422 2819.



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