

Description

Is Doula Work Skilled Work?

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Summary

While it is true that doulas do not need clinical skills, as providing medical care is firmly outside our boundaries, it does not mean the doula role is unskilled.[1] So what exactly do we learn on a doula course and what skills do we employ when supporting our clients?[2] This article will explore the skills and talents doulas aim to develop and how we place an emphasis on fostering the ‘soft skills’ that put our clients right at the centre of our care.



Learning to listen and respond

It can be tricky for some people to understand what a doula actually does and I have often wondered whether this is because our culture tends towards giving value to academic or highly- qualified work whilst under-appreciating work that is about caring and emotions. The doula role is based on empathy and human connection. I like to describe it as ‘heart-work’. That’s not to say that there is no element of these soft skills in midwifery and other medical professions, but doulas have the luxury of being able to focus almost all our attention on diving deep into learning how to be ‘be-las’ rather than ‘do-las’.

The beginning of being able to relate to others, and frequently our motivation to become doulas, comes from our own experience. But it is vital that we do not allow our own biases, traumas or convictions to influence the support we give our clients. Learning how to leave any prejudices and assumptions at home when speaking with clients is the first step on the road to becoming a doula. This may involve unpicking our own birthing and parenting experiences to fully understand, and come to terms with, our personal maternity stories.

Deep at the heart of our work is the knowledge that everyone deserves non-judgemental, unconditional support. We therefore utilise basic, personal-centred counselling skills in order to ensure that our clients feel heard, valued and understood. Learning to really listen – for the sense, the nuance and what lies between the words – is a core doula skill. This includes making sure we have received the message, unfiltered and unscrambled, by asking open questions, reflecting back what we think we have heard and giving ample time and space for our clients to pause, think, explore their feelings and expand on what they are saying.

We also need to learn how to speak; words can raise a person up or cut them down, fill them with confidence or with terror, so we need to carefully consider the words we use. Our vocabulary is predicated on a single, important tenet; that doulas never, ever give advice. The language of advice is directive – when we use words like ‘should’, ‘must’ or ‘need to’ it can sound as though we are giving commands. Doulas try to restrict ourselves to making suggestions only, so we practise utilising phrases such as ‘have you considered…?’, ‘perhaps you could…’, ‘how do you feel about that? or ‘what do you need to know or do right now?’.

Signposting and planning

Of course, our role extends beyond being a sounding board. We need to develop the ability to sit with and guide parents as they feel their way through all the choices and decisions of pregnancy. Planning their birth and putting things in place so they feel supported during the postpartum period generally means that parents feel prepared, with their confidence bolstered. This means we need an intimate understanding of the journey they take through maternity care and can point them in the direction of information and specialist support to inform their decisions.

And that brings me to the next core skill: signposting. I often say it's a doula's superpower. In fact, I think another word for doula might be 'curator'. We are passionate collectors of information, evidence, useful articles and special people who can offer targeted support in particular situations. Trading signposts with other doulas is one of our favourite activities! We try to ensure that the information we point people to is evidence based but also accept that the old wisdom can sometimes be hugely beneficial. We practise the skill of assessing the validity and credibility of things we read and try hard to hone the ability to talk to clients about gathering in information in a way that is productive, as safe as possible and in line with their preferences and beliefs.

Building bridges

It is also important that we are able to support our clients to have safe and satisfying conversations with their health care providers. We may suggest questions they can ask and ensure they are fully conversant with their rights. Ideally, our goal is for our clients to advocate for themselves so they can feel proud of the way they navigated through the maternity system but sometimes, if asked, especially during labour, we may step in to help facilitate productive discussion and mutually respectful communication.

Understanding how things work

We do need a good, basic understanding of the physiology of birth and lactation so we can help our clients to understand, and have awe for, how their bodies work. We also have a solid grasp of the various medical interventions that may be necessary, or chosen, and can facilitate discussions around the pros and cons of various forms of pain relief or comfort measures for labour. We also ensure that we are well versed in basic infant feeding support so that we can support our clients to initiate and continue feeding their babies in the way they wish to. For many of us this becomes a passion and we go on to train as Breastfeeding Counsellors or International Board Certified Lactation Consultants.

In common with many midwives, many of us are passionate about learning how to physically support our clients through labour. That might be by supporting them in different positions or helping them find movements or exercises that optimise the position of the baby. We may also be able to provide comfort with food and drink, cool cloths and other comfort measures. Fundamentally, our role is intangible and different during every labour and birth but may be as simple as 'holding the space' by being fully present and totally open to the unfolding story.[3,4]

Postpartum support

After the birth we want to ensure that our clients have the opportunity to have their stories honoured. We are there to listen, and listen again, if they feel the need to tell, re-tell and dig deep into their epic adventure. Our ability to listen to birth stories and validate our clients' feelings evolves over time – and we promise to be there to listen again, even years down the line as the parents' feelings ripen and change.

As our clients settle into parenthood they may crave some practical support. As well as support and information to help with feeding the baby, we may provide some support to manage practicalities like sleep, meals and housework. And we will probably offer more active listening – what doulas like to call 'intelligent tea-drinking' – as our clients ask questions, work through worries and feel into the kind of parent they want to be.

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Reflecting and serving

Alongside all this we are honing the skill of running our own businesses and finding time to build collaborative relationships with our local doula colleagues, other birth workers and local maternity staff. We may develop skills like social media marketing and add other strings to our bows – for example, hypnobirthing teaching, massage or pregnancy yoga. We may run mothers' circles or volunteer as breastfeeding peer supporters or sit on our local Maternity Voices Partnership group. We may pursue activism in many and varied ways, write books or record podcasts.

But at the end of the day, these extras are not what makes us great doulas. This, in my view, is the habit of deep reflection. It is being able to contemplate our strengths and weaknesses and dig deep into a story, in order to extract all the learning, that enables us to broaden and deepen our practice. To remain humble in the face of the awesome achievements of our clients is what keeps us grounded and ensures we develop into compassionate, empathetic companions on the maternity journey.

The non-technical soft skills are often denigrated and ignored, but deep listening, high-quality communication skills, compassionate conflict resolution, creativity and resourcefulness, together with an openness to constructive criticism, are truly advantageous in any job. Doulas are privileged to be able to put these skills at the centre of what we do, and I'm convinced this is one reason why women and parents supported by doulas report greater satisfaction with their birth or postpartum experience.[5] **TPM**

References

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