

Compassion and Empathy—a Doula’s Best Friends!

By Kicki Hansard

Doulas often take various courses to improve their skills and gain knowledge, but sometimes they lose sight of the importance of their ability to bring compassion and empathy to the birth experience by simply *being* rather than *doing*.

When I started out as a doula, I had a strong feeling of responsibility and the need to make sure that my clients had the birth they envisioned. Oftentimes, after a long and exhausting birth, I would wonder what I could have done differently. Why couldn’t all women have a beautiful and empowering experience? How could I change the way I worked to make this happen? I considered more training, perhaps in HypnoBirthing or massage techniques. I was so busy thinking about what external tools I could acquire to help women have their perfect birth that I couldn’t see what was right in front of me. The answer came after a client of mine ended up with an induction followed by an episiotomy with forceps. I was lost in feelings of guilt when she turned to me and said, “That wasn’t exactly what I was expecting, but it is still magical to finally meet my baby!” This made me realize that the tools I desperately needed in order to feel like a successful doula were with me all along. These most effective tools are compassion and empathy.

Doulas must watch out for the enemies of compassion: pity, judgment and fear. We are not here to rescue women or to pity them. Mothers in labour need strong individuals who believe in them and know that they have the capability to give birth. This includes educating women’s partners to make sure they understand that the sensations experienced in labour cannot be “fixed,” and that taking pain away doesn’t necessarily lead to a better birthing experience. It is helpful to imagine we are part of a crew on a boat during a storm, and together, by staying focused and grounded, we will reach the shore by riding on top of the waves, rather than drowning in the depths of despair.

As doulas, it is helpful to regularly look within to make sure we’re keeping the space positive and always finding the good in every situation. I believe many doulas often make the mistake of becoming attached to the outcome. We talk about “letting go” in labour and not fighting the bodily sensations that occur while giving birth; we encourage our clients to breathe, relax their bodies and go with the flow. Perhaps it would be useful for doulas to use this wisdom as well. It is important to stay present in the moment, be aware of the events as they unfold and be prepared to change direction in the blink of an eye. By whispering encouraging words, taking charge and avoiding thoughts of the past or the future, we ground the woman and help her stay focused.

In general, it is difficult to avoid making judgments. It can be easy to feel that it is our client’s fault that things aren’t going well. Sometimes we think that if they had listened more closely to us during the antenatal meetings and made different choices, the situation could have been very different. Sometimes we remember the stories told about the particular hospital we’re in and think that the staff has been rather unfriendly and short with us. Be quick to blow those thoughts away! I once read what was coined “The Midwives Motto” and it has stuck with me ever since. “She has good reason for feeling this way, behaving this way, believing these things, and saying these things. I may be the target of her negative emotions at the moment, but I am not the cause.”

I bear this in mind all the time, and it helps me avoid taking things personally and leads me down a non-judgmental path. It is easier to accept the people around me when I understand that they are

all individuals with their own stories and issues just like the rest of us, and that I'm not the one making them feel or behave as they are. It is difficult to find empathy and compassion when we feel dislike for someone. As a doula, it is important to remember that it is not about us.

Finally, fear is a great enemy of compassion, and this may be one of the reasons why some health professionals come across as uncaring or brusque. The fear of litigation or of making a mistake, which in a midwife's role is very different from a doula's, might make the midwife err on the side of caution. It's important to bear this in mind so that we can fully embrace the circumstances midwives are operating under, which will allow us to show them empathy and compassion. Fear is an emotion that spreads very quickly and affects all the people in its presence. If doulas can keep the space free from fear, we are doing a great service for our clients by encouraging the normal physiology of birth and helping them make positive memories of the birth.

So, what do we really need to know as doulas? Is it necessary to have a thick book of certificates from the many courses offered? What message might this send our clients? What being a doula means differs from woman to woman, and while it is important to learn and acquire a certain amount of knowledge, I believe doulas should celebrate the fact that we are not experts or advisors, as this gives women and couples the opportunity to look for answers inside themselves. It invites them to accept responsibility for the way they want to give birth and raise their children. As doulas, we need to work with our head, heart and gut feelings in balance, remaining open to the possibility of a different outcome than you were hoping for. Remember, a doula is all about being, which comes from life experiences, reflection and learning about ourselves and the women we support. Just as women need to embrace the tools they naturally possess to give birth, doulas should trust that they make a difference by using and nurturing their compassion and empathy.

This is a preprint of 'Compassion and Empathy – A doula's Best Friends', an article published in *Breastfeeding*, Spring 2012, Number 101, pp 31 Copyright © 2012 Midwifery Today, Inc.