

Brought to you from the pages of  
*International Doula*

# *From Novice to Expert*

The Five Stages of  
Doula Development



Written by Amy L. Gilliland

# About this reprint

## About this Research Project

The five articles in this series are based on my research on effective labor support by doulas. My goal is to develop a comprehensive theory as to why doula care has such positive outcomes for mothers and their families. I began interviewing doulas in 2002 for my master's thesis and it is a continuing project for my PhD dissertation. So far I have interviewed 40 doulas from across North America, over 30 parents who had doula care and seven nurses who work with doulas. In analyzing these interviews, certain patterns of behavior and particular points of view tended to cluster together based on a doula's experience level. In examining the relevant literature, my search led me to an excellent resource: the Dreyfus Model of Skill Acquisition.

## About the Dreyfus Model

The Dreyfus Model was originally developed in 1981 to explain the skill development of chess players and airline pilots. It is most well known for Patricia Benner's application to nurses in the classic book, *From Novice to Expert* (1985, 2001). The Dreyfus model posits that a learner passes through five levels of proficiency: novice, advanced beginner, competent, proficient and expert. These different levels reflect three major shifts in how skills and knowledge are applied. The first is a shift from the use of abstract principles to concrete experience in making decisions. The second is a change in how the learner perceives the situation and which particular events are seen as relevant and requiring attention. The third is a shift from feeling like an observer outside the situation to one who is actively involved in creating what happens.

Understanding these five stages of development as a doula can be very helpful. Hopefully individual doulas will feel less isolated and reach out more when they need to and we will also understand how to better mentor birth doulas in our communities. These articles can also form an interesting discussion in doula groups. It is important that doulas realize that the goal is not to become an expert doula, although some of us end up there. The key is respecting the perspective and skills that you have right now and using them to grow and be the best doula you can be for the families you serve. Doulas at all stages, from novice to expert, are valuable and important.

## About the Skill Profiles

While all of us start out as novices, we acquire skills in different areas of birth doula work at different times. Depending on our past experiences as mothers, nurses, educators or accountants, we bring a different mix of challenges and solutions to our work. The births we attend offer different kinds of learning experiences and shape our progress. So you may find that different parts of two profiles (or even three) fit where you are now and that is quite appropriate. People grow at different rates. The way to use these profiles is to increase your understanding of yourself and your colleagues. By having a concrete description and words to describe your insights, hopefully you will value what you do have to contribute more highly. By detailing the challenges of each stage, you may be able to come up with solutions that work for you. It can also help for you to know where you are going and what the next stage may feel like.

## Affiliation with DONA International

Even though I have been affiliated with DONA International as a DONA certified birth doula, DONA approved birth doula trainer and past member of the Board of Directors, the views expressed in these articles are my own. DONA International does not regard them as official stages or professional goals. These articles are provided for your educational use and personal development only.

## About Amy L. Gilliland



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# Contents

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*Stage One:*  
The Novice Doula  
**PAGE 4**

*Stage Two:*  
The Advanced  
Beginner Doula  
**PAGE 8**

*Stage Three:*  
The Seasoned  
(Competent) Doula  
**PAGE 12**

*Stage Four:*  
The Proficient Doula  
**PAGE 18**

*Stage Five:*  
The Expert Doula  
**PAGE 22**



# Stage One: The Novice Doula

All of us were new doulas once. Most beginners feel uncomfortable with their newness and want to cast it off as soon as they can. It feels more like a burden. Even experienced doulas may not appreciate the newer members in their midst, especially if they have seen a lot of enthusiastic people come and go. However, being new is a gift—it means that anything is possible; you don't know what the limitations are yet. New doulas may ask questions they feel everyone else already knows the answers to, but often they ask the questions in ways that inspire others and themselves to think. Their perspective is fresh.

I had the experience of being new as a birth doula when the idea of professional labor support was entirely new, but it also meant that I spent most of my time educating people on what we were about. One of my significant memories of being a new doula happened in 1987. On a visit to Houston, Texas, Polly Perez graciously agreed to meet with me. I felt enchanted to be in this pioneering person's office, surrounded by her important paperwork and ideas. As she talked, she spoke with her hands. My eyes kept following her beautifully manicured nails. I got up the courage and asked, "How do you massage

mothers with such long nails?" She replied, "Oh that's not a part of what I do." It never occurred to me that there could be other ways of doulaing than what I had been taught. The idea of flexibility, that there were no hard and fast rules about what to do and when to do it, was just beginning to occur to me. At that moment I realized that I needed to question my own assumptions—something that has remained with me and led me to conduct this project.

## The novice doula profile

The novice doula is excited and enthusiastic. Deep inside of her this path just feels right. She feels drawn to birth, drawn to women and energized about finally being exactly where she wants to be. The novice doula may have her own ideas about how birth should be. She wants women to have choices and options and care providers to be caring and accommodating.

Her main concerns are about what it is really going to be like. Will she be able to make a difference? Will she say or do the wrong thing...or do the right thing at the wrong time? Can she manage her own emotions when the baby is born? Will she be able to manage her life?



The path of supporting a mother and family feels satisfying but unfamiliar at the same time. She is figuring it out. Her training makes sense—mothers are acting in the ways her trainers predicted and she understands what they were describing. Things are falling into place. She is joyous when the baby is born but frustrated sometimes too. Things aren't really the way she would like them to be. Some parts are good but there are others she wishes could be different. She may not feel sure of her ability to influence events positively.

Questions—she has so many questions. What does VE stand for? (*vaginal exam*) What is the name of the shoe horn looking thing and do they use it every time? (*vaginal retractor*) She feels uncomfortable asking some of her questions, and some answers aren't in the books—she has looked! There are so many things she wants to know and it is so exciting to learn them.

Mothers are appreciative of her comfort and she has begun to figure out what she feels good at doing. She is getting better at not asking questions during a contraction and stopping a foot rub when the mother takes a deep breath. The mothers she doulas are training her, one at a time. But it is hard to remember the other things that seem essential. What

positions are best for what phase of labor? How do you ask the doctor or nurse if the baby needs to turn or not? Even though all the books tell you a mother should go to the bathroom often, it is still hard to motivate a mother who is comfortable where she is at.

The challenges for the novice doula are practical as well as personal. There are business challenges with getting clients and deciding when it is time to charge a fee for services and how much to charge. She may modify her paperwork after each client. Doulas need to encourage people to trust them while they are still building their skills. Some doulas have the added task of educating their communities about the positive aspects of professional labor support.

New doulas may make mistakes as they negotiate appropriate boundaries with clients. They need to figure out that the relationship is intimate as well as professional, which means that she is friendly to her clients but that they cannot be treated as friends. To be in balance, client relationships require self-disclosure but it must be appropriate. All people learn through trial and error, but it can be harder for a new doula when she makes a mistake. This is because she cares so much about getting it right.

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Being on call may be a new experience. It is tedious and tiring. In addition, the daily routines of life have to be planned out for when she does get called to a birth. Emergency childcare, meals and transportation alternatives need to be figured out ahead of time.

A novice doula's personal challenges usually have to do with knowledge and confidence. Frequently she may not feel she knows enough about what is happening to explain something well. She can ask the nurse to explain it to the mother, but she does not feel confident enough to do that well either. An effective doula at this stage does it anyway because her passion for mothers getting the right information is more important than her own self interest. In order to grow, novice doulas know they will need to stick their necks out sometimes. They know it will feel uncomfortable because they are new, but they do it because they love birth and feel deeply inside that their presence makes a difference.

In my basic doula trainings, I often feel that new doulas come to the workshop wanting to know the rules. If I will just explain to them what to do and when to

do it, they will happily follow. They want to be the best doulas they can. I explain that there are no hard and fast rules, just guiding principles. They will have to figure out on their own how to apply them; and it is different at every birth. This makes the task of being a doula more difficult in their eyes, but many are still undaunted. The key issues in doula care are the empowerment of mothers, non-judgmental acceptance of their choices and support for their actions. It is not about achieving or creating an idealized vision of birth.

Some novice doulas get this message in their doula trainings; and some that do get it, still resist it. Depending on the doula and her stage of personal growth and enlightenment, she will either understand more deeply or reject this message. Either way, these first few births will tell the novice doula a great deal about herself. She discovers some of her strengths and also finds a great deal of frustrations.

## Novice doula challenges

- Does not feel she knows enough
- Lack of confidence



- May try to rigidly follow guidelines for using support strategies rather than paying attention to the mother
- Perceived as “green” by others who may discount what she does have to offer
- Need to build her skills
- Need to attract first clients

### Novice doula assets

- Enthusiasm for birth and being a doula
- Belief in herself and her ability to make a difference
- Anything is possible! (This attitude paves the way for many things to happen)
- Abundant supply of energy
- Feeling of rightness about her path
- Familiar with strategies and support techniques from her training and is eager to use them

### How you can help

Novice doulas have a great deal to offer their communities. They often bring new energy and different perspectives to meetings and discussions. Often times

they are the ones willing to sit at the table during baby fairs and hand out leaflets at neighborhood parades. New doulas may have connections to different groups of mothers or community members who then further spread the word about doula care. Helping newer doulas to understand the history of labor support options in your community is a great place to start and to help them feel they belong. They deserve the nurturing and guidance of more experienced doulas, especially as they move into the challenges of the Advanced Beginner stage of being a doula. ✨

*The key issues in doula care are the empowerment of mothers, non-judgmental acceptance of their choices and support for their actions.*



# 2

## Stage Two: The Advanced Beginner Doula

The Advanced Beginner stage is one of the most important and difficult stages in the process of maturing as a doula. Doulas are more skilled deliverers of labor support, but there are professional and personal challenges. Because of these challenges, more eager and caring doulas may leave the profession at this stage than at any other. However, through my research I have discovered that many of these difficulties are universal and predictable. My hope is that by identifying them and offering support along the way, experienced doulas can help the newer doulas in their communities to persevere. What most doulas need at this stage is doulaing through the process by someone who has been there!

### The Advanced Beginner Doula profile

In the workshops where I use these profiles, doulas ask, “How many births does it take to reach a certain stage?” The stages are not defined by the number of births attended but by what it feels like for the individual doula. I interviewed some women who were at this stage by their eighth birth, while another doula I interviewed had attended 30 births and

still had not gone through the personal journey needed to move forward.

By this time, the Advanced Beginner (AB) doula has gained confidence in her ability to offer her labor support skills to families. She has learned from experience that her presence makes a huge positive difference to her clients. Instead of just hearing other’s stories, she has been to a variety of labors and births. She understands that women can experience similar births in different ways, and different care providers have varied approaches to similar circumstances. This knowledge gives her more confidence as a professional. She is more flexible in her approach and no longer chastises herself if a mother doesn’t like a comfort measure. Instead she goes on to the next thing on her list.

However, the rules that novice doulas are so eager to learn and apply haven’t always panned out. The flip side of learning to be flexible in her approach to labor support can be feelings of uncertainty and a lack of confidence. It is important for the doula to emotionally process and get her questions answered thoroughly after each birth. Each one usually has a different set of challenges, which may leave her feeling that she will never really be prepared. Sometimes this is overwhelming. Understanding that these



feelings are a normal part of maturing as a doula is important for AB doulas to hear and an area where her doula community (local or on-line) can be helpful. While she is gaining skills with each birth, this phase has more personal and professional challenges than any other. Many of the doulas in my sample expressed that their doula friends made all the difference in figuring out answers to these issues and conflicts. Almost all professions have a period of intense skill building and maturation where challenges need to be negotiated in order to continue. For doulas, it is this advanced beginner phase.

Professionally, one of the first areas that she needs to concentrate on is attracting new clients. This can take up a lot of her resources, and the actual pay she receives may not earn her much profit. The challenge of building up a practice is difficult in most places. If she is a lone doula, she may need to prove to her community that her services are worthwhile. In larger cities, the more established doulas may not recommend her until she has proven herself; or it may simply be that parents in her area prefer an experienced doula.

On the plus side, many AB doulas are more comfortable interacting with clients. Doulas may realize that telling

personal details, especially their own birth stories, may limit how mothers view them. Mothers may feel judged if they make different choices than their doula or feel they may not live up to her expectations. Most doulas learn this after going through these situations. They have also discovered that mothers need doulaing in different ways. They are actively working on conveying an attitude of professionalism at prenatal meetings and feel successful most of the time.

There may also be conflicts with her family and her non-birth friends. She feels bad letting them down at the last minute even though she feels she deserves to do what feeds her soul. But the balancing act can leave her feeling drained and unsupported. Is she making enough money at “this doula thing” to make up for lost wages from another job? Is the positive impact she knows she’s making for her clients enough to counter the negative impact on the people she cares about?

If they have decided to commit to doula work as a profession, the AB doula needs to figure out a practice style and business plan that works for her. She may need a doula partner or to establish steady backup relationships. She will need to figure out which tax form to use and what form of business will best protect

her assets. She may need insurance and will have to decide the best ways to promote her business.

AB doulas discover that some doctors and nurses are happy to work with doulas and some are not. Some are easier to connect with, and everyone works together for the client’s benefit. At other births, she may weigh and measure everything she says in her head before saying it out loud and can feel like an outsider. Just being there is a struggle for her because of the people attending her client. She isn’t sure what she could do to make it better.

From attending births, the AB doula has noticed that medical care providers have a wide variety of practice styles. Some of them are excellent communicators, but sometimes they recommend interventions in a way that feels manipulative. She’s not sure what to say some of the time even though her clients trust her to help them get the information they need. She is learning what part of her client’s birth experience she can influence and what part she can’t. The AB doula is frequently frustrated by what she sees in the medical system.

Some AB doulas are easily able to see where their personal responsibility lies, what is up to the client and what is up to the client’s medical care provider.

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2

For others, this is much harder. They feel responsible, guilty or angry at some aspects of their client's experience and feel they ought to have been able to change it. More experienced doulas tell them that their caring presence made a difference and that was enough. However, as the AB doula grows in her communication skills, she may find that there are ways she can influence her client's experience positively and avoid some of the situations that frustrate her now.

Some doulas have approached this profession hoping to change birth. They want to make a difference in the system and show people how birth can be. They have an idealistic way of thinking about things. Sometimes they only choose clients who share that vision (e.g. planning unmedicated births). They believe that if everything is set up a certain way, then the idealized birth can happen and will happen if they are a good enough doula. The birth experience is less about the mother than it is about birth being a certain way. While the AB doula may not articulate it out loud or even consciously to herself, her doula work is about her skill in helping mothers to create this ideal birth experience. When it doesn't happen, she judges mothers and herself.

The challenge for this doula is to shift and expand her vision about the meaning

of birth and what it means to be a doula. The change comes out of an important period of dissatisfaction and self-reflection. In the old way, the birth is about what the doula thinks is best for the mother so that the mother can achieve this vision. The new way is for the doula to realize that the mother decides her own journey while she is in labor. The doula empowers the mother and clears the way for her. It's not about an ideal vision any longer; it is about accompanying each mother on this mystical journey as a knowledgeable guide.

One of my interview participants, Allison (not her real name), illustrated this part of the process very clearly. She had been to approximately 25 births. Allison was very candid about her personal journey from a place of what she thought was best for the mother to a place of allowing the mother to do what she needed to do for herself. As a new doula, Allison valued drug-free, intervention-free birth. She felt she knew what was best for mothers and that part of her role was to inform them of the "best" choices. She shared freely about being inwardly judgmental when mothers made choices that were taking them away from what she thought was best. This was dissatisfying for her as an individual as well as a doula, and she came to a personal crossroads where she changed her



approach. It was infinitely more satisfying for her when she could allow the labor and birth to be mother focused. Some doulas are able to embrace a non-judgmental, mother focused attitude very easily as they begin their practice. For other doulas, like Allison, it is much more challenging.

With all of these struggles outlined, it is easier to see why some might find it simpler to stop or minimize doula work in their lives. Hopefully, just knowing that these challenges are important and necessary parts of growing as a doula will be helpful to those going through them. Just as moms learn how to mother through the supportive “mothering” doulas provide during birth and postpartum, doulas learn how to be better doulas by being doulaed! Building strong and lasting doula communities is a part of what we need to do to improve birth and family life.

### Summary of Advanced Beginner Doula challenges

- A steady stream of clients in balance with the effort put forth to attract them
- Support from her family and friends to live a doula-friendly lifestyle

- Personal challenges about letting down her family and friends
- Establishing a positive professional relationship with other doulas in her area
- Establishing a business
- Communicating effectively with medical professionals in the labor room
- Not really feeling competent because each birth challenges her skills in a new way
- Frustrated because of the medical system and the way birth is managed
- Dismayed (or worse) because of the way patients are treated
- Learning how to work with difficult people who may not like her or like doulas
- Figuring out what issues are in her realm of influence and responsibility and which are not; and how to deal emotionally with the ones that are not the doula’s
- Has to discover that it is not about her or her vision of birth
- Must center her efforts on the mother and her empowerment and let go of any preconceived notions about what that birth ought to be or what mothers ought to do

### Summary of Advanced Beginner Doula assets

- Knows from experience that her presence makes a huge positive difference to her clients
- Is developing more confidence as a professional
- Understands the wide variety of possible birth experiences
- Understands the variety of practice styles of medical care providers and medical staff
- Can recognize the similarities in the behavior of different laboring mothers and can see the progression of labor from beginning to end
- Has had success in using several different labor support techniques
- Feels a deepening sense of connection to her clients in labor more often than not
- Emerging sense of personal identity as a doula 🌱



## Stage Three: The Seasoned (Competent) Doula

The seasoned doula feels that she stands on solid ground—at least most of the time. Through honest reflection and the seeking of support, the challenges of the advanced beginner stage are now behind her. A seasoned doula feels comfortable in most situations, and some things have become predictable at births. Except for novel situations, the uncertainty that prevailed at earlier stages is now a thing of the past. Many doulas at this stage feel less anxiety and a greater sense of mastery.

### Competencies

This can lead to a greater sense of confidence in many areas of her doula work. At births, she is more able to communicate well with medical staff and careproviders especially in routine interactions. The seasoned doula understands medical terms and the verbal shorthand used at births and can explain them to her clients when needed. Her comfort measures and support strategy recommendations work. She feels more confident in her ability to read a mother's needs more accurately and also that her choices of emotional support strategies for a particular mother will be the right ones.

The seasoned doula has also negotiated the professional challenges of the Advanced Beginner (AB) stage. She has developed a business and has a working relationship with the other doulas in her area. She has a backup doula, someone she knows well and trusts. They have been to a birth together or at least shared enough stories to trust one another's actions. Her business plan has been implemented and she is remembering to use her business debit card for separate transactions. In other words, the structure has been set up for her to function as a professional. When she reads books or goes to a workshop, there is still quite a bit of new material but she is able to connect the new information with what she already knows—making new connections. Her knowledge base is deepening as well as broadening. In other words, things are coming together to form a solid foundation.

One of the personal challenges of the AB stage is becoming aware of one's own sadness and anger about birth practices. The seasoned doula has found a positive way to live with those feelings. Some doulas in this study mentioned strategies as diverse as writing poetry or becoming an activist for change. All doulas said they received help to sort out these issues with other doulas, whether



at a conference, workshop, on-line or in their communities. They discussed the births they had attended and the feelings and issues surrounding them with several experienced doulas. Through that process, doulas gain insight about strengths and areas for further skill development. Overall, doulas at this stage have decided that the positives of being a doula outweighed the negatives.

### Practice styles

The seasoned doula's approach to mothers and birth is to be present with what happens and to remain alongside the mother. She doesn't try to force it to be one way or another. She has learned that the best way she can influence birth events is by working with her clients prenatally. Their prenatal visits are richer and she spends more time educating them about choices they will have. For example, she may discuss inductions at 32 weeks, long before the careprovider does. Once it has been brought up by the doctor or midwife, the discussion is no longer impersonal. It becomes about personalities and not about philosophies and statistics. More than likely the necessity of discussing things prenatally with her clients has been learned through experience.

The seasoned doula feels that she has a practice style. She has learned her own way of initiating relationships with new clients, conducting prenatal visits and gaining closure when their doula experience is over. When going to a birth, she feels confident that she will know what to do most of the time. What happens is up to the client, the medical careprovider and the labor itself, but she can influence it in small ways. She has let go of the idea that birth must go according to her own ideals and is mother-centered and empowering in her approach. She knows how to get along with most medical people and knows how to introduce herself or any ideas she might have. She feels comfortable in the birth room and as though she belongs there most of the time.

The major area of development for the seasoned doula is her ability to adapt what she knows. The adapting process is something she thinks through; "Will this work here?" or "How can I still use cold on her back if she's in the shower?" She watches nurses or midwives use techniques and files them away for future reference. On the plus side, the seasoned doula knows ten different ways to say, "Did you have any questions about that?" without sounding threatening. Several doulas interviewed at this stage mentioned

*Overall the seasoned doula stage is one of confidence and comfortable growth*

# 3

wanting to share what they know about a particular procedure with their clients rather than getting a nurse or medical careprovider to say it. The responses they got were mixed—sometimes it worked out fine, while other times the medical staff or the clients did not receive well what she said. This is likely a common issue for seasoned doulas to work on.

In addition, novel situations and things that haven't been experienced before still throw her off. She may feel a certain anxiety or ask herself, "What do I do now?" The seasoned doula still goes through a mental process of trying to recall what she learned or read about in order to respond appropriately in a particular situation. She may look to others in the birth room for cues. Then she will reflexively calm herself and recall that what doulas always do is pay attention to the mother. She will center herself again and focus on assisting the mother and offering her and her family emotional support—which is what the essence of being a doula is all about. This will relax her and enable her to function best even if the situation is one she has not experienced before. Not feeling comfortable and confident may jar her a bit, but she recovers and finds her footing again. That is one of the cardinal signs of

the seasoned doula—something new may throw her off for a bit, but she knows to relax and focus on meeting the mother's needs. This brings her back to herself and restores her confidence.

## Personal concerns

More than likely she has had an issue with her husband, partner or children about her dedication to her doula profession. They have had to negotiate their relationship in several different ways for her to continue. Sometimes this has not been easy and she has asked herself if it is all worth it. Her non-birth friends don't really understand sometimes either, and some relationships have ended or faded away; but that happens as people change. She has new doula friends who have become a part of her established support system. They help her grow and she knows they are there for her if a birth should be difficult or she has an unexpected outcome.

Some seasoned doulas have difficulty setting boundaries and may overextend themselves on behalf of their clients. This is an issue that extends forward into the proficient and expert stages of doula work. Doulas may not be aware that they are becoming exhausted from doing so much caring. In general, care workers



are notorious for not paying attention to themselves or their own signals that they need rest and renewal. They are outwardly focused and attuned to the signals of others. Because of this tendency, seasoned doulas need to find ways to stay in tune with their own bodies and psyches. For some, this may mean cultivating new wellness habits or self-centered pleasurable activities, such as a daily walk or frequent massages. Doulas in the more advanced stages mentioned that they had purposefully made changes in their lives years before. This enabled them to balance the demands of the profession and their personal lives.

Some doulas limit clients to only certain months of the year. Other doulas change their practice model to “client share” some or all of the time (see Practice Models of Doula Care). This can be hard because while in the novice and advanced beginner stages, doulas were struggling for clients. Saying “no” to a client or setting a limit on services may feel awkward or unnecessary. However, learning to balance one’s ability to “give” to a new client with what it takes to care for one’s self is a necessary skill a doula must learn as she continues to develop.

Overall the seasoned doula stage is one of confidence and comfortable growth. At this point doulas find more

personal fulfillment and enjoyment of their work. Labor and birth are now familiar processes, as is the setting where she works most often, whether hospital, home or birth center. While they always felt they were making a difference, seasoned doulas now enter the birth room knowing deep inside that things will be better because they are there.

### Seasoned (competent) doula challenges

- Continues to improve her communication skills in special situations with medical providers and staff
- May want to show off what she knows, but knows the birth room is not the place to do it
- May need to find a source of validation for her knowledge and an outlet for activist urges to change birth
- A novel or challenging situation at a birth may throw her off and cause anxiety before she is able to reconnect and be effective again
- Continues to learn new techniques and strategies that broaden and deepen her knowledge base
- Cultivates a practice to pay attention to her own emotional needs and signals for rest and renewal

### Seasoned (competent) doula assets

- Feels comfortable in most situations
- Empowerment-centered in her approach to labor support
- Communicates fairly well with medical staff and careproviders in routine interactions
- Understands that prenatal visits may be her biggest area of influence on birth events
- Effectively initiates relationships with clients and gains closure at the end
- Understands medical terms and verbal shorthand used at births and can explain them to her clients when necessary
- Her comfort measures and support strategy recommendations work
- Feels confident in her ability to give emotional support that matches the mother’s needs most of the time
- Knows where to find supplies in the hospitals most of the time
- Belongs to a support system of doulas and birth people who respect and care for her



## Practice Models of Doula Care

The majority of doulas have an *independent practice (IP)*—meaning that they have their own business that is independent of a hospital, clinic or community organization. The IP doula is self-employed although there may be more than one doula in the practice. IP doulas are usually continuously on call for a client, with a backup doula who is only called in emergencies. Some IP doulas work together and “*client share*.” In a client sharing practice, two or more doulas share call for an individual client. In addition, they may attend the birth in pairs, or work individually, but in eight to 12 hour shifts.

***Hospital based (HB) doulas*** work for a hospital and have a schedule for when they are on call to go to a birth. They are employed by the hospital and paid according to a set amount, whether that is an hourly wage or by the birth. Usually HB doulas do not meet mothers until they are in labor.

***Clinic based doulas*** are allied with a medical clinic as part of the health care team with a physician or midwife. They may be employed by the clinic or by the client. They usually do prenatal visits and may client share or be on call continuously for a mother.



**Agency doulas** work for an agency that takes care of marketing, payment and business responsibilities. The agency director (usually also a doula) matches clients based on geography and individual personal preferences of the doula and the parents. Doulas are paid a set rate by the agency for prenatal visits and labor support. Agencies may also provide antepartum and postpartum doula services.

**Community based (CB) doulas** work for an organization that offers doula services as part of its health care mission. They are usually recruited from the local community and share the same values, experiences and spoken language as the clients they serve. CB doulas usually have expanded duties beyond pregnancy education and labor support. They may also teach life skills training, parenting education and may do some case management. The CB doula works with others in the organization to coordinate services for each mother and family.

**Volunteer doulas** are usually unpaid or receive a small stipend for their expenses. Some organizations have a call schedule and a mother or health care representative calls when a mother in labor would like a

doula. In other areas, organizations match a doula one on one with a client, and this usually includes prenatal visits.

Doulas are creative people and skilled problem solvers! These practice models are simple descriptions of the complex solutions doulas have come up with to make their lives work. Undoubtedly there are variations on each of these models that have made them work for you.

#### ***How do doulas from the different practice models compare on the Dreyfus Model for Doulas continuum?***

The majority of the participants in my study are independent practice doulas, although nine of them (22.5 percent) are hospital based. Hospital based doulas follow the same path in terms of gaining confidence, when to give information, advocacy skills, personal challenges and changing relationships with others. The growth path of HB doulas is more similar than different to IP doulas. Where HB doulas primarily differ is that they do not have the challenges of marketing, obtaining clients or running a business. They also have to develop a separate set of skills to get to know a woman in labor and her family very quickly. Another

difference is that they need to develop and maintain working relationships with other medical staff.

Community based doulas have additional responsibilities and skills, which vary from program to program. While their growth stages might be similar to IP and HB doulas, CB doulas were not included in my study. They are unique and deserve to be studied separately. 🌱



## Stage Four: The Proficient Doula

**I**n all professions, people move through unique stages as they acquire additional skills and are confronted with different situations. It is common to feel that elements from two different stages fit as our experiences and reflections help us to mature. At each phase, people share common perspectives and go through similar growth experiences. It is my hope that by examining these stages of doula experience defined by my research, that doulas support one another more effectively. Together we can help each other through the difficult parts and celebrate our joys and successes!

Donna looks down from the mountain and sees the path she has traveled below her. It has been a part of her life for so long that she knows its twists and turns intimately. The doula path and the path of the rest of her life cannot be separated. As a doula at the proficient level, she has a sense of her own history as a doula and it defines her. It isn't what she *does*, it is who she *is*. She cannot imagine not being a doula. Even if she stopped attending births, she would still be a doula—this is a strong part of her identity. A doula in the third competent stage might say, “Well for a while I was a doula.” The proficient

doula would say, “I’m a doula but I haven’t attended births for a few years.”

### The doula lifestyle

Another marker of the proficient stage doula is that she uses her doula skills in all aspects of her life. She has learned to listen nonjudgmentally and to interject suggestions with detachment whether they are used or not. She does this whether she is talking to her teenagers, their teachers or her clients. “Hmmm” comes naturally to her lips when people are talking and revealing significant information.

Getting ready for a birth now feels routine. For example, the proficient doula knows what to put in her birth bag and what foods to avoid eating while on call. Explaining to people about her lifestyle has become easier and it is just something that she does. It is no longer novel or special. She has filed her doula business taxes more than a few times and has had to renegotiate backup doula arrangements a few times too. She has seen some doulas in her community stop attending births. She may have been surprised by the excitement of novice doulas and wondered if she ever had that much enthusiastic energy.



The medical professionals in her area may know the proficient doula by name or a memorable feature (e.g. silver bracelets). Some may refer patients to her. The proficient doula may have physicians or midwives in her area that she prefers not to work with and tries to avoid. She has developed a tactful way to steer her patients to other doulas or to childbirth classes where they will learn more about different birth philosophies. The proficient doula networks easily in her community. Not only does she have a good referral list for psychological and alternative health services, she has probably met most of these people. They may also refer clients to her. She feels comfortable telling mothers that they may need to contact a professional for psychological support.

### Competent and confident

The proficient doula feels consistently competent at births and is confident in her skills. She knows that she knows a great deal but is humble about it. When a particular circumstance arises at a birth, she has a catalog of strategies to choose from and seems to intuitively know what would work best for this mother and her

## *The proficient doula feels consistently competent at births and is confident in her skills*

family. She is able to project their future needs fairly accurately and prepare them with ease. Between her book knowledge and her experiences, she knows what information her clients need to make sound decisions. The strength of her knowledge base is not in revealing it to clients but in her ability to understand what they need and cleverly assist them in getting information from their medical caregivers. Caregivers may also express that they feel at ease with her role in this process.

Communicating with the medical people at a birth comes quite easily to her. The proficient doula respects her own experience. She exudes a sense of confidence that lets others know she knows what is going on. It isn't arrogance, just a quiet confidence. She is able to pick up on a mother's cues quite easily,

even the subtle ones. She frequently finds herself explaining what she has noticed to nurses and partners when she is encouraging a change in their approach. The proficient doula makes suggestions based on intuition or instinct as well as thinking things through. She has enough obstetrical knowledge to know when to suspect a posterior baby and make recommendations based on those observations. She usually feels comfortable enough to mention her suspicions to the nurse when their relationship is collegial, but her approach is low key and comes from a sense of being on the same team with medical staff rather than anything competitive.

At this point in her career, the proficient doula has been present at births with extraordinary circumstances or unexpected outcomes. She may have



been the doula at the birth of twins, a surprise breech birth or a baby with very low Apgar scores. She may have been with a mother who had a severe medical crisis or an emergency crash cesarean. Mothers may have had complications that required lengthy hospital stays. One of the babies may have been born still, died soon after birth or passed from SIDS. No matter what the crisis, she has been there and she has had to deal with it and the people she is caring for. In the moment, her concern is for the mother and her family. Supporting them emotionally is her primary mission. When the crisis happens, most proficient doulas work on instinct—they just say and do what they have been doing to help these families. Their emotional support does not waiver, and they stay calm and in the present moment. Doulas at earlier stages may have had to stop and think about what to do and then consciously make the leap back into being emotionally supportive. They might have been thrown off for a bit. The proficient doula doesn't even think about it. She does what feels right based on her own experience.

## Depth of emotions

When interviewing doulas in the proficient stage of their professional growth, I was struck by their confidence, their strong sense of themselves as doulas and their deep understanding and trust in their own way of being a doula. However, there was also a sense of sadness, a subtle awareness that each pregnancy and birth holds the potential of pain as well as joy. Upon reflection, proficient doulas were usually surprised at the impact that being a doula had on their lives. When they started on this path, they thought that it would involve some changes; but most of those were viewed as instrumental changes—ways they would structure their lives, being on call, etc. If someone asked, of course being a doula would change them, but they could not articulate how.

Many proficient doulas revealed painful emotional experiences. They have had sad days and ones where they cried a lot. I heard stories of babies that did not live and of a mother's courage in the face of great pain or unfairness. In order to continue, proficient doulas have had to find a way to take care of themselves emotionally, and for some this was a real



struggle. Doulas who had accomplished this task found a spiritual or humanist basis to explain what they had witnessed and give meaning to their choices.

Because of this, one of the main issues for proficient doulas is to take care of themselves in order to be useful to their families and their clients. Sometimes doulas who felt overextended or emotionally exhausted just quit. They said things like, “I’ve seen enough.” The issue may be that they have not paced themselves or taken care of themselves emotionally. Or it may be that one birth experience was especially traumatic and they just could not go on without taking some time off to heal. I heard stories from doulas who felt they suffered from symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder due to birth events.

Proficient doulas who traversed this difficult terrain mentioned many different successful approaches, but all seemed to fit under the theme of finding balance and breathing room in their doula work. This seems to be the flip side of being so strongly identified as a doula. Now that it has been established, employing strategies to balance out the personal intensity of doula work becomes important. Some

doulas made more time for themselves, pursuing creative activities such as writing, painting, cooking, gardening or crafts. Others took up yoga, or an exercise activity they really enjoyed such as bicycling or tennis. Some work related strategies were taking on a doula partner, teaching or training, or starting a birth focused organization.

The path of the proficient doula has been a long one. Quietly confident, she is a well known member of her doula community. By opening up her heart to support women and families through this rite of passage, she has given of her deepest self and been changed by the process, often in unexpected ways. By taking time to pause, reflect and integrate all that she has been through, she can go forward again on her doula path. In order to give to others, the proficient doula needs to make sure she also gives to herself.

### Proficient Doula challenges

- Recognizing signs of distress or trauma and finding appropriate remedies

- Taking the time for good self care: daily, weekly and monthly
- Knowing that being a doula has changed her, sometimes in ways that make her weary and exhausted
- Finding continuing education that is interesting and relevant to her situation
- Discovering a spiritual or humanist basis for her practice that gives comfort and meaning to her life and what she has been through

### Proficient Doula assets

- Being a doula is a strong part of her identity
- Has a great deal of knowledge and trusts herself to implement it
- Her observations and suggestions are usually correct
- Works collegially with medical staff and caregivers whenever possible
- Has long standing relationships with others in the birth community where she lives
- Feels a sense of routine while on call or when going to a birth
- Feels consistently confident in her role and actions 🌸



## Stage Five: The Expert Doula

**T**he expert doula bases her actions on her experiential knowledge. She has been to many births and dealt with vastly different clients and situations. She knows there are many different kinds of crises that can occur and knows that things can happen quickly and at any time.

Her actions come from knowing herself fully and deeply and knowledge of the situation as a whole. She understands the perspectives of the mother, her partner, their family, the medical care provider, nurses and infant(s). She knows how things will appear weeks and months from now and that much of it comes back to a few pivotal moments during the labor. Her knowledge is holistic and so ingrained that her responses are automatic.

She is easily able to grasp the central issue in a situation and act appropriately without considering alternative actions that are inaccurate or would waste time. In other words, she knows what needs to be done and does it without second guessing herself. For example, if the mother unexpectedly feels an overwhelming urge to push but is in an unsuitable place to do so, the doula will immediately assess the possibilities, make

a decision and move the mother into a better position. The expert doula trusts her immediate response without question and takes appropriate action. Her actions are automatic and usually correct. Her brain is in the moment and doesn't see the situation as novel and requiring conscious thought about what to do.

In contrast, the proficient doula would be confident she could handle it but still might have to think through each step. She might need to draw upon her memory of what to do in this particular situation in order to adapt her actions. The competent doula would still look around for help and hesitate before doing what needed to be done. She would feel much less confident about the situation and her actions.

### Skilled confidence

The expert doula can size up a situation in the labor room rather quickly. This does not mean she draws conclusions on incomplete data. It means that she is able to take into account the significant factors contributing to a situation—she knows what matters and is able to assess it. She is skilled in her ability to notice what is important and is able to attribute the correct meaning most of the time even with subtle behavior cues.



She feels entirely comfortable in a wide variety of situations and sees herself as a peer working alongside nurses, midwives and physicians. They are all birth professionals with different roles and areas of specific knowledge. Everyone is essential and has a place on the birth team. She feels this way even if other people do not see her as necessary or significant. Her attitude conveys professionalism and acceptance. She can convey important shades of meaning through her non-verbal behavior. She is not manipulative, just aware of how different people could perceive her actions. She is in control of what she does almost all the time.

Sometimes the expert doula discovers she is one of the most experienced people on the birth team. After attending births for almost a decade or even two, she may have attended more births or a wider variety of births than the labor and delivery nurse or even the obstetrical resident. She may make suggestions that the medical staff has not heard of before or ask questions they had not considered. When this happens she may adjust her approach to create even more of a team atmosphere and sense of camaraderie. In some settings where the doula is well respected, less

experienced staff may be assigned so they can informally learn labor support techniques by working alongside her.

This does not mean the expert doula is authoritative or arrogant. She has learned to flow with the needs of the mother, the labor and the unfolding circumstances of the birth with an ease that comes from experience. She knows her place in the scheme of things and how to help mothers to achieve their goals.

### Dealing with limitations

On the flip side, the expert doula is frequently frustrated by what she cannot control. She may be upset by the attitudes and actions of medical care providers and staff and her inability to change things positively on her client's behalf. She has an acute awareness of the limitations of the doula's role at births. She accepts these limitations but she may also be angry about what she cannot control. She may grieve for the way labors and births could have been if hospital protocols and medical care providers would have been different. Mothers may be satisfied with their births, but as an experienced doula she knows the joy that might have been possible or problems that may have been prevented. While intellectually

*Many expert  
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she understands that North American culture has a fear of birth that women readily absorb and that physicians must constantly think about defending their actions in court, the emotional impact is very difficult to handle. If she continues to work in this atmosphere without an outlet for her feelings, the expert doula risks her emotional health.

In order to counter this effect, expert doulas have found different ways of handling their distress. Many expert doulas use their knowledge to effect change in their communities. They may work as birth activists to change a particular policy such as mandatory separation of mother and baby during the first hour after birth. They may reach out to young women, educating them about the realities of pregnancy and birth and thus lessening their fear. They may teach independent childbirth classes that allow them the freedom to share what they know. What these and other strategies have in common is to give the expert doula a sense that she is able to create positive change regarding birth. It offers a counterweight to the stress she feels when she is not able to change something at an individual woman's birth.

## Finding balance

Self care is also a priority for the expert doula. If she has made it to this stage, she has experienced what happens when she stretches herself too thin or takes on too much. She recognizes her own individual signals of distress and pays attention to them—most of the time. She takes time for retreat and reflection and knows the number of her chiropractor or massage therapist by heart. When she needs to she can say “no” to a new client unless economic reasons necessitate her continued practice.

She has an established emotional support system that may be spread across the country or across the globe. The only doulas who are really helpful or understanding of her perspective are other expert or proficient doulas. Novice, advanced beginner and seasoned doulas seek advice and energy from her. Their perspective is different enough that it is not really helpful when she is in crisis or needs to reflect and relax.

The expert doula has probably moved into another position that makes use of her professional experience. She may oversee a doula program or have become a doula trainer. She may be a provider of continuing education for doulas



or a speaker at local or international conferences. While this can happen during the seasoned or proficient stages of doula development, the expert doula is the most likely one to be in these positions.

The expert doula has also expanded her expertise into a wider variety of areas. She may have become a lactation consultant or be an infant behavior specialist. The expert doula has probably considered becoming a midwife at one time or another. More than likely this is borne out of her desire to treat mothers differently during labor. Some expert doulas are also midwives but most are not. They have fully embraced the doula's role as being right for them.

Expert doulas are usually older—they have definitely been doulas for many years. They have weathered family crises and seen themselves change over the years. Physically she may not have the energy or the abilities she had as a novice doula. The expert doula trusts herself in birth situations but she may also be wondering, “What’s next? How do I use what I know?” For some doulas this is an inner quest, one that leads them to a deeper sense of spirituality in their lives. For others, it spurs them to find jobs or positions that utilize their doula knowledge.

These women are doulas in every aspect of who they are. They use their communication skills and natural empathy in all of their personal and professional interactions, which heightens the quality of their lives. Expert doulas are our wise women—they know when to speak up and when it is better to keep silent. They may be our leaders and the ones we turn to for advice. They are also the culmination of the last 20 plus years of the modern labor support movement. We have all contributed to creating a profession of birth experts that are unique in the world, and we are rebuilding a knowledge that was lost from our history as childbearing women. And we are all changing birth simply by our existence—no matter what our stage of development.

### Expert Doula challenges

- Continued self care
- Discovering an outlet for frustration at the obstetrical system
- Strong feelings of anger, sadness, grief and/or powerlessness
- Finding an effective way to create change that matters to her

- Realizing when she has been traumatized or reached her limits and getting appropriate help
- Sharing her knowledge
- Finding a satisfying answer to “What’s next?”

### Expert Doula assets

- Deeply ingrained, intuitive understanding of birth and of mothers
- Ability to understand multiple perspectives simultaneously
- Can flow with whatever happens at a birth
- Trusts intuitive actions and responses
- Feels like an essential member of the birth team alongside care providers and nurses
- Doula skills are applied automatically in many aspects of her life
- Practices good self-care most of the time
- Has a support system that is at her level of expertise and emotional development
- Is respected by the birth community for her knowledge and expertise
- Has discovered a spiritual or humanist basis for her practice that gives comfort and meaning to her life 🌿



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