

A thick fog has rolled in, light refracting in every direction. You can see a few arm-lengths in each direction but not much farther. You try to get your bearings but all of the familiar markings are hidden by the fog. You take tentative steps forward seeking out firm ground. It is disorienting to navigate this new and unrecognizable path.

On your next step, your right foot plunges into water; not what you wanted. You weren't prepared for water - no boots, no change of socks. The water isn't too cold but still, it adds to your discomfort and disorientation. You have no choice but to take another step though and now your left foot is also submerged. After a few more steps, you stop. You try to look through the fog to see if there's a dry spot or a familiar landmark ahead but you see nothing.

In that moment, although you will ultimately have to push onward, cautiously and with uncertainty, you pause; tired and overwhelmed. In that same moment, a raft appears. You happily and with great relief climb in, take a deep breath and pick up the paddle. The raft provides comfort and security. You squint, padding towards a familiar old oak tree. The fog seems to be lifting ever-so-slightly and with it, you feel your mood lift. Having the raft has allowed you to clear your head and make a decision about moving forward.

This raft is your postpartum doula.

Bringing a new baby home can feel a bit like navigating a foggy night in unfamiliar territory! Lining up the support of a postpartum doula is one way to avoid feeling alone and to secure that raft for the uncharted waters of being a new parent. The raft grants you the space to be fully present in the early days of getting to know your new baby. The raft releases you from feeling bogged down with questions to which you don't have answers and from seemingly unresolvable worries.

The origin of the word "doula" is Greek and it translates to "woman's servant". The role of a postpartum doula is indeed to serve the needs of the mother or new parent. It is one of companionship, non-judgmental compassion and non-medical support. An additional driving force for postpartum doulas is to provide education on the multitude of experiences unfamiliar to new parents. Imagine the relief for a new mother to have someone provide suggestions with evidence-based information, in a compassionate and supportive way.

Given the nature of this work and the relationship between doula and mother/new parent, there are established guidelines and standards of practice in certification which foster appropriate boundaries. One very significant guiding

principle is that of integrity. A postpartum doula provides emotional, educational and non-medical support within a family's home. The following demonstrate some specific examples of the ways in which a doula could provide this support: helping the new parents figure out concrete strategies to make sure they each get sufficient sleep, setting up "feeding time" baskets to be stationed in different locations around the house (this can be especially helpful if there is an older sibling in the home and the basket contains items for them too), and celebrating the small victories such as wearing baby while taking a walk or having success in soothing baby. A postpartum doula does not diagnose or treat medical conditions; nor proffer "solutions" for any ailments. This is beyond a postpartum doula's scope.

In all aspects of this profession, a postpartum doula must carry herself with a strong sense of principles. Her conduct must be of the highest integrity, and she must treat her clients with honesty and decency. A postpartum doula's relationship with other doulas must be one based upon respect, fairness and courtesy. This will only serve to deepen a doula's resources and connections to both the birth worker community as well as the population at large. As per DONA International guidelines, the health and welfare of mothers, their babies, families and friends are a driving force behind the conscientious postpartum doula.

In many other countries and cultures outside of the United States, there is postpartum support as part of the infrastructure of maternal health care. The **Tresillian Family Care Centres**¹ in Sydney, Australia is an excellent example of postnatal support structurally integrated in the medical system. A quick glance at their website gives you a clear idea of how helpful their services could be to new parents (their motto is: "it's in our nature to nurture"). They offer easily accessible advice and tips on the following hot-button topics of new parenthood: settling, daily activities, breastfeeding, nutrition and crying. There is also a parent's helpline phone number prominently displayed.

In Singapore, there is a comparable institution at **Mother & Child**². This center offers prenatal childbirth education classes and the opportunity to arrange for a birth doula. Postnatal support options include lactation consultants, midwife home visits and new mom support groups. A pediatric dietitian is also on staff. To house all of these resources in one place demonstrates a prioritization of maternal health.

¹ *Tresillian Family Care Centres: Baby Advice & Parenting Tips*. Sydney Local Health District, 2021, www.tresillian.org.au. Accessed 16 March 2021.

² *Prenatal / Antenatal and Postnatal services at Mother and Child Singapore*. Mother and Child, 2019, www.motherandchild.com.sg/services. Accessed 16 March 2021.

At *Maternal*³ in Lima, Peru a similar establishment exists through which pregnant women and partners can attend childbirth preparation classes and couple strengthening workshops. In the postpartum, there are myriad offerings from breastfeeding support to “stimulation” classes for babies, as well as infant massage. A postpartum workshop to address physical and emotional issues is also available. What an incredibly comprehensive program addressing not just topics of pregnancy but also the massive transition to matrescence.

In the United States, new mothers and parents lack such extensive institutional support and are therefore especially vulnerable to a greater postpartum struggle than is necessary. The maternal morbidity and mortality rates are too high for a first-world country. Probing even further, these rates among black and brown women are staggering and appalling. Black women are 3 times more likely to die from pregnancy complications than white women.⁴ This injustice also cascades into morbidity rates related to birth and postpartum complications for non-white women. It is systemic and reflective of the overwhelming racial disparities embedded in our maternal health care system.

Pushed from the nest of robust prenatal care, a new mother is left roaming in a blanketing fog with only periodic visits to her own healthcare provider or the pediatrician. Neither focus wholly on the emotional needs of the mother. The postpartum doula fills this gaping hole by reading and meeting the needs of new parents, providing education and resources and most importantly, a life raft of compassion, camaraderie and understanding.

³ *Maternal* | *Psicoprofilaxis y preparación para el parto* | *Estimulación prenatal* | *Lactancia Materna*. Maternal, 2019, <https://maternal.pe>. Accessed 16 Mar. 2021

⁴ *Racial Disparities in Maternal and Infant Health: Current Status and Efforts to Address Them*. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2022, <https://kff.org>. Accessed 15 January 2023