
When Birth Doulas Must Provide Labor Support at a Distance®

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In the wake of the Clovid-19 Pandemic, doulas have been asked to pivot their care to a virtual platform. While it is challenging to not be able to provide the hands-on support we are accustomed to, virtual support can be surprisingly effective.

I am defining “virtual” to be primarily through visual and auditory support using electronic devices. Texting may be an option, but is not the primary intent for the type of support discussed here.

In a virtual platform, almost everything a doula offers in labor can still be provided:

- helping to find a comfortable position
- providing reminders about rest, hydration and nutrition
- providing guidance, relaxation and coping skills
- helping to answer questions
- helping to formulate questions for care providers
- guiding the partner through hands-on body work

Before labor

- Choose a platform. Zoom for Healthcare, Doxie.me, Skype for Business and Facetime may or may not be HIPAA compliant
- Walk your client through a session of using the platform in advance of the actual “Labor Day”.
- Consider accumulating a collection of videos of positions and comfort measures that you would like partners to learn to use in advance. During labor these videos can be dropped into a chat box.
- You may have to create some of these short videos yourself in advance. At 2 a.m. you may not want to wake your daughter so you can demonstrate a double-hip squeeze!
- Collect pictures of comfort measures and positions to show during your virtual experience. These can be purchased for a low fee from places like Plumtree Baby and Etsy.
- Prior to labor, discuss being taken into the shower room. Your support while the person labors behind the shower curtain may continue to be helpful. You can make suggestions about seating, towels, lighting, shower head location and more that a partner might not consider.
- Prior to providing virtual labor support at the hospital, check on what the Wi-Fi connection will be. Hopefully the birthing person’s Wi-Fi will be good enough. Often, the hospital's guest Wi-Fi service is not effective or will cut out after a certain time.

- Set realistic expectations with your clients in advance of them heading to the hospital. There is always potential for Wi-Fi to be ineffective in large buildings. Get the number to Labor & Delivery in case their phone dies. If you have to call, you can be connected to their room.
- Some hospitals may not have good access with some carriers. For example, our local Kaiser hospital had a poor connection with AT&T. However, Verizon always had a good connection. Ask.
- Ask clients to consider three device needs:
 - a device to see the doula
 - a device that doula can discreetly communicate with partner if needed
 - a device to play music
- Consider bluetooth wireless earbuds. You can be in your client's ears and even the partner's ears simultaneously. They can set up their phone, tablet or computer and connect it, so you can have your face present and your voice heard without interfering with the nurse's work.
- Consider a tri-pod, lighting and/or a microphone for yourself.
- Explain that you will need to plan for breaks for yourself. Set a temporary plan with them. Perhaps every hour for 5 minutes you will go to a "video off" black tile, or a card with an affirmation written on it in the lens. Ask them to recognize we will have to be flexible on Labor Day with this plan.
- Ask for grace. We are not experts at this. None of us have provided support virtually during a pandemic. By asking in advance, you will feel more confident that you will all work together as a team to make it work.

Hospital Bag

- Share ideas for their birth bags. Items that you carry in your doula bag may not be on their list of things to pack. Review items that you think they should take with them that you would normally have brought yourself.
- Keep a list or photo of all items in their bag so you can refer to it in labor.
- In a sanitary fashion, consider sharing a "Doula Box." Fairy lights, earplugs, hair ties, lip balm, massager tools, massage oil, labor position pictures, coconut water and affirmations are possibilities. Plastic items can be sanitized before and after labor and returned.
- Prior to labor practice with a sheet of labor positions that you can refer to during labor. They can bring the sheet with them in their bag. Have it with you during their labor as well.

Virtual Support During Pregnancy to Prepare for Birth

- Prior to the birth you, may want to make voice recording files and share them. Examples are guided relaxation, meditation and affirmations. While you certainly can direct them to apps and other sources for that, it may be helpful to start creating that auditory connection that you will be providing in advance of the birth.
- Consider practicing relaxation and visualization techniques via phone. For example, have a phone appointment a few nights each week while they lay in bed and prepare to sleep. Our agreements are: 1) stop me anytime 2) falling

asleep is ok 3) we will end by saying “Goodnight” and we can debrief the next day.

- Prior to birth, review their birth plans. Consider asking them to add appreciation to the staff for their dedication during this pandemic and that you will also have virtual doula support.
- Prepare a list of affirmations for clients to choose from. Use them!

When Labor Begins

- Depending on regulations in your area, you may be able to join them in-person in early labor. Begin what you can of rituals, rhythm and relaxation at home, so that your client can continue following your guidance with these at the hospital.
- If you are following them to the hospital in your car and can safely do so, use speaker phone to continue the breathing pattern. Agree that the person in labor will cue the contraction with a noise like a breath or a sigh so you know when to begin.
- Different doulas handle early labor support in varying ways. Many text in early labor. In the case of virtual support, consider establishing virtual contact with phone calls or video early in labor, rather than by text. Allowing them to hear and see you early on will help establish trust in this new system. They will begin to see that you are able to provide practical and appropriate suggestions. They will hear the calm in your voice or see the calm in your face. This can be helpful for avoiding heading to the birth location too early. Because of this early labor support, they will be more likely to continue to access your services when active labor progresses.

Devices for Support at the Hospital

- There are a variety of devices that birthing people can bring to the hospital. Laptops, tablets and smart phones are obvious options. Ideally, you want this to be a hands-free experience for them.
- The birthing person and their partner may want to bring a long cord for charging purposes, as well as an emergency battery pack.

Pros of a Laptop or Tablet

- can sit on table
- can sit on bed-stand next to bed
- your face will appear bigger to them

Cons of a Laptop or Tablet

- must have a large enough surface to rest on; this is often the tray table in the room
- Nurses often move tables to do their work resulting in you needing to have someone put you back in place

Pros of a Smart Phone

- can be propped on a tripod in a variety of places in the room
- can be connected to ear buds or a speaker via Blue Tooth

- with permission of hospital staff, can be attached via clamp, or even taped in place with a pop socket, or rest on top of the “pump box” of an IV pole
- IV poles tend not to be moved as much as tables in a room

Cons of a Smart Phone

- may require the purchase of a tripod
- your face will be small

Setting the space from where you will provide support:

- Create a nest for your personal of comfort as the doula at home. A stool to put your feet on, a blanket, drinks, snacks, your favorite scent, pictures of comfort techniques and positions you think might be helpful to show in the moment as well as a list of their labor bag items will help. Have their favorite affirmations on cards to be placed in front of the camera lens when you are on a break. Make your go-to list now so you are ready on labor day.
- An arrow sticker pointed toward your camera lens on your laptop will remind you to look into the camera. A smile sticker reminds you to keep a calm face.
- Consider the space you're in when doing “the virtual doula thing” a Sacred Space. Minimize distractions. What will they see? A calm space, or laundry? Think “how will she remember this?”
- Take some breaths. The relaxation we would like them to experience should be held in your body as well. Mentally and emotionally set your intentions for yourself prior to providing support. Something like, “I leave behind my distractions of the day. I am present in this moment. I empty my head so my heart can be filled” may remind you, you are not here to multi-task. You are here to be fully committed to their physical and emotional well being. Protect her memory. They will not get a do-over.

Protocols for having the virtual device in the labor room

- As new staff members join the labor team, ask the partner to introduce you.
- Use professional hospitality reminding all that this will not be recorded.
- To allow for an un-interrupted experience, have them put their device into "do not disturb mode."
- Be prepared to have your device on mute, so they are not hearing background noises in your space.
- Be ready to "un-mute" it when you are providing verbal support.
- Remember that if the device you are shown on gets moved and you end up looking at the ceiling or something, they can still see you normally!
- Be aware of your resting face! Unintentionally, some of us may have a "BRF" (B* %chy Resting Face). A smile sticker up by the lens may be a good reminder.
- As you speak, look into the lens, not off to the side.
- Consider having lighting for your face.
- Remind partners not to plug into outlets with red outlet plates or unplug any devices in a hospital outlet.
- Be aware that at some hospitals, your device may have to be turned off during pushing times.

Connie Sultana, BA, CD/BDT(DONA), ICCE, LCCE is an active Birth Doula, Doula Trainer and Passion for Birth Lamaze Teacher Trainer living in Santa Rosa, California, USA. She has provided phone support on the way to the hospital for 100s of clients and virtual support to a few during birth. The best and brightest doulas and CBEs she knows contributed ideas for this article. More tips can be found at <https://www.conniesultana.com/doula-support/>