

# Doula Support for Early Labor



Early labor support varies, depending on the birthing person's needs and how the labor is presenting. It is normal, generally speaking, to start with phone/text support. In some cases, the doula might go to the client's home to check in with them in the very early stages; in others, the doula might wait until things seem to be getting a little more intense before providing in-home support. In yet other cases, the doula might not go to the client's home at all, and meet them at the birth location instead, whether due to previous agreement, or because that's how the situation happened to develop. It's a good idea to have a conversation with your clients about their desires for support during this time -- keeping in mind, of course, the fact that what they think they want prenatally may be entirely different from what they end up wanting when they are in labor, and that often, the circumstances of the labor will dictate your actions more than previous agreements.

It's important to remember that labor can be very long, often much longer than parents are picturing when they are in the early stages. (Except, of course, when it's short! Pay attention to what's going on and what your clients are telling you.) Parents often become very excited in early labor, and often want to immediately throw a lot of energy into the idea of being in labor. One way that you can look at your role in early labor is helping parents calibrate their responses appropriately and save their energy for the most demanding portions of the experience, which are still in the future. So, is this a good time to be up and about, rocking

on the birth ball, practicing breathing exercises, and getting sacral pressure? Or might it be better in this moment to just take a nap, or curl up in front of the TV with a snack, and save the ball, breathing, and pressure for later, when the labor really demands it? Ultimately, of course, you can't control your clients' thoughts and actions -- nor should you try to. You will all navigate the situation together, and deal with what it presents.

**Here is a list of ideas for early labor support.** You might wish to teach some of these techniques to the partner and birthing person in advance, so that they can provide support when it's still too early for you to join them. Although this collection of ideas are listed here as "early labor" support, they may be useful at various other points in labor, and in the prenatal and postpartum periods as well.

- **Massage** – using the amount of pressure the client requests, smoothly rub or knead various parts of the body – the shoulders, lower back, arms, legs, hands and feet. Long strokes can be used to calm them, harder strokes can be used to provide a sensation to focus on (distracting from the contractions), hold-and-release strokes can be used to get certain muscles to relax.
- **Effleurage** – Very light, circular massage done on a small area of the body – the shoulders, upper or lower back, belly, hips
- **Hand massage** – holding the hand top up in both your hands, rub your thumbs across the top from the middle to the outer edges, as if you were breaking a 2-stick Popsicle in half, applying pressure to the palm of the hand with your knuckles. Or, using your thumbs, rub circles in the palm.
- **Foot massage** – use similar techniques as in the hand massages above.
- **Heat pack** – In early labor, heat is often desired on the back of the neck, on the back, or on the lower abdomen. There are a variety of ways you can use heat in labor including heat packs bought from the store, an electric heating pad, a rice sock heated in the microwave (put uncooked

rice in a long sock, tie the open end closed and heat in a microwave for two minutes. Let it sit for a few minutes to make sure it doesn't continue to get hotter before placing it on the body), or a hot pack made from a waterproof pad (heat some water almost to boiling, soak a towel with the hot water, wrap in a waterproof pad, tape it up and place it inside a towel or pillow case as a heat pack). It is important to make sure you do not apply hot packs directly to the skin. Instead wrap it in a towel or fabric to ensure it does not cause a burn.

- **Warm water** – A shower or bath may feel good. Sometimes in early labor, taking a bath in hot water can slow or stall contractions. A good rule of thumb if this happens is to wait about 20 minutes and if the contractions don't pick back up, then get out of the tub until later in labor when the contraction pattern is more active.
- **Distraction**- taking a walk, watching a movie, playing a game, resting or doing an early labor project are all ideas for ways someone may distract themselves in early labor. Distraction techniques often become less effective as labor moves along; this is often a sign that things are progressing.
- **Fabric massage** – using a long piece of fabric or a scarf made of luxurious fabric (silk, velvet, etc.) cover the client with it and slowly jiggle it, pulling it very slowly from the head down to the feet. The fabric can also be scented with a soothing fragrance.

## Pain-coping Practices for Early Labor

In addition to the pain coping practices you learn in the course, such as Breath Awareness and Non-Focused Awareness, these practices can be used to help people find their rhythm and focus in labor.

- **Mindfulness** – Notice what your mind is telling you about this moment; quiet your mind and focus on being in the moment, being at peace,

being at one with the experience, noticing the details in your body and of your surroundings

- **Toning** – Using a hum or low tone, encourage the birthing person to make a sound that vibrates low in their body. This usually creates a soothing vibration and has an opening and relaxing effect. Continue toning/humming with the out breath. Having others in the room join in with the birthing person can be helpful too.
- **Visualization** –Some helpful visualizations in labor are:
  - Imagining yourself coping beautifully and strong with each sensation
  - Breathing in strength and breathing out effort
  - Being in a special place where you feel totally safe and relaxed and loved
  - The cervix softening and melting away
- **Guided imagery** –You may talk your client through an image or suggest they lead themselves silently. Some ideas are to imagine the cervix as the opening of a flower, riding the contraction as you'd ride a wave, a flame growing with each contraction, etc.

## Ways to Encourage a “Slow” Labor

Sometimes, labor may not start when a client and/or their care provider expects. Sometimes, labor may appear to stop and start for hours, or maybe even days. Sometimes, labor may appear to start as expected, but then not progress. The list below gives strategies that might help encourage the onset of labor and/or encourage the establishment of regular, progressing contractions.

It may be helpful for you, as the doula, to try to understand why the client feels the need to encourage the onset or speed of their labor. Is it the emotional pressure of wanting their labor to follow the path that they had expected? Is it pressure from timelines instituted by a medical care provider? The distinction may be an important one, and may guide how you work with the situation.

- Change positions/activities every 30-60 minutes.
- Walk. (Try doing “funny walks” with asymmetrical stomping or marching.)
- Dance.
- Climb stairs or walk curbs (with one foot on top and one foot on the ground, tilting the pelvis side to side dramatically with each step)
- If there has been a lot of light/activity/noise, change it up by creating a cave-like atmosphere: lights off, no chatting, no extra people, soothing music, etc.
- Acupressure.
- Acupuncture. (Check with their medical care provider.)
- Labor-stimulating herbs or homeopathics. (Check with their medical care provider.)
- Nipple stimulation. (Check with their medical care provider)
- Sex. (As long as membranes have not been ruptured.) Orgasm.