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How to be a supportive birth partner during childbirth

Whether it's your partner, friend or daughter due to give birth, being asked to be a birth partner is an honour. However, providing practical and emotional support during labour can be a daunting role too.

What is a birth partner?

A [birth](#) partner is someone who is usually close to the [pregnant](#) person, such as a partner, trusted friend or relative, who can offer support during the birth experience. Some people hire a doula, who can give emotional and practical support before, during and after childbirth. Although they may have lots of experience of [childbirth](#), they may not necessarily have medical training.

The role of the birth partner varies widely. It can mean keeping the birther calm, fetching them food and drink or advocating for them - communicating what they want or need during [labour](#).

"Birth partners are a huge part of the experience of having a [baby](#). It is very important when preparing to give birth that people feel that their birth partner is prepared, confident and readily able to attend the birth," says Alix Taylor, who co-runs the hypnobirthing organisation [The Birth Uprising](#).

Hypnobirthing teaches [relaxation](#) techniques such as visualisation, [breathing](#) and [mindfulness](#) to improve the experience of labour and birth. It also provides practical information about labour and recovery.

[Studies](#) have suggested that informed birth partners can vastly improve the birth experienced by bridging communication gaps between health workers and women, which can boost confidence. [Research](#) has also shown that companions can reduce instances of interventions and improve outcomes for childbirth too.

What does a birth partner do?

There is no 'one-size-fits-all' approach to being a birth partner. For some women, the emphasis will be on providing emotional [support](#) in the form of calming words, breathing techniques and encouragement. For others, a birth partner is there to ensure their preferences are communicated and acknowledged.

"What makes a good birth partner will vary massively depending on what it is that the person who is [pregnant](#) would like," says Taylor. "For example, someone who likes everything 'just so' or who is very tidy and organised may need to feel like someone else is confidently taking on that role for them to be able to relax.

"This could be the birth partner having a checklist to go through to ensure nothing is missed, having the baby's things nicely organised so that items can be found easily or keeping the birthing space neat and tidy," she adds.

Others may need their birth partner to offer primarily emotional [support](#), to help them if they feel [anxious](#) or if they experience any changes in circumstances.

Finally, some birthers may wish for their birth partner to be their advocate and their 'rational brain' throughout labour, Taylor adds. "When we are with professionals, it's common to struggle to speak up for ourselves and ask questions to get more information without feeling like a nuisance," she says. "A birth partner may be in charge of sourcing information and helping to talk things through."

Tips for birthing partners

Be honest

It is a privilege to be someone's birth partner, but not everyone will be comfortable with the idea. It's essential to be honest and upfront with the person giving birth, so they can organise alternatives or work through any [worries](#) with you.

"This might go as far as not wanting to do it at all, but it could also be in terms of their willingness to carry out certain aspects of the role. If a birth partner doesn't feel competent with an element that is important to the birther, then all is not lost," says Taylor.

Some people may choose to have a couple of birth partners who are confident in different aspects of support. For example, one person may help with practical tasks and another may offer emotional guidance.

Stay calm

Staying [calm](#) is crucial. Witnessing childbirth can be a very intense and stressful experience, but the focus needs to be on the person in [labour](#) and their needs. Rather than pretending to be calm, it can be more helpful for birth partners to process any fears and [anxieties](#) beforehand, says Taylor. This will mean they feel more confident in their role.

"How a birth partner feels will impact the birther," she says. "We have all been in a room with someone [stressing](#) out and felt ourselves become panicked too."

Manage discussions

The birth partner may also need to manage any discussions around the birther's care during labour. "This may mean asking care providers to elaborate when they give recommendations, asking for the risks and benefits, or requesting time to discuss things privately," says Taylor.

"The birther may not feel able to advocate for themselves in the throes of [labour](#) and so they will need you to get as much information as possible and help them to process this to help make a decision."

Find out what the birther needs

Birth partners should focus on what the person giving birth wants and how to support them. This can mean developing a [birth plan](#) together, finding out where they want to give birth and if they are OK with certain obstetric interventions. It's important for the [birth](#) partner to understand the reasoning behind the birther's preferences.

"A birth partner can help with this by making sure that they are involved in as much preparation for the birth as possible," says Taylor. "If the birther is attending [antenatal](#) classes then this should be something that the birth partner does as well wherever possible."

During the birth, partners may also want to keep notes of key events, including contraction times and location changes. They can also help to manage the environment by keeping the space calm and quiet.

Look after themselves

Finally, it's important for birth partners to [look after themselves](#) too. This can mean getting rest when possible, [eating](#), staying [hydrated](#) and [speaking to trusted friends](#) or family members if they are stressed.

Ultimately, a birth partner can only support a birther properly if they are healthy and relaxed. [Self-care](#) is key and the aircraft analogy is fitting – it's important to put on your own oxygen mask first, before helping someone else with theirs.

Be aware of their role in an emergency

It's also crucial for the birth partner to be aware of their role if the birther experiences an emergency or has to have an unplanned [caesarean](#). The birther should discuss with their birth partner whether there are circumstances in which they want them to step forwards or backwards. For example, if the birther wants medical staff to take charge in the likelihood of a serious complication. It's important for the birther and the partner to talk through the [birth plan](#) to include every eventuality.

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