**Birthing Empowerment: A Doula's Guide to Birth |S4 EP 102**

Because as doulas, you know, we have to love you unconditionally. We do not judge, we do not question, you know, your choices. We are there to support and empower you throughout the whole process.

Have you ever had that sort of thing being put into a birth plan? And then if so, like what happens when that goes off piste? You know, we stay as flexible as we can to ensure such a safe and comfortable experience, but also honouring our client's wishes as best as we can. Women in labour, one piece of advice, only one thing that you're going to tell her, what would it be? Welcome to Sense by Meg Fora. The podcast that's brought to you by ParentSense, the app that takes guesswork out of parenting.

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This is Sense by Meg Fora and I am Meg Fora. I'm your host and your guide in all things parenting, everything through the perinatal journey, which means from conception all the way through until five years old. So it's that this kind of first formative years of life.

And as you know, each week I invite a guest to be on with me and sometimes we talk to a mum and she asks me questions and other times I ask a fellow colleague and a kind of a partner in the parenting journey to come alongside me and to talk around something that is a very deep speciality for them. And today I'm absolutely delighted to be joined by a doula. And if you don't know what that word means, you will know by the end of this podcast, of course.

And her name is Kat. Kat, welcome to the podcast today. Thank you so much Meg for having me.

You know, especially with World Doula Week coming up, I'm so honoured to be here with you today and just to let everyone know what a doula is, what our roles are and just, yeah, everything doula. Yes. So actually Kat, we are in the midst of doula week right now and as this podcast goes live, and so it just felt very appropriate to have somebody come on and talk about what it is to be a doula, what a doula is.

And then I'm also actually going to give a little bit of my journey as well, as I did have experience of using a doula. So I guess the best thing to do before we kick off is for us to tell you a little bit about who you are, what your absolute passion is and maybe a little bit about your family as well. Oh, so I'm Kat.

I've been a doula for about 10 years now. So a little bit of a granny in the industry. So yeah, my journey into being a doula really started with the birth of my first daughter.

I'm a mom of three girls. And just having the absolute support and love from my team inspired me into this new love of birth. And it struck such a unique, amazing feeling within the birthing realm on how powerful we are.

And I don't think I would have had such a positive birthing experience if I didn't have the support and the love from my team that was with me with my daughters. So yeah, I fell in love with the birthing world and I haven't looked back since. Excellent.

So for those moms who are not familiar with the term doula, can you tell us a little bit about what doulas do, who they are and what their role is? Do they deliver babies? What do they do? Sure. So what is a doula? So we are professionally trained individuals and we offer physical, emotional and informational support to expected moms, to their families, single parents, throughout the whole realm of family connectiveness. We are there to support you before birth, during birth and of course, after birth.

I think we're the real work that really does start. We are not medically trained professionals, which means we don't have doctor's qualifications, etc. But our roles include emotional support.

So continuously, emotionally supporting you during your pregnancy, your labor and postpartum. And just being that encouragement for our moms and our families and creating a calm and supportive environment. Physical support, of course.

We provide comfort measures such as massaging, positioning suggestions, breathing techniques and assistance with relaxation and exercise to help ease those kind of labor discomforts. We are there to be your voice. So we help families understand their childbirth options.

We help them navigate the healthcare system. So we are able to kind of inform them with regards to what happens in a natural birth, cesarean birth, etc. We communicate.

So we facilitate communication between our families and their partners, as well as the family and partners and their medical team. We are a continuous presence within your birthing bubble. We remain with the families from beginning, middle and end.

Continuously supporting them and providing complete love and compassion. As well as postpartum supports, of course, like I said, that's when the real work really does start. Ensuring that very fine line of just giving birth to complete, I don't know what I'm doing with this beautiful baby I've just given birth to.

So helping you with breastfeeding, breastfeeding support, newborn care and just really adjusting you into this new role of parenthood. Absolutely. The word that jumped out for me, you said it a couple of times, was continuous and ongoing.

And I think that is the kind of one of the key differences between a doula and for instance, maybe a gynecologist or even a midwife. And I mean, my story of having a doula was I didn't know what a doula was when I obviously felt pregnant and was having my firstborn James. And I landed up in Constantinburg MediClinic, having a very traditional hospital delivery.

And it was actually a classic delivery. I mean, I dilated kind of a centimetre an hour. I gave birth without an epidural or any pain relief.

But I had alongside me and of course, my gyne would pop in and out and a carinel would come in and she'd see if I was doing and then she'd go back out again and she'd say, okay, you know, you're four centimetres dilated. I'll be back in kind of two hours when I've done my patients. And so this went on through the day.

And eventually, obviously I gave birth and Cara was in the room when I delivered. But there was a woman in the room who never left me. And her name was Louette.

And she was just alongside me the whole way through. She actually was a qualified nurse. But her main role was actually as a doula.

And when I gave birth to Alex, my second, she happened to be there as well. And then when I wanted to have Emily, I knew that I... And Alex was a particularly difficult delivery. She was a posterior delivery again with no pain relief, which I mean, if anybody's done that, it's not for the faint hearted.

It was terrible. It was really, really hard. But Louette was there with me and she kind of really saw me through it.

And I ended up delivering naturally with no pain relief, which is almost impossible with a posterior delivery because they're just so painful. And so when it came to delivering Em, I sought her out again. She was there 100%.

She never left my side. Cara came and went. And in fact, with my third, it ended up being a cesarean section and Louette was there right the way through in the delivery room as well.

And that's where my kind of my experience of doulas came from. I know without a shadow of a doubt that my first two deliveries would not have been without pain relief had she not been there. And potentially even my second one wouldn't have been a vaginal delivery if she hadn't been there.

So I place a massive amount of importance on these women. I really do. I think that doulas have an incredibly important role to actually play.

So if I was a mom who was pregnant right now and I hadn't come across Louette, how does a mom start to actually choose a doula and how does she seek her out before she actually is going to deliver instead of just kind of finding somebody in the kind of delivery room? How does it all happen? So, you know, when you are choosing your doula, I think it is important even before that word doula comes up that, you know, you and your partner kind of discuss, you know, that you would like to have a doula. Like you said, you know, us doulas are not only there to support moms, we are there to support the families. And, you know, a couple of things that, you know, someone can consider when choosing a doula is you know, it's important to perhaps interview multiple doulas.

You know, myself, I'm quite a loud personality. I'm very, you know, my hands always, you know, fly up and down and perhaps my personality might not gel with your personality. So it is important that, you know, you do interview a wide number of doulas.

There are quite a few websites where you are able to find doulas in your area, in your region, et cetera, as well as ask for recommendations. As doulas are really starting to become more popular, which I'm so grateful for, speak to friends and family and see, you know, if they've got a doula that, you know, they worked with and was it a positive role, did they do, you know, what the doula said that they would do, as well as, you know, see if the doula is properly qualified. There is quite a lot of these online one-hour courses and then you're a qualified doula.

So qualification, I think, is quite important as well, especially South Africa has got a different medical side to the rest of the world. So it is important that the doula does know our medical system as well. So just pause there for a second.

Just tell me what would constitute a good qualification? What qualifications would we be looking for? Is there a registration body? Is there a course that is, you know, what do we look for? Yeah, so there is quite, there's a few organizations. I personally did my doula through an organization called WOMS, which was about a year's course. It was, you know, very informative.

We had to do certain qualification hours. We had to do hours at hospitals. We had to have a certain number of births that we have witnessed, etc.

So there is quite a few organizations around. Obviously, you know, they're all on the internet. But when it comes to qualifications, you know, for myself, I've got my doula qualification as well as my postpartum qualifications, as well as I did a peer lactation course as well.

So, you know, qualifications, you know, does mean a lot, but I do think that it's actually more of a personality thing. I do think that this person has to connect with you. It is such an intimate space that your doula will be in.

And it's, you have to feel comfortable with that doula in the room that, you know, that you're able to ask the awkward questions if you need to. Because as doulas, you know, we have to love you unconditionally. We do not judge.

We do not question, you know, your choices. We are there to support and empower you throughout the whole process. Yeah, absolutely.

Very interesting. So you mentioned something that I found quite interesting, and that was that because I've always thought about doula support being very much in the birthing room and through the birth process, but you did talk about support during pregnancy. Now, I only saw Louette once during each of my pregnancies, just a quick visit before I was due.

But you seem to be alluding to a little bit more of a deeper support. What sort of support do, can doulas offer during pregnancy? And why would you need that? So look, I mean, you know, the doulas are there even without, you know, even with the pregnancy. I've had, you know, a couple of instances where moms are not even pregnant yet.

They're considering the IVF routes and just being a non-judgmental support system where they're able to express how they're feeling without being judged. You know, when it comes to pregnancy, you know, as pregnant women, you know, we are, you know, we do kind of fall off the rails once or twice. It's important to have a non-judgmental person who's in your circle, but is not really in your circle.

You know, they're not family and friends where you've got to worry, you know, are they going to be telling this one or that one? So complete confidentiality and just knowing that, you know, you are in such a safe space. So with regards to pregnancy, any kind of questions you may have, medical questions, not so much. It's not in our scope to kind of answer those medical questions.

We cannot diagnose you and we cannot tell you, you must go get this medication, et cetera. But just being a support person throughout any stage of pregnancy and having a doula, you can have a doula at any time. I've had, I'm a doula for people that are not even pregnant yet, but then I've had, I'm a doula when it's two o'clock in the morning, my phone rings and she says, Kat, hi, you don't know me.

I've never met you, you never met me, but I really actually think I need your support. Are you able to assist me? So what sort of, there's kind of midnight calls, what sort of things are they asking you for? You know, are they saying, I think I might be spotting or are they saying, was it more emotional? I mean, what sort of questions would you be looking at that you'd be supporting mums with in pregnancy? This episode is brought to us by ParentSense, the all-in-one baby and parenting app that helps you make the most of your baby's first year. Don't you wish someone would just tell you everything you need to know about caring for your baby? When to feed them, how to wean them and why they won't sleep? ParentSense app is like having a baby expert on your phone, guiding you to parent with confidence.

Get a flexible routine, daily tips and advice personalized for you and your little one. Download ParentSense app now from your app store and take the guesswork out of parenting. So, you know, if a mum has a question throughout the day like, hi Kat, my breasts are leaking.

Is this normal? Is it okay? You know, just kind of reassuring them on the basic medical knowledge that we are able to provide. Just to kind of make sure that, you know, the anxiety is at a minimal, that they're not going into their labor and their pregnancy fearful. You know, that they've got the support and empowerment that they need, that they're not questioning themselves or questioning how strong they are or is their body doing this? Is their body not doing that? Why haven't I lost my mucus yet? Is this normal? But the phone calls at the night is, you know, Kat, this is happening.

I'm feeling some discomfort. I'm feeling some surges. Is this normal? What should I do? So just really making sure that as the labor kind of progresses, that there's no fearfulness, that the dads are also not stressing out, that there's an answer for everything, that they know what has just happened, what is happening right now and what could happen next.

So there's a full sphere of information that they're able to kind of emotionally relax into the labor process, because, you know, there's nothing that stops labor like fear. So it is important that, you know, moms go into labor absolutely empowered and supported. Yeah.

What was quite interesting was, and I think that was what we experienced with Lorette, was that we, my husband felt very contained and his fear didn't rise. And because his fear didn't rise, I was referencing of him actually more than Lorette. I mean, he was very much my birth partner, but the fact that she was there in the background alongside him, so it wasn't that she took his place at all.

In fact, he was very much, it was very much a, him and I were very much in a connection, in a zen, like we were very much together in the birthing process. He talked me through my breathing, but Lorette was kind of there alongside just helping us to take down all of the anxiety. So I think that's important to recognize is that you don't take the place of a birth partner in terms of your husband, although you can.

I mean, if somebody's husband doesn't want to be part of the process or can't be, you can take that role. Correct. And like you said, doulas do not replace partners.

Absolutely not. We work as a team together. We support the partners as well.

But like you said, there is no wrong or right way for partners to be at birth. 100%. This is their birth as well.

And their choices should be nonjudgmental and respected as well. So, you know, the doulas are there for moms, for partners. I've often had the grannies in the delivery rooms as well.

So just making sure that that entire team is loved, supported, that there's no nonjudgmental feelings towards anyone. It's just love and empowerment so that families have a positive birthing outcome. Yeah, absolutely.

Now, I mean, a lot of us are A-type moms. I was one of those moms where I liked to know exactly what was coming. And birth is probably, well, I was going to say it's the most out of control I've ever been, but of course, actually motherhood was the most out of control I've ever been.

But certainly my first experience of being fully out of control because, you know, your body is marching to its own tune and there's a lot of almost kind of like just giving up, not giving up, but giving over and allowing the process to take place. But there also was for me a little bit of planning. And I had a birth plan for all three of my children.

It didn't go according to plan with baby two and baby three because baby two was posterior, baby three was a Caesar. But I wanted to know what are your thoughts on birth plans and what should moms be thinking about in terms of their birth plans? So when I sit with my clients and we do the birthing plan, I say it exactly how it is. It is just a plan.

It's nothing set in concrete. As birth, anything can go left, right or center. So much can change quite quickly.

But it is important that your needs and your wants are discussed. So when creating a birthing plan, you know, I work quite closely with the parents, you know, to kind of really understand their wishes for their childbirth. So we discuss things like pain management and what kind of positions do they want to be in for labor.

During labor, we help them adapt the plan as needed on how things are going, how things are going to go. And if they need medical advice, of course, you know, they'll have to speak to the medical team. But there's also a lot of jargon that kind of goes around the room.

So the doula will kind of break it down into simpler terms. But, you know, we stay as flexible as we can to ensure such a safe and comfortable experience, but also honoring our clients' wishes as best as we can. So it is important to have a plan, but also to be mindful of different options as well.

Plan A, Plan B, all the way to Plan Z if you have to. But as a doula, you are going through every single plan so that, you know, our families know the whole thing, that there might not be a scenario where the mom is confused or she's fearful because it hasn't been discussed. So I think the birthing plan, it's important to discuss all kind of avenues, and then the client must then choose the options that, you know, that she wants.

And the doula is there to respect and be nonjudgmental and empower those decisions as well. So I want to give you a scenario. What happens, have you ever had a situation where mom has said to you, look, whatever happens, I don't want to have an epidural.

You know, I really want to do this naturally. And if I start to scream for an epidural at kind of eight centimeters, you have to stop me from having an epidural. Have you ever had that sort of thing being put into a birth plan? And then if so, like, what happens when that goes off-piste? Well, I am that person.

I think with my third eye was in the car for my midwife, I was like, I don't have to do this again. Get the anesthetist there by the time I arrive. So look, there are those moments of doubt.

And I think, you know, with enough, when you see enough births, you can kind of, you kind of can see when the client is very close to delivery and she really probably does not need the epidural that, you know, that kind of transition stage is happening. But on the side of that, you know, the client says, I do not want an epidural with absolutely not. And you can kind of sense that, you know, perhaps she really does need it.

It's important for the doula to kind of explain the pros and the cons of the epidural, let the families have that decision, that is their decision to make, and then be nonjudgmental and completely support and empower. I've had moms who said no epidural. They had the epidural and they still today say it was the best decision they have made.

And because of that decision, they had the birth that they wanted. Might not have been completely to plan, but they are grateful that that resource was available to them. They grateful that they took it because they had a positive birthing outcome.

Yeah, very interesting. Now there's a lot of research around doulas. You can go, moms, if you want to go and go and Google it, there is really a lot of research about the benefits of doulas.

Kat, you must be close enough to that research to be able to cite a couple of kind of facts and outcomes from studies that have shown the benefits of actually having a doula. Where are these benefits seen? So look, you know, research does say that, you know, doulas can minimize your labour time, that there is less risk of interventions, that most moms that do have a doula do have a positive outcome, whether it's completely to the birth plan or slightly left or right. I just think that in this kind of day and age in our society, there is such a lack of support in the maternity care.

And our number one goal is support. And, you know, the research can say all they want, but I think myself and my fellow doulas, we can absolutely advocate on how important it is to have that support. Some hospitals, we are not allowed, we are not allowed to practice in certain hospitals.

But then our postpartum care kicks in, where we're able to be with our moms and families at home, because we are supporting, we are supporting, and we are loving, and we are empowering, and we're making sure that they are loved unconditionally. So, yeah, I mean, I'm so grateful for my fellow doula sisters and, you know, myself as this kind of career choice. So, yeah, from my side, I do think that every woman deserves a doula.

Yeah, absolutely. Well, I mean, I was quite surprised by your statement then, we don't have to unpack it, that certain hospitals won't allow doulas in, because in my head, if you think back to, and you read any historical books, or you just think about how births had to have been kind of 100 and more years ago, there would have been another woman in the room with you. You know, she may have been a qualified midwife, maybe up to 100 years ago, but before that she wasn't, she was a doula.

She was effectively another woman who had kind of taken a deep interest in birth and a passion for coming alongside other women and helping them to deliver. So, I mean, the fact that it's almost the most natural thing, it's the way that the world intended it was that we would have women alongside us. And there is something about that power of woman.

And, I mean, you said something right at the beginning when I asked you why you do what you do, and you said this, like, incredible experience of being alongside somebody when they give birth. It's just, it must be an incredible situation. Well, it's absolutely life-changing.

You know, we live in a world of such negativity, especially, you know, in certain aspects of our country. And to see something so positive, it really is life-changing. And, you know, I will be at a shopping centre and I'll see a client whose baby's now five or six or seven years old.

And it's like, look, there's auntie Kat. You know, she helped. She was in the room with you.

She, you know, she helped mommy through all of this. And, you know, just knowing what doulas, their impact on families, it really is the most remarkable career. And like I said, such a negative world that we sometimes live in to see the ultimate positive.

Of new life. So Kat, tell me, like, subjectively, what is the, what's the best moment for you? Is it like getting it, getting a mom into transition? Is it seeing that head crown? Is it that first breath? Is it putting the baby on the mom's chest? Is it the mom looking into the dad's eyes? Like what's that? If you had to take it into one single magical moment, what is the most magical moment in the birth process for you? I think that's an impossible question because every single stage, even on the labour, when the mom phones and she's like, oh, what is it bro? We're having a baby to, you know, like you said, seeing that head crown and just knowing how close she is to giving birth. I, one of my personal favourites especially because I'm really, really close to my family is when these family members in the waiting room and you know, you hear the dad go out and the six and they're like the baby's here.

And I mean, for people that know me, I'm incredibly emotional. I cry at every birth and I'm not a pretty crier as well. But just seeing husband and wife become mom and dad, and to see their mom and dads become granny and grandpa, and to see sisters become aunties, it never gets old.

It really doesn't. And it's not something that I take for granted. And, you know, as students, we always leave birth on a bit of a birthing high where it's four o'clock in the morning, you know, you've got to be up at six, but you're still in your bedroom wide awake, just getting over that adrenaline.

You know, there's no one particular moment. The whole process is magical and women are incredible. We are so magical.

We are so powerful. And I'm so grateful to be in the presence of powerful, incredible women. It inspires me.

It makes me want to be a better person, a better woman, a better mother. So, you know, it's something that I'll never take for granted. Amazing, amazing, amazing.

So that's an inspirational piece that you're leaving people with. Let's talk about a really practical piece. So, women in labour, one piece of advice, only one thing that you're going to tell her, what would it be? Your body, your baby, your rules.

Okay. I love that. I love that.

I think women have to start knowing their choices, knowing their options, respecting their bodies, respecting themselves, respecting their babies, that there's only not one way or this way that they must explore their options. And whether that's having a planned caesarean, that is absolutely perfect. Own that decision, know your choices, know everything that's going to happen.

If you're going to have a natural birth, own that. Just having the knowledge that you've got options, that you've got choices, because there is hundreds and thousands of people out there that can respect your choices, that you are able to have the birth that you want and not kind of, you know, because my mom had a I might have to have a caesarean, or my mom had natural, I really don't want to have natural, I really want to have a caesarean. You know, really owning your choices and knowing that everyone has a choice and it needs to be respected.

Because women are not being respected in the maternity section. I love that. Well, I mean, that's just an incredible piece to leave mums with.

And it's actually not just true for the birth, it's of course true for the whole parenting. So being Doula Awareness Week, is there anything going on for it? How are you promoting it? And, you know, how can people hear a little bit more or support Doula Awareness Week? So I think, you know, being Doula Awareness Week, it's something that, you know, we are, we do, you know, once a week. From the get go, I just want to thank my fellow doulas.

We are an incredible bunch of women. And I want to thank them for the work that they do, the empowerment, the advice that they give, the support that they give, that I really want to start off with. But Doula Week, it's all about what is a doula, what do we do? You know, we give crucial support to families that really need it.

There are talks happening, there are workshops happening. So I think the doula community, we just really kind of get together and really spread the awareness about, you know, being a doula, because we do believe every single woman and family deserves a doula. Every single pregnant woman deserves support.

So just trying to get the word out there on who we are, what we do. Yeah, I think that basically kind of sums it up. And just, yeah, again, thank you to all my fellow doula sisters.

That's amazing. Well, I hope that this podcast has done a little bit to advance the awareness of doulas and for mums to understand a little bit more about it. So thank you very much.

Kat, if somebody wants to get hold of you, I know that if they wanted you as part of their birth, they would have to be living in Johannesburg. But regardless, you can probably connect them with other doulas as well. Is the best way to get hold of you on Instagram or email? What is best? I've got an Instagram page and a Facebook page.

My company is called Cuddles and Co Doula Services. But there are websites where you are able to, like I said, wombs.co.org is you can go onto their website. You are able to see the doulas in your area.

You can see their qualifications, et cetera. So, yeah, these on the natural birthing group of South Africa on Facebook, you just type in the word doula on your search bar and a whole information also does come up. But, you know, for, you know, someone says to me, Kat, I know you're in Joburg, but I'm in Cape Town.

You know, can you give me a list of numbers? You know, as doulas, we're not in competition with each other. That's not what we're about. We are here to make sure that women are supported during their pregnancies and birth.

So, you know, we will always be able to also give you a list of people, you know, who are in your region or close by. That's amazing. Yeah.

So, moms, if you are looking, I would just hop on to doula.jhb, which is the Cuddles and Co Doula Services. That is Kat's business. And you'd be able to just DM her on Instagram and she'll be able to give you all of those different links as well.

So, Kat, thank you so much. I have loved chatting with you. I must be honest.

I feel sad that the only three births I've ever been part of were my own. I would love to have been part of another woman's journey. And yeah, I think that it is an incredible gift to give to another woman to be with her, but also obviously an incredible experience for you.

And I can, I can taste your absolute delight as you go through these births. So thank you for joining us. Thank you so much for having me Meg.

Excellent. And moms, what you can do for me is you can go and like this podcast, rate it and share it because the more you share our podcast, the more other people get to hear about it. So until next week, keep well.

Bye-bye. Thanks to everyone who joined us. We will see you the same time next week.

Until then, download ParentSense app and take the guesswork out of parenting.