



## **PREGNANT CHICK USER GUIDE #5:**

### **Birth Etiquette For Support Folk**

Aloha partner or birth support person,

First of all, congratulations for agreeing to perform such an important and demanding job. Your hard work is obviously about to be trumped by that of your labouring partner's, but make no mistake: what you're about to do is still A Very Big Deal. In fact your support may well mean the difference between a smooth-sailing natural birth and a cascade of unwanted medical interventions. Kudos, too, for attempting to renovate the entire universe before D-day. Hopefully those last couple of contractions will distract your dilating companion from the fact that you didn't quite get round to finishing. Oh, well. What's a roofless romper room between friends, anyway?

Now that labour's started for real, you may feel a combination of excitement, dread and possibly impatience if the pre-labour dragged on. Regardless of how much preparation you've done, it's normal to feel performance anxiety about how you'll go in the heat of the moment. Try not to worry about whether or not you'll remember everything. Birth isn't an exam paper with a set of right answers. All you can do is bumble along as best you can.

Just make sure you give her your undivided attention and put her needs way above everyone else's, including your own. Tell her again and again how much you love her. How proud you are of her. How well she's doing and how everything will be all right. Respect her decisions even if they deviate from her original birth plan. Being a good labour aid means being flexible and reassessing your approach on a contraction-by-contraction basis. It's not the time to say: 'I'd love to help out but you said you didn't want gas until you'd tried a hot shower and rules are rules ...'

Being a good labour companion also means biting your tongue if you feel like complaining. We know you're tired and anxious and have hand cramps from massaging her shoulders for the gazillionth time. We know what you really need is someone to wipe *your* sweaty brow and say over and over again how well *you're* doing. But unfortunately you're on your own. Your labouring lady friend is in no position to help you out. What's more, if she senses your neediness or worry and turns her attention to you, it could affect the way her labour progresses. Keep telling yourself there'll be plenty of time for you to sleep/crack up/get some sympathy/not have to rub anyone's back later on. And try not to feel hurt, angry or insecure if she yells at you for doing things the wrong way or just for existing. A new human is about to pop out of her vagina. She is not herself.

Don't push her into pain relief just because you can't handle the sounds she's making, the look on her face or the knowledge that she's hurting. If you keep saying 'Why don't you have gas/pethidine/morphine/an epidural?' she may lose confidence in herself. Confront caregivers when you have to but avoid picking unnecessary fights just to let off steam. Apart from anything else, most midwives are feisty buggers who'll probably get the better of you.

Here are a few other handy hints for helping out (ignore anything that does not apply to your situation, especially if your labouring partner is having an epidural or C-section):

- Offer lower-back, shoulder massages or acupressure if you know the spots (if you don't, you may get an opportunity to subtly look them up on the internet).
- Suggest changes of scenery and position.
- Suggest sips of water and bites of food.
- Avoid telling her to 'just relax' and suggest she flops, melts or drops her shoulders instead.
- Breathe slowly with her if she hyperventilates.
- Encourage her to rest between contractions.



- Remind her to wee regularly.
- Walk with her if she's up to it.
- Make eye contact if she panics or looks lost.
- Hug her, kiss her, stroke her arms and hold her hands if she'll let you do these things.
- Stay calm if you're the one helping her relocate from home to the birth centre or to the hospital. Keep your mind on the road and your speed within the limit.
- Say things like, 'You're amazing' and 'You're doing brilliantly.' Don't say things like, 'Could you keep that birth mucus off the new car seats?' or 'Eeeeeewwww.'
- Try to keep the birth environment as private, comfortable, respectful and familiar as possible.
- If your labouring partner wants a natural birth, offer concern and sympathy if she demands pain relief during contractions but only take action if she follows this up with a more serious request after the contraction has passed.
- If emergency medical interventions are necessary, stay strong for her until the crisis is over.

If you feel like you're not coping:

- Wait until she seems like she can spare you, then grab a few moments to yourself in the bathroom, take some deep breaths and try to calm down.
- Eat and drink regularly to keep your strength up.
- Try to stay confident in her ability to give birth — she may pick up on your doubts if you lose faith in her.
- Talk to your caregiver if you need guidance or reassurance.
- Try not to feel guilty if you have taboo thoughts such as, 'Thank God it's her and not me', 'Why can't she just

hurry up?’ or ‘How embarrassing, she sounds like an ape.’ Thinking such things is normal — the important thing is to let them go rather than let them out.

- Ring or arrange to talk to someone if you feel a desperate urge to let off steam, whinge or panic.
- If you’re the dad or second mum, remember that you’ll finally get to meet your baby real soon.
- If none of this works and you’re still not coping, organise for someone else to step in while you recover.

After the baby arrives, some pregnancy guides suggest you might like to read him a welcoming poem. Other acceptable options include a cold beer and a nap. Remember that holding it all together during labour may mean a meltdown afterwards. You might like to consider a debriefing session — therapy-speak for a chat about the birth — with a professional or sympathetic friend. And give yourself a big pat on the back. You’ve been a real champ.