

Written By Margaret Larkins-Pettigrew

# How To Advocate for Yourself as a Black Birther

By

Margaret Larkins-Pettigrew, MD, MEd,  
MPPM, FACOG  
SVP, Chief Clinical Diversity, Equity and  
Inclusion Officer  
Enterprise Health Equity Institute



The pregnancy experience begins before the actual implantation of the ovum (the fertilized egg), which starts the beautiful creation of a living and breathing human being. This miracle is not without stressors but preparing with self-advocacy promises a joyful wellness journey.

Serena Williams, considered by many to be the greatest tennis player of all time, provides a frightening example of the disparities experienced by Black women and birthing people within the healthcare system. Williams, who was in phenomenal physical shape had competed in professional tennis matches early in her pregnancy, and who had excellent prenatal care, gave birth to her first child in 2017 by

C-section.

Everything with the procedure appeared to go well initially. Soon after delivery, Williams began experiencing shortness of breath. She knew something was wrong because she had a history of blood clots and was aware of the signs of pulmonary embolism. She informed her nurse that she had a medical emergency, but her concerns were ignored, and she had to insist on the doctor running tests. The positive outcome for Serena is credited to her ability to advocate for her well-being.

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As a medical professional it's my experience that the following recommendations will ensure women can become effective advocates for their well-being. The strategies that will assist in making this experience a safe and personalized one include:

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Intentional investment in the prenatal period

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Understanding the pregnancy course, including risks and benefits

03

Working with a clinician who will act as a medical partner and a doula or community health worker for support

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Engage in a centering health program (in-person or virtually)

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Continue utilization of support individuals and services for a minimum of one year after giving birth

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### Intentional Investment in the Prenatal Period

Pregnancy is described as a normal physiological process that exerts significant abnormal stressors on a woman's body as she supplies protection and needed nutrients to her unborn child. The prenatal period is the optimal time to become familiar with the birthing process while preparing your body, mind, soul, and family for this planned event. This requires more than prenatal vitamins, physical wellness, and gathering needed genetic information. Exercise, continue to work, and enjoy being around others. This allows for opportunities to destress and focus on your wellness.

For many, pregnancy is a choice. In 2022, we find that very few individuals are conceiving by mistake.

Much has been written concerning the mother's psychological wellness, which often fully manifests itself in the postpartum period but can be a constant challenge during pregnancy. Taking care of your mental health is essential to be prepared for pregnancy.

Mood swings and previous history of mental illness may be exacerbated during pregnancy, which is why it's necessary to seek and maintain cognitive health management and support before, during, and after pregnancy from a provider who specializes in reproductive psychiatry if possible. Family members should also be prepared to recognize an increase in anxiety causing loss of sleep, a change in appetite, a reduction in hygienic care, and significant mood swings.

The options of safe birth control methods are endless, and the myths surrounding statements such as “I didn’t think I could get pregnant” are now buried in old history books. So now that we agree that pregnancy is a choice, let’s agree that pregnancy requires preparation that includes the future mothers’ psychological, emotional, and social wellness.

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### Understand the Pregnancy Course, Including Risks and Benefits

Regular and scheduled prenatal visits are critical to a successful pregnancy. Although pregnancy is considered a normal process, entering this phase of motherhood must be approached with a broad foundation of knowledge of both the risks and benefits.

Morning sickness, back pain, constipation, and mood swings are many complaints echoed by pregnant women. These are normal discomforts that the changes and fluctuations of hormones bring to this experience. These hormonal changes also give women



protection against ovarian and breast cancer. While discomfort during pregnancy may exist, intimacy, sex, and orgasms are often more enjoyable.

In addition to providing the developing baby nutrition, birthers are encouraged to take better care of their bodies. A close partnership with the provider will enhance a trusted relationship. If medical issues exist, such as diabetes, hypertension, or substance abuse, seek out a specialized high-risk physician. For more information and guidance, I recommend expectant mothers to read *What to Expect When You're Expecting*.

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#### Work With a Clinician Who Will Act as a Medical Partner and a Doula or Community Health Worker for Support

The care women receive before, during, and after the birth of a child will limit the anxiety that generally accompanies the anticipation surrounding birth. A partnership with a clinician that will listen, advise, and always treat a mother with dignity and respect is never to be compromised. Find someone else if you encounter a provider who cannot meet these expectations.

A doula or community health worker will be

#### Engage in a Centering Health Program (In-Person or Virtually)

The CenteringPregnancy model has demonstrated that group care has improved pregnancy outcomes for mothers and babies. This model brings women together to perform risk assessments, educate them on practicing self-care, and provides them with support as part of the wrap-around clinical care. This method of pregnancy care brings patients out of the exam room into a unique, advocacy group that will be supportive while adding clarity to this experience. The psychology of this care model is focused on decreasing stress

a valuable asset to any mother. These individuals give mothers an added layer of advocacy and protection by understanding their communities' cultural, socioeconomic, and political strengths and weaknesses. Doulas give women a voice when they are fearful, in pain, and too weak to use their voices. They bring comfort to the entire family. Developing a safe birth plan that is evidence-based and reflects a mothers' wishes can be developed jointly with her clinical team. All birth plans should be reviewed to ensure realistic

and anxiety through meditation, mindfulness, yoga, and dance.

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Continue Utilization of Support Individuals and Services for a Minimum of One Year After Giving Birth

The postpartum period may sometimes be the most stressful time during pregnancy. This is the period that traditionally extends through six weeks after delivery. It has been demonstrated that women need more support well beyond six weeks. This is primarily a critical period for under-resourced mothers who find it more challenging to find and receive much-needed support.

This is a time when the "village" must act as advocates for a safe transition to motherhood. A significant other, family

The birthing experience requires a tremendous amount of energy, and a lack of sleep in conjunction with the demands of a newborn can lead to significant stress, anxiety, and depression. Support from family and friends who can assist in helping mothers through this period is critical. In addition, mothers need pampering as well. I recommend starting a new tradition: A mother shower. Shower her with things that will remind her that she is a beautiful woman and a beautiful mother.

Advocacy for a safe and

member, or friend should accompany the new mom to initial visits. This will lend a second set of ears and eyes to make sure instructions are clear. Meals and meal preps are also significant assets, along with grocery store or pharmacy runs to relieve undue stress.

memorable birthing experience starts with the birther's knowledge of their own body, awareness of the potential risk factors they may face, and having a support system to advocate on their behalf and help them as they bring life into the world.

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