

Emotional Support During Childbirth and Postpartum Recovery: A Qualitative Study of Women's Perspectives

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Article Info

Article history:

Received 27-04-2026

Revised 11-06-2026

Accepted 17-06-2026

Keyword:

Emotional Support;

Childbirth; Postpartum

Recovery; Women's

Experiences; Qualitative

Study; Maternal Well-being

ABSTRACT

Childbirth is a complex physiological and emotional process that has been widely studied from a medical perspective, focusing primarily on physical outcomes. However, the emotional experiences of women during labor and postpartum recovery remain less explored, despite their significant impact on overall well-being. While previous studies have examined the benefits of emotional support during childbirth, the deeper, subjective meanings of these experiences are still poorly understood. This study aims to address this gap by exploring how emotional support influences women's experiences of childbirth and recovery from a phenomenological perspective. Through in-depth interviews with 15 women, who had experienced vaginal or cesarean childbirth within the previous six months we examined their perceptions of emotional support and its impact on their sense of control, anxiety, and overall satisfaction. Participants were purposively selected to represent varied maternal backgrounds, including differences in age, parity, and sources of support during labor and postpartum recovery. Interview data were analyzed using a phenomenological analytical procedure, involving repeated reading of transcripts, identification of significant statements, coding of meaning units, clustering of emergent themes, and interpretation of the essence of participants' lived experiences. The analysis revealed that emotional support from partners, healthcare providers, and family members significantly enhanced women's experiences during labor and recovery, fostering a greater sense of empowerment and emotional resilience. These findings provide new insights into the importance of emotional support and emphasize its integration into maternity care practices. Our research contributes to a more holistic understanding of childbirth, suggesting the need for further investigation into the long-term effects of emotional support and the cultural variations in maternal experiences.



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INTRODUCTION

The experience of childbirth is a profound and transformative event in a woman's life, marked by both physical and emotional challenges. Childbirth is not just a biological process, but a deeply social and cultural event that is influenced by a variety of factors, including support systems, healthcare environments, and personal expectations (Herman et al., 2023). Because women's experiences of labor, delivery, and postpartum recovery are embedded in social and relational contexts, emotional support has become an important dimension of maternal care.

In recent years, the discourse surrounding childbirth has shifted from a strictly medical focus to a more holistic approach that includes emotional, psychological, and social dimensions. The importance of emotional support, such as the presence of partners, family members, and healthcare providers, has become an area of increasing interest. Many studies have highlighted that women who receive strong emotional support during labor report lower levels of stress, greater satisfaction with the birth experience, and a more positive postpartum recovery. However, existing studies have not sufficiently explained how women personally interpret such support or what meanings they attach to it during childbirth and recovery.

The need to explore the meaning of women's experiences with emotional support during childbirth and postpartum recovery is critical. While quantitative studies may provide valuable insights into outcomes and general trends, they often fail to capture the rich, nuanced experiences of individuals.

Phenomenological research offers a unique approach to understanding these experiences by focusing on how women perceive, interpret, and make sense of their emotional support during labor and recovery (Yilmaz, 2025). This exploration is crucial for enhancing maternal care, as it not only improves understanding but also informs the development of more compassionate and personalized healthcare practices. Understanding these subjective experiences can lead to better emotional and psychological support structures for women, ultimately improving their overall childbirth experience and recovery.

Research into individuals' experiences with specific phenomena, particularly in the context of childbirth and postpartum recovery, has increasingly become an important area of study (Queiroz et al., 2025). This research aims to understand not only the physical processes but also the emotional and psychological dimensions of these experiences, which are essential to a comprehensive understanding of maternal health. While medical literature predominantly focuses on physiological outcomes, the emotional and subjective experiences of women during labor and recovery have gained attention in more recent studies. These studies emphasize the importance of emotional support, highlighting how women interpret and respond to the emotional care they receive during childbirth.

However, there are significant challenges when attempting to capture the depth of these subjective experiences. One of the primary methodological challenges is the reliance on quantitative methods, which often focus on measurable outcomes and fail to fully account for the complexity and personal significance of emotional experiences (Mukhlis, Suradi, et al., 2023; Mukhlis, 2025b). While surveys and statistical data provide valuable information on general trends, they fall short in exploring the lived experiences of individuals. This gap in understanding underscores the need for a qualitative approach that can delve deeper into the personal meanings and emotional nuances of women's experiences during childbirth and postpartum recovery.

Given these challenges, previous research methods have not been fully effective in capturing the essence of the phenomenon (Schenk-Day et al., 2025). The reliance on broad, generalized data overlooks the unique, individual perspectives of women, which are crucial for understanding the multifaceted nature of emotional support during childbirth. Phenomenological research provides a solution to this limitation, offering a detailed and rich examination of the lived experiences of women. By focusing on individual experiences and the meanings attributed to them, phenomenology allows for a deeper understanding of the emotional and psychological aspects that influence the childbirth experience, which is often overlooked by traditional medical approaches.

In the context of childbirth and postpartum recovery, much of the existing research has focused on practical solutions that assess physiological outcomes or generalized trends, often using quantitative methods such as surveys or standardized questionnaires (L. Perocier, 2023). These methods are valuable for measuring broad patterns, such as maternal satisfaction or health outcomes, but they fail to capture the nuanced, subjective experiences that shape how women experience labor, support during childbirth, and recovery afterward (Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, & Zulbaidah, 2025; Mukhlis, Arifin, Ridwan, Zulbaidah, et al., 2025). While these studies provide important data, they do not offer the deep, personal insights necessary to understand the emotional and psychological dimensions of the experience. As a result, the richness of women's lived experiences, particularly the meanings they attach to their emotional support, remains largely unexplored.

The limitation of these approaches is that they overlook the essence of individual experiences, focusing instead on generalizable outcomes. In the case of emotional support during childbirth, for example, quantitative research may show that support leads to better outcomes, but it does not explain how women perceive and interpret that support, nor does it delve into the emotional significance of these interactions. This gap in understanding highlights the need for an alternative approach one that is capable of capturing the depth and complexity of these experiences.

Phenomenology offers a solution to this limitation by focusing on the subjective experiences of individuals, exploring the meanings they attach to their lived experiences in a detailed and holistic manner. By using phenomenological methods, this research aims to fill the gap in the literature by providing an in-depth exploration of how women experience emotional support during labor and recovery, and how they make sense of these experiences (Anesen et al., 2025). This approach allows

for a more complete understanding of the phenomenon, one that considers both the emotional and psychological dimensions that influence women's perceptions and experiences of childbirth.

Previous research has explored various aspects of childbirth, focusing primarily on physiological outcomes and general trends, often using quantitative methods. Studies have examined the role of emotional support during labor and recovery, highlighting its positive impact on maternal satisfaction and outcomes. However, these studies have tended to overlook the depth of women's emotional experiences, missing the subjective meanings they attach to the support they receive. Theoretical frameworks such as social support theory and attachment theory have been applied to understand the role of emotional support, but they often fail to capture the unique, personal experiences of individuals (Mukhlis et al., 2024; Mukhlis, Maryam, et al., 2023). Thus, rather than repeating established evidence that emotional support is beneficial, this study seeks to understand the deeper emotional meanings that women assign to such support. To address this gap, a phenomenological approach has been chosen for this study, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of women's lived experiences (Pienaa et al., 2025). Phenomenology focuses on understanding how individuals make sense of their experiences and the meanings they attribute to them. This approach is particularly suited for examining the emotional and psychological dimensions of childbirth, as it allows for a detailed analysis of the feelings and perceptions that shape women's experiences. By using this method, the study aims to uncover the underlying essence of emotional support and its impact on women during labor and postpartum recovery, offering a richer and more holistic understanding of the phenomenon.

This article is structured to first provide a detailed introduction to the phenomenon under investigation, including the social and cultural context of childbirth and the importance of emotional support. The methodological approach is then outlined, describing the phenomenological design and the data collection process (Boy et al., 2025). The article continues with a discussion of the data analysis process, including thematic analysis, followed by a presentation of the results, which will highlight the key themes emerging from the participants' experiences. The paper concludes with a discussion of the findings, linking them to existing literature and offering practical implications for improving maternal care.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

The research adopted a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of women during labor and postpartum recovery. Phenomenology focuses on understanding and describing the subjective experiences of individuals, offering deep insights into the meanings they attach to specific events or processes. This approach was chosen due to its ability to uncover the essence of participants' experiences, making it particularly suitable for answering the research questions related to emotional support during childbirth and recovery (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). The phenomenological approach allows for a detailed examination of how women perceive and interpret their experiences, shedding light on personal and emotional dimensions that might be overlooked in more quantitative studies.

A descriptive phenomenological approach was utilized to remain faithful to the participants' lived experiences, emphasizing the descriptions of their experiences without interpreting them through external theoretical frameworks (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). This design was chosen to provide an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences as they relate to emotional support, recovery, and preparation for childbirth. Prior to data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the relevant institutional ethics committee. All research procedures were conducted in accordance with ethical principles for studies involving human participants, including respect for autonomy, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that individuals with relevant experiences were included in the study. The study focused on women who had recently given birth, ensuring that their experiences would directly relate to the phenomena under investigation. Inclusion

criteria were set to include women aged 18 to 45 years who had experienced a live birth within the past six months. Exclusion criteria included women with severe complications during labor or recovery that may have hindered their ability to recall their experiences clearly.

In total, 15 women participated in the study. The average age of the participants was 30 years, and the majority were first-time mothers (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). These characteristics were important for understanding how women navigate the challenges of labor, emotional support, and postpartum recovery. The diversity in participants' ages and backgrounds provided a broad perspective on the emotional dimensions of childbirth and recovery. Participant recruitment continued until data saturation was achieved, meaning that no substantially new themes, categories, or insights emerged from the final interviews. Saturation was assessed through ongoing comparison of interview data during collection and preliminary analysis.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews, which allowed participants to share their personal narratives in a comfortable and open manner. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in private settings, such as participants' homes or quiet rooms at local healthcare centers, to ensure a supportive environment conducive to candid discussions. Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes, depending on the depth of the participant's responses.

The interview protocol included open-ended questions designed to explore participants' emotional experiences during labor, the types of support they received, and their feelings during recovery (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). These questions were designed to encourage participants to reflect on their experiences without leading them toward specific responses. The interview guide was developed based on existing literature on emotional support during childbirth and postpartum recovery, with modifications made to address the unique focus of this study. Before each interview, participants received a clear explanation of the study objectives, procedures, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality measures, and their rights as research participants. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants before participation. Participants were also asked for permission to audio-record the interviews, and all identifying information was removed during transcription to protect confidentiality.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a common method in phenomenological research that allows for the identification and exploration of key themes within the data. The analysis process began with transcribing the interview recordings verbatim. The transcripts were then reviewed multiple times to immerse in the data and to gain a deep understanding of the participants' experiences. Following this, the data were coded by identifying meaning units phrases or sentences that captured significant aspects of the participants' experiences.

These codes were grouped into categories, and common themes were identified. Thematic analysis followed a systematic process that included the reduction of data into manageable segments, clustering these segments into themes, and then interpreting the significance of those themes within the context of the participants' lived experiences (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). NVivo software was used to assist with organizing and managing the data, though the core analysis remained based on manual coding and thematic grouping. To strengthen researcher reflexivity, the researchers maintained reflective notes throughout data collection and analysis to document assumptions, emotional responses, and potential biases that could influence interpretation. Regular discussions among the research team were conducted to review coding decisions, compare interpretations, and ensure that the final themes remained grounded in participants' narratives rather than researchers' preconceptions.

RESULTS

The Experience of Emotional Support During Labor

In the context of labor, participants reported that emotional support played a significant role in how they experienced the process. Women emphasized the comforting presence of their partners and

healthcare providers, which helped alleviate their anxiety and fear during labor. However, participants did not experience emotional support in a uniform way. Their narratives showed differences in the source, meaning, and perceived adequacy of support during labor. One participant stated:

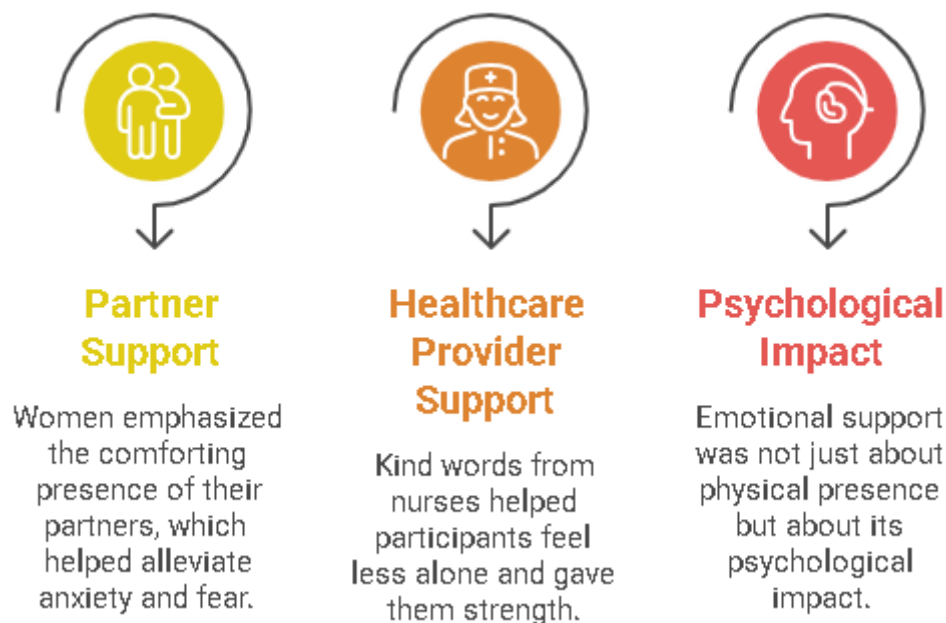
"Having my partner there with me made all the difference. When I felt like giving up, he was the one who told me I could do it. His words kept me calm, and I was able to focus better."

This sentiment was echoed by several participants, who highlighted that emotional support from their partners provided not only reassurance but also a sense of security in the unfamiliar and intense experience of childbirth. For these women, partner support was interpreted as a form of emotional anchoring, particularly when pain, exhaustion, and uncertainty intensified. Another participant shared:

"When the nurses came to check on me, their kind words helped me feel like I wasn't alone in this. It gave me strength, knowing they cared."

These narratives suggest that the presence of supportive individuals during labor contributed significantly to the participants' sense of control and well-being. The experience of emotional support was not just about physical presence, but about its psychological impact, which helped participants endure the challenges of labor.

Emotional Support in Labor



Perceptions of Postpartum Recovery

Postpartum recovery was another central theme identified during the interviews. Many participants described a complex array of emotions related to their physical and emotional recovery after childbirth. The support system continued to play an integral role in their well-being during this period. One participant reflected:

"The first few days after giving birth were the hardest. But my family supported me, especially when I felt exhausted. They helped with the baby, and I could rest."

Interestingly, while most women appreciated the physical assistance they received, there was a recurring theme of emotional vulnerability. Several participants mentioned feeling overwhelmed by the changes in their body and the demands of caring for a newborn. As one participant explained:

"It was overwhelming, honestly. I didn't know how much my body had to recover. And emotionally, I felt like I was on a rollercoaster. But having my mom around helped me manage."

This theme underscores the importance of both physical and emotional recovery in the postpartum period, with participants indicating that emotional support continued to be essential for navigating the challenges of early motherhood.

The Role of Emotional Preparation Before Birth

In preparation for childbirth, the women in this study discussed how emotional preparation was just as important as physical preparation. The anticipation of labor was often accompanied by feelings of fear and uncertainty. One participant mentioned:

"I was scared, but my midwife helped me understand what to expect, emotionally. She told me it was okay to feel scared, and that really helped me cope."

For some, attending prenatal education classes was a key aspect of emotional preparation, as these sessions provided both information and emotional reassurance. As another participant noted:

"The classes helped me feel more in control. I wasn't as scared because I knew what was happening and what I could do to manage the pain."

This theme highlights the importance of emotional preparation, not only in terms of understanding the process but also in cultivating the emotional resilience needed to face childbirth with confidence.

The findings from this study reveal the significant role emotional support plays in shaping women's experiences of labor, recovery, and preparation for childbirth. Emotional support from partners, healthcare providers, and family members emerged as a crucial factor in enhancing the overall experience of childbirth and recovery. Additionally, emotional preparation before birth was identified as an important aspect of coping with the fear and uncertainty that often accompanies labor. Importantly, the findings also demonstrate that women's experiences were diverse: while some participants felt reassured and empowered, others experienced emotional gaps, unmet expectations, or conflicting forms of support. These insights contribute to a deeper understanding of the emotional dimensions of childbirth, which are often overshadowed by the physical aspects of the experience.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight the significant role emotional support plays in shaping women's experiences during labor and postpartum recovery. Women who received emotional support from their partners, healthcare providers, and family members reported feeling more empowered and better able to cope with the challenges of childbirth (Ferdinands et al., 2025). These findings align with the central research question regarding the emotional dimensions of childbirth, shedding light on the profound impact that emotional support has on women's overall experience during this critical period. However, these findings should also be read critically in relation to studies suggesting that emotional support does not always produce uniformly positive experiences, particularly when support is perceived as controlling, inconsistent, or misaligned with women's expectations. In this sense, the quality and responsiveness of emotional support may be more important than its mere presence.

This study contributes to the understanding of emotional support during childbirth by focusing on the subjective meanings women attach to their experiences (Moskal, 2025). Unlike previous research that has predominantly examined emotional support in terms of physical outcomes or general satisfaction, this study provides a deeper insight into how emotional support influences women's psychological well-being during labor and recovery. The emotional reassurance provided by partners and healthcare providers allowed participants to feel more in control and less anxious, thereby enhancing their overall sense of agency and well-being. These findings underline the importance of including emotional support as a central component of maternity care, as it significantly contributes to the positive emotional and psychological outcomes for women during childbirth.

When compared to previous literature, the findings of this study complement and extend existing research on emotional support during childbirth. Research by Field (2010) and Simkin (2001) has emphasized the positive effects of emotional support on maternal satisfaction and reduced stress, which supports the findings of this study (Fahm, 2025). However, this study contributes to the literature by providing a more nuanced understanding of how emotional support impacts women's psychological experiences, particularly during the postpartum period. While studies have focused on emotional support during labor, this research expands the scope by also considering the continued emotional support needed during recovery (Mukhlis, Janwari, et al., 2023; Mukhlis & Abdullah, 2025). Moreover, this study's phenomenological approach provides a unique perspective that allows for a deeper exploration of the subjective experiences that shape women's perceptions of emotional support, a dimension that has been underexplored in previous studies.

Implications of Findings

The findings of this study offer significant implications both for scientific understanding and practical applications in maternal care. The emotional support provided during childbirth and recovery emerged as a critical factor in shaping women's experiences. This study reinforces the importance of considering emotional well-being alongside physical care in maternity services. In clinical settings, these findings highlight the need for healthcare professionals to not only focus on the physical aspects of childbirth but also to ensure that emotional support is an integral part of the care provided (Almela-Baeza et al., 2021; Ma'Mun & Maliki, 2023). The sense of control and reduced anxiety reported by women who received emotional support suggests that healthcare providers should be trained to provide not only clinical care but also emotional reassurance and encouragement throughout the process. This is particularly relevant in cultures or communities where emotional expression during childbirth may be minimized or overlooked, calling for a more holistic approach to maternal healthcare.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into the role of emotional support during childbirth, there are several limitations to consider (Jiménez-Lasserrotte et al., 2025). One key limitation is the relatively small and homogeneous sample of participants, which consisted primarily of first-time mothers from a specific cultural background. This limits the generalizability of the findings to all women or to other cultural contexts where childbirth experiences may differ. Additionally, the study focused solely on women who had recently given birth, meaning that it does not capture long-term emotional impacts or the role of ongoing support in later stages of motherhood. Another limitation is that the study did not systematically compare women who experienced different levels or types of emotional support, making it difficult to determine which form of support was most influential in shaping psychological outcomes. Future research with a more diverse and larger sample of participants, including those from different cultural backgrounds and experiences, would help validate and broaden these findings.

Prospective Directions for Future Research

The findings of this study open up several avenues for future research. One potential area for further exploration is the longitudinal study of emotional support, examining how the emotional experiences of women during childbirth influence their long-term psychological well-being and parenting practices (Nadal et al., 2025). Additionally, research could investigate how different types of emotional support, such as that provided by healthcare professionals versus family members, impact women's recovery and long-term satisfaction with their childbirth experience. Finally, exploring the role of emotional support in diverse cultural contexts would provide a deeper understanding of how cultural norms shape women's experiences of childbirth and recovery (Mukhlis, 2025a; Mukhlis & Saidah, 2025). These studies could contribute to developing more culturally sensitive and personalized approaches to maternal care that prioritize both emotional and physical health.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the emotional support experiences of women during labor and postpartum recovery, addressing the gap in understanding the subjective meanings of these experiences. The

findings revealed that emotional support from partners, healthcare providers, and family members significantly influenced women's perceptions of control, anxiety, and overall well-being during childbirth. The research provided new insights into the psychological dimensions of childbirth, which were underexplored in previous studies that primarily focused on physical outcomes. These results emphasize the importance of integrating emotional support into maternity care, suggesting that it plays a crucial role in improving maternal satisfaction and reducing stress. In practical terms, maternity care providers should routinely assess women's emotional needs during antenatal visits, labor, and postpartum recovery; encourage the active involvement of partners or chosen birth companions; provide clear and reassuring communication during labor; and offer structured postpartum emotional check-ins to identify anxiety, distress, or unmet support needs. Healthcare facilities should also strengthen staff training in empathetic communication and woman-centered care so that emotional support becomes a consistent component of routine maternity services rather than an informal or incidental practice. Future research could expand on these findings by examining the long-term impact of emotional support on maternal mental health and exploring the influence of cultural differences in emotional support practices. Further studies using diverse populations will help refine and expand the understanding of emotional support during childbirth and recovery.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest related to this research.

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