

“Little things that make a difference”

Women and Depression Conference 2007

Authors: Connie Morgan and Vi Singleton

Organisation: The Benevolent Society’s Mid To Older Women’s Health Team.

The Benevolent Society’s Centre For Women’s Health was established in 1994 in Campbelltown in South West Sydney.

SW Sydney is an area of high socio-economic need, diverse client populations and is poorly resourced

Extensive community consultations were conducted in establishing the Centre and determining the programs to be offered

One of the programs developed after this process is The Mid To Older Women’s Health Team, the other is the Domestic Violence Team.

The goals of the Mid to Older Women’s Health Team are to: improve the health status of women in their middle to later years through the early identification of physical and psycho-social problems and the provision of appropriate, flexible and accessible services.

Women in their mid to older years experience isolation due to issues from life transformations, loss of an intimate partner relationship through divorce or death, domestic or family violence, ill health or depression and other mental illness.

The need for an information, counselling and clinical; service regarding management of menopause, ageing, self-esteem and body image, healthy lifestyle, nutrition, accident prevention, multiple drug use, loss and change have been identified as issues that women attending the services require.

The team offers a range of holistic services to the mid to older women of Macarthur that include; counselling, naturopathy, massage and group work. It is in the group work that we see significant changes in women as they connect, learn new skills and find a friendly safe environment in which to learn and grow.

The groups provide an opportunity for women to meet others and feel connected in a ‘safe’ environment. Women are encouraged to choose “little things that make a difference” such as music, journal writing, poetry, mandalas, writing lists of positive things, photos and trinkets to remind them of better times, fond memories or positive experiences. While the process is ‘small’ the impacts for women are huge with women in follow up groups reporting that these little things enable them to sustain their sense of wellbeing and that they become more resilient to the impact of isolation and depression.

“I look around and suddenly my world is smaller”, “I feel lonely”

This paper will demonstrate how The Mid to Older Women’s Health Team at The Benevolent Society’s Centre for Women’s Health works with women 45+ and Aboriginal women 35+ to address issues of isolation, depression and grief. The Mid to Older Women’s Health Team have noticed that it is the little things we do in group work that help women find useful tools that enable them to find new meaning in their lives.

As women get older they have less contact with others, whether through children leaving home, partners dying/leaving, moving to another area or moving into another 'space'. The groups provide an opportunity for women to meet others and feel connected in a 'safe' environment. Women are encouraged to choose "*little things that make a difference*"

As I said early the process is 'small' the impacts for women are huge with women in follow up groups reporting that these little things enable them to sustain their sense of wellbeing and that they become more resilient to the impact of isolation and depression. "*I am glad I came to the group. I feel connected and I have learnt new ways to feel ok about myself*".

As simple as it sounds, the importance of creating a safe environment is a crucial ingredient for women feeling able to connect and explore difficult issues and women tell us this in evaluations.

"They were sensitive to the group in areas which were painful and allowed me to be comfortable to share what was on my mind."

How do we do this?

Safe Environment

The Centre for Women's Health creates a safe environment for women to attend individual services or group work by providing a welcoming and comfortable space in which women can feel a sense of belonging. The old heritage buildings are decorated so that the space becomes inviting. Women comment on the hominess, the colour, the peaceful space provided. We endeavour to ensure that the space is client focused so from the time a woman enters the space she feels welcomed. The reception space offers a friendly receptionist, comfortable lounge chairs, a small library and information.

Group rooms have artwork, curtains and other inviting décor. Each team member prepares their group program with respect and care. The environment is set up so that women will feel welcomed as soon as they come to the space. Aromatherapy – essential oils may be burning, soft music playing, candles lit, chairs formed into a circle.

The scene is set by the facilitators explaining the philosophy of the centre around inclusion, respect, social justice. Group rules reflect this, ensuring boundaries are clear and that will enable women to learn and re connect after being isolated sometimes for many years.

Awareness

Over time the team came to understand that breaking down the isolation of depression, showing women that they were not alone in their struggle to move away from depression could be a shared experience which then enabled them to feel connected to others through shared experiences. They notice that at times women who have experienced prolonged episodes of depression will find the strength and courage to reach out to another woman when she hears the pain of this woman's story.

|

The woman's awareness

- The reaching out enables her to move away from her individual pain to support another person. Women's personal awareness around self care is encouraged with discussion on self caring in place of selfless or imposed sense of selfishness. They come asking "*Where am I. Where did I go?*"
- Relearning how to connect with others the women will form informal networks during the course of the workshops and go out to coffee after the group and then have connections into the future when the group ends.

Types of Groups

A range of groups with the focus of reducing isolation may not identify that moving away from depression is the key component of a group for women. In the past 12 months for example the group program contains: gentle exercise (for women with limited mobility), Jazz It Up and Koori movement to music (for women with more flexibility).

- **Life transformation** – women exploring a new way to be after loss or life change
- **Mindfulness meditation or Mandalas, Magic and Mediation**, giving women the tools to sit quietly and reflect on their lives in a positive way or to use mediation to draw mandalas and get in touch with feelings in a supported environment
- **Beyond blue** – gaining tools to move a way from depression,
- **Do it your self reflexology** a one-off session over 3 hours that encourages women to think about alternatives and complimentary ways to healing while meeting others
- **Growing older** – a place for women to explore the myths around aging and identifying strengths of being an older woman.,
- **My favourite doll** a craft group that enable women to think about the roles they experience in their lives. The craft activity was making a doll.
- **Weighty issues** – explored issues for women challenged by their weight and gave them tools to use for a healthy life style
- **Rediscovering myself** – a program for women who want to find out about themselves after major family changes.
- **Don't Worry be Happy** – a group that moves away from supported discussions of depression to more positive awareness of the self.

Flexibility of the facilitator

Each member of the team will adapt their knowledge and skills to allow processes to develop within each group. The program objectives are identified and each week plans are made to assist women to identify their goals for the group. The **flexibility of the facilitator** is a fundamental element in the forming of strong group ties. Women are heard at each session and the next week's plan can be adapted to the women's needs.

"I learnt to do things in different ways - less "knowing" more "allowing". The groups also awakened in me the power of music and art in helping women heal and acknowledge their feelings and perceptions."

Approaches

The MTOWH Team use a variety of tools for the group programs including cognitive approach, narrative, art expression. Exercises carried out will reflect the needs of the group with the knowledge that allowing a process of reflection and connecting to others encourages women to explore their life experiences and their knowledge which they then can share with others and thus feel less alone.

Aims for groups may include combinations of:

- To give women the opportunity to meet and share with other women who have experienced depression.
- To offer a creative group program
- To recognise and name depression and understand it
- To provide a way to increase strategies to deal with depression and reduce the impact of depression on women's lives.
- Participants will acquire new information and skills
- Participants will gain social connections
- Participants will report enhanced self awareness

The aims are measured through the group evaluation tool that women are encouraged to complete at the end of each group. The Evaluation Outcomes are collated by the Administration Team and the team manager writes the report from each group that is fed back into the team and informs all team planning so that women's voices are always present in the work we do.

Example of Tools that could be used in group sessions include:

- **An Action Plan** – The idea of an Action Plan is to develop a technique that can be used when most needed. Often when a person is feeling more down or experiencing a very 'black' time, it can be extremely hard to use the well known strategies because they seem to go out of reach. The aim of an Action Plan is that it can give a person "some sense of control in what can be an

otherwise out of control situation". It involves developing a personal action plan so that it can be ready for use later on, if needed.

- **Emergency Box** – This simple tool made up of items meaningful to individual women is gathered together during the workshop. A shoe box, that can be decorated or not, has items such as favourite music recorded on to disc, photographs or pictures, poems, stones, trinkets etc. Depending on the individual women in the group handouts that can be taken home as reminders of the sessions that include information about the Black dog.
- Some of the groups have a follow up session three or four months after completion and will report on what is happening in their lives.

One woman said:

"I remember something you said in the Depression group five years ago, and that helped me to cope"

And another woman who had attended a number of groups over several years and was experiencing some family difficulties said:

"I realise I CAN manage - and I am now ready for the rest of my life"

We value women's contribution to the Centre and in respect of the messages they give us I include responses from the evaluation tool, which asks women what they liked best from the group.

Responses have included:

- Happy peaceful
- Strong and feeling of belonging
- Good, excellent
- Being able to talk
- Feeling strong when someone achieves something
- Feeling powerful
- We care for each other
- We can empathise with each other
- Understanding how everyone felt
- Depression is very isolating – feeling less isolated
- Being comfortable with the facilitators not being judged by them.