

PARENTS+KIDS

Tamara Hunter

BIRTH OF NEW DAY

Group helps mothers struggling with stresses of their role

There are not many people who would be excited about getting up every day and going to work with depressed and anxious mothers of young babies. Adele James is, though.

The survivor of postnatal depression is over the moon at now being able to help other mothers through similar experiences and at seeing the difference she and her co-facilitator in Community Midwifery WA's mother nurture group are able to make to mothers struggling with stress, anxiety and depression.

"We laugh, we get excited, we love going to work because it's so worthwhile," Mrs James said. "We really do see good stuff happening."

The CMWA's first mother nurture group was held just over a year ago, with funding from the City of Melville. Since then, the program has shifted and expanded, in partnership with other groups, to Fremantle, Joondalup and Armadale. More groups are planned.

"We can't keep up with the demand," Ms James said. "If it was up to me, I would have one in every single town and every single suburb. There's demand all over so it's really a case of where you can get the venue with support."

The group provides small, safe, confidential sharing spaces which take the emphasis off education and lists of things to remember. Instead it helps mothers to share, bond with their babies and develop confidence in their own parenting ability.

Mothers are nurtured by the facilitators and one another including being waited on with food and drink. They are given the floor to share their troubles, uninterrupted, and confide their deepest anxieties and fears without fear of judgment.

Although the group includes women at all ends of the spectrum from those with mild anxiety or depression to more severe cases where they are having difficulty functioning due to anxiety, postnatal depression or post-traumatic stress disorder, it avoids labels and focuses instead on the relationship between mothers and their babies.

"You would be hard pressed to find a mum who wouldn't admit to feeling some sort of psychological distress in the whole process of giving birth and becoming a mother," Sue Coleson, a psychotherapist specialising in early parenting and mother-baby bonding, said. "I really would think that it's a universal issue in Western society."

"But rather than get hung up on labels and diagnoses, because I think that can be very stigmatising if mums find themselves falling at the higher end of that spectrum, I am thinking all the time about the relationship between the mother and the baby."

"All the research shows that that first year of development is so critical in terms of future emotional development. What we are trying to do is support mums to understand their babies, to get to know their babies and to feel understood."

Ms James said the group helped mothers understand that it was normal to struggle when making such a big life adjustment.

"It's about creating community but also about support and debriefing," she said. "They can come and debrief about motherhood, they debrief about their week, also about their feelings, how they're coping, how they're adjusting. It's a real honour to walk with these women and to watch them become confident."

When women talk about their birthing experiences, babies often respond to their mother's anxiety by becoming teary or unsettled.

"But what we find consistently is that once the mums have had the opportunity to talk about these really painful things in a very supportive environment, the babies settle," she said.

"Somehow the tension of holding painful, difficult, ambivalent feelings inside is picked up by the babies, if you like, and once those kinds of difficult things can be addressed, the baby is kind of released."

Ms James said the group was different to some mothers' groups where there was sometimes an element of competitiveness.

"We have never ever seen that in our group," she said.

She said many mothers, particularly older ones with professional backgrounds, had read a lot about babies and parenting, but babies hadn't read the books. Mothers needed to understand that they were the real experts.

"We have this mantra that you are the expert on your own baby."

"If your baby needs to be held 24 hours a day and doesn't remove itself from the breast, there is nothing wrong with that because it's happy."

"If your baby doesn't cry and goes to day care, that's OK too — as long as you are both happy and healthy."

The mother nurture groups are supported by WA Health and operate on a gold coin donation. Mothers can refer themselves to the CMWA or be referred by child health nurses or other community outreach services. For more information, go to www.cmwa.net.au and click on Postnatal Support Services or call 9430 6882.

A nurturing environment

Kirilli Heath knew that motherhood would be hard work, and she was ready for it. In fact, the first few months were okay — she managed.

But after three months of caring night and day for daughter Freyja, even with the support of her partner, fatigue started to set in.

It was at this point that she gained a place in one of Community Midwifery WA's mother nurture groups, a 10-week closed program where a half a dozen mothers and their babies meet once a week to share their mothering experiences, stresses, anxieties and progress.

"It started at just the right time for me because the next few months were harder — it was just the ongoing-ness of it all," Ms Heath said. "It wasn't that one particular day was hard, it was just that it was one after the other after the other. There were no breaks."

"Now, at six months, I am feeling really good, and it's okay — there still aren't any breaks but it's just adapting and adjusting to a new job. To have support in that time was really, really good — to share with other people, whether they were the same problems or different ones, and go through them together."

Ms Heath had been part of another mother's group, linked to her local child health nurse but, while she had enjoyed meeting other local mothers, she had felt it was largely focused on getting government information out and didn't offer the chance to share more deeply.

"It was good to have a catch up but it was that general thing that a lot of us do a lot of the time — 'Oh well, it isn't too bad, this was hard but I am okay now' — that glossing over," she said. "You don't want to load anyone with your problems."

"Whereas the (MWA mother nurture group) gave you permission to say 'It's really hard at the moment'."

"It was just being able to express that in a safe place. I really looked forward to it — it was supportive, it was warm, and it was — liberating is a bit of a strong word — but I just felt very comfortable there to say whether it was a good week or not."

"If it wasn't good you could share it without feeling that you were asking for any advice but you gained support and strength from it."

The program's strict guidelines emphasise that those who take part in the groups do so with respect, confidentiality and a lack of judgment of other mothers and their approaches to parenting. Before each group, a different mother takes turns to read the guidelines.

"It's a place where you can open up and get upset if you need to," Ms Heath said.

Listening to other mothers talk about their experiences had reminded her things were always changing and to live in the moment with her baby, rather than worrying about what had happened or what was going to happen.

"That thing about taking a village to raise a child — it really rings true and even though it's just getting together with other mothers, I think that's a really important part of that."

"I don't think it's a solo project, and supporting each other is definitely the way to do that."

'If your baby doesn't cry and goes to day care, that's OK too — as long as you are both happy and healthy.'



Good support: Kirilli Heath and Freyja.