

# Create space for mums to talk

**Many women talk about not having space and encouragement to talk about their real emotions and experiences. Space is not just a physical phenomenon. It also comes from language and images, safety and people. We can all help to make space for women to share their feelings, experiences and ideas.**

why?

The activities described here can be used to **generate discussion** in groups or individually. They don't need to be run by specialists, although having a person designated as the facilitator or leader is very useful in keeping things on track.

Many people are **fearful** of emotional discussions. There are lots of reasons for such fear, some well founded. They include the potentially explosive nature of some subject areas and not knowing how to manage and/or defuse highly emotional discussions. Some people say that they are wary of triggering a ripple effect in which women "upset each other" or in which already-pressured women feel they need to look after the distressed woman in the group.

The activities described here can affect women quite **powerfully** and occasionally women do become quite emotional. By inviting women to reflect on change or needs or their resources, we do open up the possibility for them to talk about issues that are difficult or highly emotional for them. This is not a bad or wrong thing.

If you want to have **open, honest group discussions**, you need to think about how to manage difficult situations. As a group you need to:

how?

1. Set group **ground rules** about things like confidentiality and respect
2. **Invite** a local social worker or counsellor to come and talk to your group so that people can put a face to a name (this makes it easier to seek help later)
3. Have a **facilitator** (this might be a professional or somebody from the community)
4. Give a **list** of local support **resources** to everyone in the group and always discuss what supports could be helpful in a given context
5. Always **introduce** activities carefully and well
6. Always allow plenty of time for discussion and **debriefing**, in pairs or as a whole group. Good questions to ask are:
  - How did/do you feel?
  - What did you learn from this activity?
  - What would you like to do now?
  - Is there any support or help you need as a result of the activity?

Often these activities have tangible products (drawings, collage etc) that can be pinned up in waiting rooms or neighbourhood houses or libraries to stimulate discussion among the broader community. Of course, often the most important products are not so easy to see ... friendship, support, connections, new ideas and fresh perspectives.

This is part of a report of the **Women's Health Goulburn North East Looking After Mothers Project** (the LAMP). We have also produced a full report and a manual on the photography project Picturing Motherhood. You can view all of these at our website at [www.whealth.com.au](http://www.whealth.com.au) or call us on 03 5722 3009.

more info

# What can we do?

# And how?

These are activities involving drawing, talking, making things and relaxation. They're just the beginning. Use your imagination! Raid your library for self-help books and training or groupwork manuals, then adapt them for your own purposes. Stock up on oil pastels, magazines, coloured paper, gluesticks and other craft equipment. Use found objects and the natural environment ... leaves, rocks and other people's rubbish. Link activities ... meditate on an image, then draw it. Listen to some music then talk about how it makes you feel.

## drawing

### Individual drawing

Women generally seem to enjoy this activity greatly – even those who say they can't draw! You can start by letting people **doodle** for a couple of minutes to get in the mood.

Set out your equipment (A3 paper & oil pastels) around the room beforehand, so that people don't feel they have to sit together.

**Introduce** the activity with something like:

*This activity is going to involve some drawing. Most of us spend a lot of time talking or writing. This uses certain parts of our brain, but what about the other bits? This is an exercise for you to use different part of your brain. It's a chance to take notice of symbols and colours and patterns, not just words.*

*For some of you, this might be the first time you've drawn anything since you were a kid, or since your kids were little. Some of you might feel like you "can't" draw.*

*I'm no artist, and I'm no art critic. I'm not going to suggest to you that anything you make will be a work of art. That's not what this is about. This is a drawing exercise to encourage you to reflect on some of your values and resources. If you make art, that's good, but if you come away with some insight about yourself, then that's great!*

Emphasise that it's okay to **sit alone** to draw and that people **don't have to show** their drawings if they don't want to!

Invite each woman to **draw** a picture (for example):

- Her pre-baby and with-baby selves
- Herself as a mother
- A tree, with what she needs to flourish drawn/written in the roots, and the fruits & flowers of her life in the branches
- A well or a web of wellbeing (what & who is in the well/web that she can draw on)

Emphasise that the pictures might incorporate symbols or words and imaginary or real life things.

**Allow time** for drawing.

When participants seem to have finished, move into **discussion**. This could happen in a whole group, pairs or small groups. In the discussion, **discourage** participants from trying to **analyse or interpret** other people's pictures. Rather, **encourage** them to **ask each other** the **questions** on page one. This is not an exercise in art appreciation!

## Collective drawing

Pin up a piece of butchers' paper and arm yourself with a box of crayons.

Introduce the exercise by saying that most women have some picture in their heads of the “**perfect mother**” and that we're going to **jointly draw her** to see if our pictures are the same. Then ask a series of **prompting questions** and draw a picture based on the agreed responses. The easiest way is to start with her hair and move down through her body (just make sure you leave enough room on your paper!)

Prompt questions might include:

- What colour hair does she have?
- What are her boobs like?
- How tall is she?
- What shape is she?
- What's she wearing? (clothes, jewellery)
- What expression is on her face?
- What's around her? (car, house, husband, baby)

Then have a **discussion** based around the questions listed on page one.

This exercise highlights the level of commonality in our collective imagination. Whilst the perfect mum is somewhat shaped by each woman's class and culture, there are commonalities in our images of the “perfect mother” because she is all around us in the media and arguably our histories.

We all carry this woman around within us to varying extents and her presence is felt at different levels according to our mood, experiences and confidence. Most of the time we know intellectually that we cannot be this woman (nor do we want to!). However there are still times when we take our measure against her. This is disempowering and undermines our sense of value and achievement.

You might close with asking what each woman wants to say to this mythical perfect woman. You can do this in a round robin or each woman could write a comment on a post-it note and stick it to the drawing.

## Magazine images

This activity generates much hilarity, but becomes more serious as women turn inwards and reflect on their own experiences.

Take piles of **magazines** and invite women to look through them to locate an image that reflects a positive aspect of their experience of motherhood, and another that reflects a negative aspect. Women often subvert images, taking them out of context in order to relate them to themselves. For example, a picture of a sleeping baby becomes a negative aspect “this is how my baby never is”. There are very few images that are straightforwardly negative or difficult experiences.

A variation on this task is to ask women to find pictures of women that remind them of themselves, or to find pictures of women-as-mothers. Or pictures that show how they feel today (etc).

These activities are followed by a **discussion** about the pictures of motherhood that we carry round in our heads. Women need very little encouragement to talk about the unrealistic images they see in front of them and to name the pictures that are missing. They are quick to note that the audience for these magazines is not reflected in the images on the pages. You could move on to discuss where women learn about and prepare for motherhood, and to talk about what does/doesn't match the expectations of these women.

You can also use magazines to make **collages** and friezes around a theme or to tell a story. Use textas or crayons to give your real captions to unreal images. This can feel very empowering!!

collage

# Relaxation & meditation

Relaxation activities can be very successful in mums' groups when the kids are not yet mobile. (Some yoga/meditation instructors also run sessions with mums & toddlers ... ask them how!!)

The meditation below is called **Awareness Meditation (AM)**. It acts as an antidote for all the time that we don't spend "in the moment". It enables us to recognise that most of what we do, we do without thinking, without awareness, with no appreciation of what is happening within and around us. It gets us to focus on the Now. For women who are finding it difficult to value the ways that they spend their time, it can bring new appreciation and insight to mundane, everyday tasks.

**Awareness doesn't have to entail closing the eyes and meditating. This is where it's great as a relaxation exercise, especially for anxiety.** In a new mums group for example, you could get women who are holding their baby to be aware of themselves and their babies: where their bodies are touching; what muscles they can feel; noticing their baby's gaze; noticing their breathing. Or you could slowly talk through a meditation in which women focus on one part of their body at a time (eg left foot, left calf etc). People can also do AM at home: brushing teeth with awareness for example! The idea is to focus on something that has become routine and to really notice it.

You could introduce the Awareness Meditation activity by saying something like:

*One of the things that I always found difficult about meditation was "trying to think of nothing". I know people who reckon they can do it, but for myself, it seems impossible. In the exercise we're going to do now, I'm not going to ask you to think of nothing. What we're going to do now is called awareness meditation. It can be very relaxing, but don't worry if you feel at the end it's not for you. If you don't feel comfortable doing a meditation, you could just sit quietly and close your eyes. If something makes you feel unsafe, just raise your hand and I'll come over to be with you.*

Then go through the following instructions slowly and peacefully with long pauses between instructions.

First get comfy in your seat, close your eyes, and take some slow breaths through your nose, down into your belly. (Can get people to put their hand on their lower abdomen to feel it swell with each intake of breath)

Focus on those breaths. Notice what's going on, what sounds you hear, what thoughts pass through your head. Notice them, but don't follow them. Don't try to identify them, just notice that they're there, and let them go.

Keep coming back to your breathing.

If you start to feel some pain or discomfort in your body, notice it and then return to your breathing.

If you notice any smells or sounds, notice and let them go.

Keep coming back to your breathing.

Continue with these cues for about a minute, then continue in silence for 3 minutes. Very quietly attend to anyone who's having trouble or babies that show signs of stirring.

*Now I'd like you to slowly bring your awareness back to the room and this group, and in your own time, open your eyes.*

Then spend some time in discussion and debriefing, using the basic questions listed on page one. Note that with practice, awareness meditation gets easier. ■