

In Practice

Maternal Journal: how creative journaling can support pregnant women, new mothers, and those that birth, with a history of mild to moderate mental health problems



INTRODUCTION

There is growing recognition of the serious nature of maternal mental health problems during childbirth – with one in five women* in the UK developing a mental health illness during pregnancy or up to 1 year after birth¹ and suicide as one of the leading causes of death.^{2,3} Furthermore, services for perinatal mental health are patchy, with high thresholds for conventional treatments. This leads to many women* with mild to moderate symptoms having little specialist support.

Maternal Journal is an interdisciplinary collaborative project, produced by artist and midwife Laura Godfrey-Isaacs; psychiatrist Carmine Pariente, Professor of Psychological Medicine at King's College London; and Debra Bick, Professor of Maternal Health at Warwick University. It explores the therapeutic potential of journaling as a way to promote wellbeing and positive mental health for pregnant women*, new mothers and those that birth, who have a history of mild to moderate depression and/or anxiety. The project was brokered (and funded) initially by the Cultural Institute at King's through the Arts in Mind Scheme, which paired up artists and academics to explore innovative approaches to mental health, the brain and neuroscience. It has since attracted funding for the development of a

website from Arts Council of England.

The project pilot involved a series of workshops, facilitated by Laura and Carmine, that included creative activities introduced by visual artists, poets, cartoonists and writers; Hollie McNish, Kate Evans (aka Cartoon Kate), Frances Burden and Rebecca Fortnum & Sharon Boothroyd. At each workshop, one of the artists devised creative exercises, using different writing and visual arts techniques that supported participants to create the journal as an expansive, therapeutic,

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creative aspect of their care through pregnancy. In addition, the sessions involved participants sharing work they had made in between the meetings and any experiences or concerns they had, building in psychosocial support for participants and cohesion within the group. This led to a strong practice of sharing and support within the group, with participants feeling safe enough to reveal and explore thoughts, feelings and experiences openly. Discussions ranged from personal accounts of physical, psychological and emotional struggles with pregnancy and mothering to social, political and cultural issues referenced through media, art and medical frameworks.

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WHY JOURNALING?

Maternal Journal builds on research that shows engagement with the arts aids good mental health and wellbeing, as well as addressing social isolation. It has

been championed by the recent All-Party Parliamentary Group's report 'Creative Health'.⁴ Furthermore, in 2017, Arts, Health, Wellbeing: A Theoretical Inquiry for Practice⁵ documented the benefits of linking patients with non-medical support through art on prescription and social prescribing projects.

In particular, journaling has a strong female legacy of being used by women* in their everyday lives and by writers and artists. It is suggested that it can also act as a therapeutic device by providing a means to check in on feelings, help to understand triggers towards poor health, document good and bad days, and put experiences into perspective.

Journaling in pregnancy has particular poignancy as it relates to the inevitable marking of time, the nature of the experience as 'a journey' and the sense of being in a liminal space (a threshold between one state and another). It is also commonly a time of great imagination and vivid dreams – all good material for a journal.

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THE HISTORY OF JOURNALING

The rich history of women's* journaling comes partly from it being one of the only

possible ways in the past to write, be creative or express social and political views, when professional engagement wasn't permissible.

In the project, we connect our participants to this history by profiling some key diaries, journals and sketchbooks, for example, by Frida Kahlo, Virginia Woolf, Bobby Baker, Anne Frank and mass observation diaries. Another key writer we introduce is Virginia Woolf – 20th

century author of the seminal 'A Room of One's Own' – who kept a journal for 26 years.

We explore how journals can take different forms and how it could be conceived as private or for a wider readership – and how it can include reflection, analysis, and creative release, as well as being personal, intimate, and a source of pride through developing one's own voice and personal expression.

CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S JOURNALING

In addition, we research contemporary artists such as performance artist Bobby Baker – whose Diary Drawings 'Mental health and me'⁶ documents 11 years of mental distress and treatment, through a daily drawing practice.

We also discuss contemporary diary keeping in social media forms such as blogs, Instagram and Facebook, and we considered work by artists such as Louise Bourgeois, who created works about pregnancy, mothering and birth, and artist Frida Kahlo's extensive sketchbooks.

OUTCOMES AND WOMEN'S FEEDBACK

The project pilot received very positive feedback from participants. What was originally planned to be a project during pregnancy has grown into the postnatal period, with the group now meeting monthly. Most have kept or have the intention to keep the journal going and have produced some incredible work – from drawings, paintings, collage, prose, poems and more.

Feedback is documented below:

'I feel energised and given permission and support to continue to find and establish my own space and voice creatively, at home and outside. Which in turn makes me feel already less anxious and fearful about the impact of this baby on my sanity.'

NEXT STEPS

We are now looking at research funding to re-design and run a larger project. We also received funding from Arts Council of England for a website, so resources can be available for those who would like to create their own Maternal Journal or group.

This launches on 1 May 2019 at: www.maternaljournal.org.

Short films about the project can be accessed here:

vimeo.com/252153043

vimeo.com/252153004

Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/maternaljournal/>.

Twitter: @maternaljrnl

Instagram: @maternaljrnl

NOTE: The use of the word 'woman*' is intended as inclusive and generic to cover any person who 'births' or identifies as a 'woman', 'mother' or 'gender non-conforming parent'.

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