



Mothers are doing it for each other: A conversation with The Motherkind Café

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By Katharine Handel



Illustration by Katherine Crawford, "Salutogenesis."



The three co-ordinators at our first birthday party in January 2020

The Motherkind Café is an Oxfordshire post-natal peer support group where women who are worried about their mental health after having a baby can come and talk about it in a supportive and non-judgemental environment. The café offers both monthly “circles,” which are facilitated discussion groups on a particular topic or theme to do with motherhood, and drop-in sessions. It was founded in 2019 by Emily Malden and two clinical psychologists, Guin Webster and Rebecca Knowles-Bevis.

Today, I am one of the café’s co-ordinators along with Emily and Katherine Crawford. Although The Motherkind Café has had to change its format during the COVID-19 pandemic, it has continued to operate via a private Facebook group and Zoom support meetings. I thought that the model of mothers helping other mothers by drawing on their own experiences was a great example of salutogenesis, so I had a conversation with Emily and Katherine about the history of the café, what it means to us, and what we’d like to achieve with it in the future.¹

Emily Malden: I set up the café because I wished it had existed when I had my son. I wanted an informal space where it was ok to say you were really struggling and where you could hear that there were other people who had struggled too. I’d read a lot online about women who’d had difficulties with their mental health when they’d had a baby, and I’d meet people with older children who would admit that they had found it hard at the beginning, but nobody who I met who was in the same phase as me was prepared to say they were struggling.

Katharine Handel: And didn’t you also have problems finding somewhere you could bring your baby with you?

EM: Yes. I wasn’t really eligible for any clinical support because they didn’t think I was ill enough. I tried to find a group through MIND because I saw that they ran peer support groups, but they didn’t have any specifically for post-natal depression or post-natal mental illness. I know psychologists say that post-

natal depression is still depression and the symptoms are very similar, but for me, my mental health was completely linked to the fact that I'd just become a mum, and I was really struggling with that concept. I felt there was a real lack of support for women with mental health problems that had specifically developed in the post-natal period, and though I was offered some groups or therapy, you couldn't bring your baby, and I couldn't leave him because he was so young at the time. So it was important to me that you could bring your baby, but that the focus would be on the mum's mental health.

Katherine Crawford: I remember seeing a call on social media for peer supporters to help set up a café with mums in mind which was specifically for mums who had found it difficult, who'd either experienced post-natal depression or who were just finding the transition to motherhood hard. I had post-natal depression with my second child and I just loved the idea of the café: I thought, "This is what I would have wanted when I was really struggling." From my own experience of peer support, it's so important to see people who have been in a really dark place who have survived it and who are ok; it proves they're human. I wanted to give hope to those mums, so I got in touch with Emily and I'm really pleased I did.

KH: I had been really wanting to do something for women in my local community for a while. Then I saw the Facebook advert and I felt like I could contribute something useful, as I'd suffered from depression for a number of years in the past and I was really worried that I was going to relapse when I had my son, though I was very lucky and that didn't happen. I remember messaging and saying "I've been depressed but I'm not currently depressed and I didn't have post-natal depression, is this enough?!"

EM: I'd say about a third of the women who applied to be peer supporters didn't identify as having had a post-natal mental health condition: they just knew that it was really hard and they wanted to tell other mums that it wasn't going to be hard forever. Everybody struggles, I don't really believe people who say they don't, but we're not allowed to say it.

KH: I think you need to hear somebody being honest first so that you feel comfortable being honest about what's happening to you.

KC: I think that's what makes it such an important place. At all the baby groups that I ever went to, you were so afraid of saying something like, "I'm not really enjoying this," because what if somebody rejected what you said? Whereas when you come to the café, once that door is closed, you can say whatever you like. We're not going to throw it in anyone's face. We're going to say, "It's ok to feel like that, and it's not going to feel like that forever." It really spoke to me that it was just mums. It's a protected space just for us. And seeing people relax when they don't have to be careful, when they don't have to really explain what they're finding difficult, is just lovely. God, I miss it.

EM: I miss it! This is making me miss it.

KH: Me too. I really miss connecting with other people. Remember that first session when we all got together to do the training and talk about the café? It was such a special day. We knew we'd all lived through our own horrible experiences and that we were there because we wanted to do something with that pain and turn it into something that would help other women.

KC: That's what mums do though, isn't it? They just plough through it, crack on.

EM: I think for quite a few of our peer supporters, it was empowering to think "I've got something I can do that is useful for other people," and I think that's part of what's great about it. And I think there's a very specific kind of support from people who've been through the same thing as you, and we've had people say that this helped them more than the clinical support they received. I don't mean that clinical support isn't really important, but in my case, I knew that I just needed to talk about what I was going through because I couldn't process it and I didn't feel like there was really anyone who understood. I think peer support is an amazing tool for helping people who are going through something really tough. Seeing someone who's been through the same thing as you on the other side of it is so powerful.

KH: I think sometimes with your mental health you need permission to say, "This is bad." You get that much more easily and much more non-threateningly from talking to one of your peers than you do from going to see a doctor. It feels like almost a stepping stone to either saying, "This is enough, this is what I need," or to recognising, "I need more than this." The validation of somebody else saying that what you're going through is serious is very valuable.

EM: Yes, I can think of specific examples of women I've spoken to for whom being at the café, hearing that other women had found it hard, and realising that they weren't alone was definitely enough. And I can also think of plenty of women who maybe hadn't fully realised that they were struggling because they had post-natal depression and they needed more help. Both of those instances can be seen in a positive light, because they both have very positive outcomes. The people who need the help can feel empowered to go and get it, and the people who don't feel the need to seek help elsewhere get something from not feeling so alone in struggling with motherhood, because like I said, I think everybody does.

KC: I think how you access the café is important as well, because although we have our safeguarding and our policies, the three of us are not qualified to say, "You have post-natal depression." What we can do is to say, "If you have it, or think you might, you are welcome here and nobody's going to say that you're ill or label you." From the outside, we just look like a playgroup. We've had many visitors who have taken a couple of sessions before they're happy to say that they're really struggling. You can't just keep going to the GP and saying, "I'm fine, I've made this appointment but I'm absolutely fine," but people can come to us for as many sessions as they like. I think that's a really nice way to be able to access informal support, there's no pressure.

EM: I think one of the things I was really keen on was that it should be a drop-in, no referral. So you can just decide on the day if you want to go. And there's no criteria for coming, you don't even need to feel like you have anything at all, you just need a space to talk about what you're going through. I know that

baby groups are a vehicle for social interaction with other mums, but they seem to have a big focus on the baby, or the mum and the baby, without any focus on discussing what's just happened to you.

KH: I think the café is the one place where you're yourself first and you're a mother second, and what's going on with you is the most important thing. It's about you, and that's something that you don't get very often as a new mum.

KC: Also what I really like about the café is that you feel a bit looked-after, you're always welcome, somebody makes you a cup of tea. You don't realise how important that act is until you've had your identity stripped, you've just had a major life event that could have included surgery, and sometimes nobody even asks you how you are!

EM: And that's what we care about, because we know your little baby is loved and held and fed, and we have no doubt that you're doing a brilliant job as a mum, but what's important to us is how you deal with it. That question just didn't feel like it was being asked enough.

KC: I think our circle sessions are great as well. I'd never ever heard of anything where you could come as a mum to a session where there would be no bubbles involved and no-one would be offering to do sensory play; instead, it would be an adult conversation. I really enjoy those talks where you have a room full of women having a really deep conversation.

EM: Yeah, about things like identity, or how a baby changed your relationship with your partner, or with your mother, or with other members of your family. They were amazing. They've always been our most popular sessions. I think what's great about them is that they give people a space to have an in-depth conversation: it's an open floor for a really interesting discussion, a safe and confidential space for a discussion about something interesting, about really massive things that are a part of being a mum.

KH: It's been a bit different this year, hasn't it?

EM: Yeah, because we've done a lot of online support, but we've had phases of not being able to actively support people in the way we'd like to and we haven't done as many sessions as we would have normally done.

KH: But what we've got instead is a real community on our Facebook group.

EM: Yeah, I agree. For ages I'd wanted to create a private Facebook group for the people who'd been to the café to feel a connection, and I'd always hoped that people would make friends through the café, so setting up the group this year has been great in many ways. It's got about 300 members and it's a nice community and a space where people can share things, so that's been a really positive outcome of being online.

KH: What I really like is that we've seen women who we supported when they were having a tough time supporting other women in the group as well: women who came to us when they were really struggling with their mental health now respond to people who are in the same position as they were, and they can

add their own wisdom, so we're seeing the community supporting itself.

KC: There have also been some conversations when we've talked about recovery and hearing people mention the café is a really special feeling. It makes me feel quite smug, in a really nice way.

KH: What are our hopes for the café, going forward?

EM: I just really hope to be able to see people face-to-face again soon. More broadly, I'd like to be able to sustain it for as long as possible and empower other women to want to keep running it. In the short term, we're looking to train a new group of volunteers, some of whom have been visitors to the café, which will be lovely, because we don't really know what it's like to come to the café as a visitor, whereas they do. I'd love to be able to have a couple of sessions that run in different places throughout the county too. And to keep our online group running and have that as a space for people to talk as well. That's what I'd like for the next one to two years.

KC: I'd agree with Emily. I'd love to see it expand. In my pipe dream, we'd have a session running somewhere in Oxfordshire every day, so that somebody could potentially go every day and get that support from other mums, to create a network of mums who are looking out for one another and taking the strain of the loneliness and isolation you can feel. And not just in COVID times: being a new mother can be incredibly isolating whenever you do it. But I'll settle with trialling another location and continuing what we're doing. And publishing our book!²

EM: I think I just want to keep the conversation open about mental health, particularly for new mums, but really for mums of all stages, and to battle some of the stereotypes and expectations of women as mums and about the way society tells us we're supposed to feel. I think anything we can do that's a little chip away at that massive block of expectation and pressure on women who've had a baby is a positive thing, and I'd love to just keep us banging that drum.

Katharine Handel is an editor and researcher. As well as being one of the editors of the AIMS journal, she is also one of the co-ordinators of The Motherkind Café and a contributor to the café's podcast and blog. She lives in Oxfordshire with her husband and son.

1. For more about the café, visit our website at themothekindcafe.org.

2. This book (which is currently in preparation) will contain stories contributed by members of the café's community about their experiences of feeding their babies and how that impacted their mental health.