

Chapter 2

An Introductory Visit to a Women's Journaling Group

Abstract This chapter provides a brief glimpse into a session of a Women's Journaling Group where readers can gain a sense of how such a group might be facilitated and how journaling activities can be employed to explore women's experiences of violence and depression.

Keywords Journaling • Women • Gender-based violence • Depression • Women's journaling groups

A Women's Journaling Group

In this chapter I would like to invite you to observe part of a group session with the women as they participate in a Women's Journaling Group Program.

Facilitator: "Good evening everyone. How are you?"

The women reply in different voices and with different responses.

"I'm good!"

"I'm hungry; can we eat as we talk?"

"It's freezing outside. What happened to the summer weather?"

"Sorry I'm late, the dog escaped".

Following some laughs and shared snippets of conversation, the women find their seats around a table that holds pens, paper, magazines, glue, scissors, books, other journaling paraphernalia, women's baskets and purses and food for a light supper.

As facilitator I ask them how their week has been and what journaling they might have practised since we last met. Some women have been busy and not able to journal their thoughts or feelings, but other women share their experiences. There is a mixture of excitement at new insights into the impacts of verbal

violence, doubt about uncovered responses from the past and pride at taking steps towards a new goal of beginning friendships with other mothers at the children's school. As the women listen to each other, they encourage each other and comment on the changes that have occurred. There is some gentle challenging when one woman wonders if all her efforts to re-establish a new lifestyle are worth it. The other women remind her she has rights to live free from violence and that depression is a common response for women who have experienced violence. The atmosphere is friendly, reassuring, trusting and safe.

In response to my suggestion we start some journaling, the women agree and organise their journaling materials. I will use a journaling technique the women have used before but will provide a different topic and context. The technique is a 'sentence starter' and I read it out to the women. Their journaling activity is to complete the gaps in the sentence with whatever comes into their minds.

Me: "It is important to me for my voice and my needs to be heard because ... and then my depression ...".

When women have finished their journaling and have thought and shared quietly with each other, we do a round where each woman can share whatever she would like to share about her response. Some women read out exactly what they journaled. Other women talk generally about what they journaled and the themes that arose. Some women add insights that were revealed.

Adella wondered why it was important to be heard. "Why do we need other people to validate us and our thoughts?"

Zoe journaled that "It is important for me to voice my needs and have them heard when I'm depressed because often I feel that's when they're totally taken away. When I'm depressed, I'm so lost within myself, that when I do express myself, I'm taking a huge risk of putting myself out there. And often my thoughts might be jumbled and quite inarticulate. If I do that, often the depression can ease, if only for a minute or so, if someone actually hears me, the power of that. When you're struggling so hard to express your needs. Even if they don't understand it, they've actually taken the time".

Penny journaled "Because if I'm not heard, I lose sight of who I am, what I think, or I lose touch with my feelings. It makes it more difficult to express them and then I feel out of control and not in touch with myself. Gets too difficult to express myself, so I go into myself and other people's needs are more important".

Zelda journaled "Because the hearing validates me. Not just others hearing me, but me hearing me. I also need to be heard while I'm speaking without shouting. If I get into shouting mode, I'm already uncertain that my opinion is valid or my needs are reasonable. And then my depression rolls in again, like a fog, surrounding me to the extent that I cannot see my way, so I go and hide away. To write this down, feels like a new learning".

Magdalena said: "Because they need to be recognised".

We finished this activity with some further discussion and each woman highlighted what was most enlightening for her. This journaling activity opens up

further opportunities for women to keep journaling and to think about, for example, what are the 'needs' that are important for them to identify and achieve. As one woman later journaled in a 6-week evaluation follow-up: "Depression that I've experienced I think has partly (or mostly) been about my issues with not knowing myself and so not knowing my priorities & needs, so exploring this has given me insight to my depression/causes of my depression".

Conclusion

This excerpt has provided a brief glimpse into one particular session of a women's journaling group. It shows how women may interact and support each other, how insights might be achieved through journaling, reflection and discussion within the group and, outside the group in between sessions, and how a focus on expressing thoughts and feelings can be combined with a focus on hope and moving toward change. In the following chapters I look at the theories, concepts, contexts and perspectives that are helpful in gaining an understanding of and ability to analyse gender-based violence against women and depression in women. I will also explore how this knowledge underpins and supports the Women's Journaling Group Program model.

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