

Women Gathering in Dry Times

Make it happen!



A resource for organisers and facilitators of
Women Gathering programs and events

2008



WOMEN'S HEALTH
GOULBURN NORTH EAST

Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE) was established in July 2000. Previously known as NEWomen, Women's Health Goulburn North East is the government funded specialist women's health service for the Goulburn Valley and North-East Victoria.

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Written by Claire Zara with thanks to all who co facilitated and participated in the Women Gathering programs.

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Introduction or *Why Women Gathering?*

The Women Gathering journey started at Women's Health Goulburn North East (WHGNE) before the fires, before the floods, before the frosts and before the closure of the tobacco industry in Myrtleford. All these events snowballed in the Hume region heralding industry and climate change and rending asunder the 'givens' in rural communities. 'Givens' like eventually, after tough times, things get better.

They haven't.

No-one could have guessed just how tough life was to become for rural communities, nor how much we would need to turn to agencies and government for support - emotional, spiritual and financial. And no-one could have foreseen just how much we would need to look outside ourselves for respite from the growing pressures besieging our own families and relationships as financial urgency and looming debt began to chip away at the futures we had taken for granted.

Before this (rainless) shadow fell over the Hume region, a WHGNE volunteer, Sally Nansen, spent a year researching women's relationships in rural areas. The result was a literature review "*Women Gathering*", a passionate account of why women's friendships are so important, and the reasons they fail, or never really get started, in rural areas. Sally's review encompassed national and international research and local anecdotal accounts and struck a chord with all those who read it.

Women Gathering – a literature review, found that the primary obstacles to women forming close friendships with other women in rural areas were gossip, the lack of confidentiality, and either deliberate or accidental exclusion. Non, or limited acceptance of diversity placed a further mighty wedge between a woman and a potential friend.

Sally Nansen's findings surprised no-one; the response was akin to a collective "*aha*" as readers recognised the scenarios she described, of the unexpected exclusion and loneliness in what should have been an idyllic pastoral setting. The real surprise was that this had not been articulated so clearly nor attempted to be addressed in the region before now.

The simple but vital ingredients to making and maintaining women's friendships, trust, confidentiality and inclusion, became the cornerstone of the Women Gathering project.

As the forces of economics and nature joined in what seemed to be a concerted attempt to break the hearts and spirits of our communities, warning bells began to ring in the corridors of local mental health agencies. Women were bearing a '*disproportionate amount of the burden*' of the now named 'rural crisis'. They were often supporting depressed partners, small children and aged parents; they did farm and external work; they contributed to the community and helped out in schools. They stretched themselves in all ways to meet the changing and increasingly alarming needs of family and community. Agency workers started to wonder aloud how long and how far they could stretch before something snapped.

At WHGNE we were warned: "*If the wheels fall off women, they fall off the community.*" The advice from mental health agencies became "stay connected" keep up friendships; make time to be with people for recreation, intellectual stimulation, support and fun. Recent

research confirmed that the more friends we have, the better off we are, both mentally and physically.

So our overriding message to the women of Hume became: *“gather with women, make and maintain friendships, include women who might be on the fringes and respect each other’s stories”*. At functions and gatherings we stressed the absences; who isn’t here? Who has been forgotten? Who could have been included by a simple phone call or offer of a lift?

With an almost evangelical fervour we have spread this message throughout the Hume region, developing programs, speaking at functions and reminding audiences of women wherever we are that, *“together, women do better”*.

Women Gathering in Dry Times

“Women Gathering in Dry Times” is a resource to help or inspire you to begin getting women together in your community. It’s a flexible ‘how to’ account that guides you through our processes in the Hume region. In some ways this document is a report, an account and an explanation. Women Gathering unfurled in different ways in different parts of the Hume; it is still unfurling and has taken on a life of its own. We’ve poked a stick at the sleeping giant and now it’s mobilised into action. Women want to get together; they want to meet other women to talk, create, explore, laugh, sing, and share knowledge and information.

We know because they told us when we asked. Asking is important; it’s sometimes called ‘community development’, but ‘asking’ is simpler and to the point. If you ask your community or neighbourhood what they want, you are more likely to be successful when you provide it, or help them provide it for themselves.

Women Gathering in Dry Times is divided into sections; the initial one-off Women Gathering days where we brought diverse women together to find out their thoughts and need; the eight week programs that resulted from these lively consultations and ‘beyond’ the direction Women Gathering has taken so far.

We have only included general costs and noted when a service or venue was donated. Costs vary to budget, and each budget is different. Because WHGNE is a Hume region wide service some services were paid for because it was simply too costly for us to send staff hundreds of kilometres to investigate options. In your own communities where local talent, agencies and catering are on hand, many of these costs will be much less.

What’s negotiable about Women Gathering

Almost everything. How you choose to create your gathering is totally up to you and your community of women.

However, we do ask two things – firstly, if you do use this model or resource, please acknowledge WHGNE. We are a not for profit organisation who serve the women of the

Hume region by assisting them to achieve their potential and wellbeing using a variety of means, including: conducting local research, providing education and training, advocating on women's behalf and providing referral services. By distributing Women's Health GNE information bags (appendix 1) and informing local women of our various roles you may be indirectly helping a woman link into an agency or information service that can assist her. She may need family violence, financial, health or general resource advice. We can help put her on the right track.

What's not negotiable

Women's Health programs reflect the core value of equity inherent in all our work. Acceptance of diversity and inclusiveness is essential to maintain the integrity of the Woman Gathering programs. We do not accept the idea of a 'selected' participant group which excludes women openly or by denying them access either by selective promotions or unwelcoming behaviours.

WHGNE will not support any individual or agency which practises selectivity regarding participation in the program.

The success of the Women Gathering programs can in no small way be attributed to the healthy mix of young and old women, poor and middle class women, rural and urban women, women with disabilities and women with difficult lives, educated women and women who left school at 11 to care for families. The visible empathy, support and consideration demonstrated by these diverse women and the friendships that have developed were nurtured in an atmosphere of open hearted acceptance for difference, not the closed mindset of exclusion and sameness.

This is the spirit of Women Gathering – the only non-negotiable element.

Creating the Resource

We wanted the Gatherings to reflect the findings in *Women Gathering – a Literature review*, offer women different options for gathering together; be informative and skills based; be a community consultation process and also provide a venue for sharing, fun, food and laughter.

The **Women Gathering Draft** (appendix 2) document remains thus; a draft for the possible ways a Women Gathering day may go; a flexible blueprint which can be altered, modified, used in total, or picked through for ideas. It has never been 'set in concrete' because each time it is used it changes with the flavour brought by each facilitator on the day.

The Women Gathering Draft includes:

- Facilitator's List of what to bring on the day
- A visual evaluation format
- Introduction
- Ground rules
- Introduction and getting to know you suggested activities
- Information about the speech by Cathy McGowan given at the Anne Summers Forum in 2004 (the DVD is available from WHGNE and can be copied)
- Discussion about groups including types of groups available and successful groups
- Opportunity to share stories about personal experiences in groups
- Discussion about friendship and risks associated with making new friends
- Communication skills
- Case studies
- Brainstorm activity to determine what the group/community would like in a longer program
- Evaluation

The Women Gathering days are supported by a 'party pack' of information provided by WHGNE which includes local women's health services, depression, drought information and a health passport (available from WHGNE for free).

This resource is designed to be delivered over a whole day by two facilitators, from 9.30am to approximately 3.30 pm with provision for morning tea and lunch.

****Warning! Many women will be unable to stop talking and generally connecting with new acquaintances. A firm stand to keep on track is recommended but not always possible to enforce. Take it easy and have a cup of tea.***

Women Gathering Days

Finding passion in the Hume

Because WHGNE is based in Wangaratta and has a Hume region focus it is imperative that we work with local women in their own communities. And because we are a small organisation, creative, sustainable projects that give women the opportunity for ownership are essential to our effectiveness and their personal leadership development.

Our decision to take Women Gathering to the 'four corners' of the Hume region was made on the interest and availability of key women in Shepparton, Seymour, Myrtleford and Alexandra and a desire to find out how different the stated needs of women in these areas are.

Below is a brief snapshot of the Women Gathering Days.

| Co - Facilitator | Area | Venue | Number of Women |
|---|------------|---|-----------------|
| Kerry Connor CH nurse | Myrtleford | Ovens&King Community Health Centre | 18 |
| Fran Smullen Counsellor | Shepparton | MI Centre Mental Illness Fellowship Vic | 6 |
| Casey Community Development Worker Mitchell CHS | Seymour | Winery | 15 |
| Meredith Bowden Psychologist/community development worker | Alexandra | Alexandra Community Health Centre | 16 |

The day was fully subsidised by WHGNE including lunch and morning tea. Plenty of nourishing food is essential to grease the wheels of lively and relaxed communication.

How we reached our target group – or didn't

Ideally we wanted to include women who were disadvantaged by the changing environmental and economic climate – farm women who were doing it tough. We soon realised that to spread the broader message of inclusion it was just as important to have key community women who had influence in their own spheres, whether it be clubs and associations or volunteer community groups, to spread the word, as it was to have disadvantaged women present on the day. As our knowledge of drought impact grew it became apparent that it was not only farmers who were suffering, but shops and business as well; climate change was impacting at all levels of our communities. Our target group became "women".

Wanting to involve as diverse a range of women as possible and to disadvantage none, childcare and transport cost subsidies were made available. The day was, of course, free.

Spreading the Word

Below is a list of some of the places we contacted with information about Women Gathering days:

- Neighbourhood houses
- Community health centres
- Mental health agencies
- Medical surgeries
- Maternal and Childcare centres
- Drought workers/drought response organisations including the Department of Primary Industry
- Local council community development workers
- Church agencies
- CWA
- Victorian Farmer's Federation
- Landcare groups
- Hospitals
- Planned activity groups (PAG)
- Multicultural groups
- Aboriginal women's associations
- Sporting groups and recreation reserves
- Rural financial advisors
- Centrelink
- Australian Defence Force (Seymour)
- Libraries
- Local Shires
- Department of Human Services

Personal contacts and word of mouth are perhaps the most effective method of reaching the women who may benefit most from attending a Women Gathering day or program, however when women say they didn't hear about it, having ticked all the above boxes (and others) and knowing you did your best makes for a better night's sleep.

Media and advertising

We publicised Women Gathering days as widely as possible, sending media releases to local papers and speaking at functions wherever possible.

Below is a list of helpful sources we used to get our message out:

- School newsletters
- Local papers – ads and editorial
- Free papers
- Flyers in town and stock and feed outlets

- Rural women's network magazine article
- Mail out in the Myrtleford area
- CWA website
- Farmers Federation 'what's on' on website
- City Council local events websites
- Local radio

What worked best

Key women who could bring along a number of other women were the greatest asset. As we often found, the women who benefited most from Women Gathering were the ones who found it the hardest to come along (and had been the most isolated)– more so if they had taken their courage into their own hands and arrived knowing no-one. This bravery was to continue to astound us as women came to each of the different programs, sometimes trembling with fear and apprehension, but somehow determined to make a start, take a risk and find their way out of isolation and loneliness.

Shepparton was the only place that did not have a facilitator placed strategically in a local agency which could assist in recruiting women for the day. This may be an explanation for the low numbers or perhaps that the venue, generously supplied by Mental Illness Fellowship Victoria, was a deterrent to potential participants wary of the mental illness connotation.

Despite low numbers a core group of committed women continued to attend weekly.

Connection is the key. WHGNE, in order to function effectively in the region needs strong key connections, who in turn are connected into their community/client base. Within a smaller community these people are known to the facilitator or organisation. The issue of small participant numbers are thus minimised as key women in the community can be accessed to invite women to along.

What worked least

Sending group emails may be today's method of fast information dissemination but it will never beat a real time conversation on the phone or face to face. Agency workers are confronted with hundreds of emails weekly and the delete button runs hot on items that have no prior introduction through an earlier contact. While our intention was to inform as many individuals and organisations as possible about Women Gathering, conversations with key individuals followed by electronic information was likely the most effective. Sharing your enthusiasm is always the best way to get others motivated. Saying that, it doesn't hurt to send out those emails just in case, with a request for the recipient to print out your flyer and display it in their agency. It is unrealistic to think that you can have conversations with everyone, particularly those involved in direct service delivery.

Flyers

The Women Gathering flyers improved as we progressed. Creating flyers is an art in itself and should sometimes be left to those with the skill! Clear and informative, uncluttered and motivating are all good elements of a successful flyer. We are still learning.

Distribution

When distributing flyers in the community we began with the obvious venues, community health services, schools, medical surgeries, adult education centres and neighbourhood houses and progressed to shops, stock and feed stores, hairdressers and supermarkets. A useful rule is firstly think women, then add rural and see where it takes you.

In smaller areas you could consider a post out to town and RMB letterboxes. It is expensive but can be effective

What we learnt from the Women Gathering Days

At the end of a full day of discussions, role plays, activities and meeting new women we asked each group what they would like from a longer, six to eight week Women Gathering program in their community. These are their responses:

Myrtleford

- ❖ Assertiveness training
- ❖ Self preservation
- ❖ Self esteem
- ❖ Dealing with controlling behavior
- ❖ Relaxation/meditation/massage
- ❖ Expressing anger safely
- ❖ Guilt – war on guilt
- ❖ Setting boundaries; negotiating

Seymour

- ❖ Skills based – facilitation; public speaking
- ❖ Confidence, self esteem
- ❖ Evening with drinks
- ❖ Self defense
- ❖ Inspirational guest speakers ie woman of the year; women's journeys; role models
- ❖ Sex/relationship education
- ❖ Menopause
- ❖ Managing family relationships including letting go of parenting
- ❖ Older women – what's my role after kids
- ❖ Grief and loss
- ❖ Caring for aged parents

Alexandra

- ❖ A health expo where all the services agencies are represented
- ❖ Information for carers
- ❖ Yoga/relaxation
- ❖ Diet and health
- ❖ Exercise
- ❖ How to build/maintain/retain friendships
- ❖ Bus trip to somewhere
- ❖ New craft day
- ❖ Pampering
- ❖ How to say “no”
- ❖ Adventure day – i.e. rafting; skiing
- ❖ How to set up clubs
- ❖ How to get funding
- ❖ Fashion parade

Shepparton

- ❖ Empowering women to be themselves
- ❖ Assertiveness
- ❖ Finding out voices
- ❖ Open discussion/ our stories
- ❖ Massage
- ❖ Guest speakers
- ❖ Life transitions
- ❖ Art
- ❖ Singing/ Karaoke

The desire for empowerment, assertiveness skills and information acquisition emerged as common themes for women around the region.

Women Gathering – eight week programs

Who came

Two programs were completed in 2007. Running consecutively, Women Gathering Myrtleford and Women Gathering Shepparton brought together a diverse group of women including farmers, retired professional women, widows young mothers, intellectually and physically disabled women, women from other cultures and women at various stages of their life. Some women came to every session throughout the program, others came when they could, and for some, once was enough.

Who didn't or couldn't come

Working women were absent necessarily because of the morning timeslot. The needs of working women or women who have responsibilities in the day are a recurring concern when programs are often run at inconvenient times for them.

While some young mothers did come many times, childcare availability was another issue that prevented regular attendance.

Though agencies were approached there were no Muslim or indigenous women at any of the Women Gathering sessions. How to engage these diverse groups is an important consideration for further programs.

What was offered

To reflect the stated requests of each area, two separate programs were designed, each running one morning per week, with a different theme. Morning tea including fruit, cakes and tea and coffee were provided by WHGNE.

Myrtleford 8 Week Program Venue: Ovens and King Community Health Centre

| Week | Activity | Facilitator | Cost | Women |
|------|--|-------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------|
| 1 | Getting Started | Adele Davis | Facilitator fee | 18 |
| 2 | Art & Games | Suzie Losch Artist | Facilitator fee | 21 |
| 3 | How to say No and mean it | Adele Davis | Facilitator fee | 16 |
| 4 | Heal your life, Love yourself and create the life you want | Susie Mullholland | Facilitator fee | 10 |
| 5 | Self Care | Gil Malone Primary Mental Health | Free | 11 |
| 6 | Singing Workshop | Bev Hoffman | Facilitator fee | 10 |
| 7 | Women's Stories of mothers & daughters | WHGNE Facilitator | Free | 9 |
| 8 | Patchwork | Participant run | Free | No record |
| 9 | Crime/domestic violence Information session | Police | Free | No record |
| 10 | Where to from here? The group's future plans | WHGNE Facilitator | Free | 9 |

From a large number to begin with, the Myrtleford Women Gathering group gradually developed into a core group of around nine women who continue to meet at least monthly. These women have also linked into other networks for the first time and have formed new friendships within the group. The group's 'leadership' is rotating with activities and responsibilities planned out some months ahead.

School holidays in weeks six and seven saw the group losing its mothers as they succumbed to childcare and travel restrictions.

Where a WHGNE facilitator was unable to attend in weeks eight and nine, three women nominated themselves to run these sessions. The two women who successfully organised

and facilitated the patchwork session had never had responsibility for a group before; the term 'leadership' would not have occurred to them.

Shepparton Women Gathering Venue – Mental Illness Fellowship Victoria Centre

| Week | Activity | Facilitator | Cost | Women |
|-------------|---|---|-----------------|--------------|
| 1 | Getting Started & Goal setting | Motivational Speaker Ann McCamish | Facilitator fee | 6 |
| 2 | Clay sculptures | Angie Russi Shepparton Art Gallery | Materials | 6 |
| 3 | Relationships Mothers, daughters & granddaughters | Barb Gray Relationships Australia | Free | 9 |
| 4 | Heal your life, love yourself | Susie Mulhullond | Facilitator fee | 15 |
| 5 | Informal gathering School holidays | WHGNE | Free | 3 |
| 6 | Mental Health A medical perspective | Sharon O'Reily GoulburnValley Mental Health | Free | 8 |
| 7 | Hope & the future | Fran Smullen Centacare | Free | 6 |
| 8 | Where to from here | WHGNE facilitator | Free | 4 |

The Shepparton Women Gathering group remained small throughout, despite all best efforts to publicise the program. It consisted of a core group of at least three farming women who had stock responsibilities to attend to before coming to the group. During calving, some women were unable to attend.

The influx of women in week four, while making for an exciting morning, came as a surprise Planned Activity Group (PAG) activity organised by their facilitator. Some women did revisit the group later.

In the final session the small group expressed various levels of wanting to continue the group but was uncertain as to how. Some women discussed meeting privately for coffee or lunch, but no firm decisions were made.

A surprising result

A short while later WHGNE were approached to form a partnership with Shepparton Art Gallery to encourage women to meet at the Gallery and explore different mediums of art making. Centacare became a third partner and the program took its shape; a thematic discussion around life/love/drought/philosophical issues, followed a by practical, skills based art workshop. The women were then set loose with paint, paper, feathers, glue and other sundry materials to form their thoughts into object or design.

Three women from the eight week program continued to gather at the Gallery, meeting and sharing with a new group of approximately ten women who came along to *“meet other women and do art”*.

Once again this program was free; Shepparton Art Gallery provided the space and the expertise; Centacare provided the guided discussion and WHGNE provided the modest funds for materials and morning tea, financial assistance for travel and childcare and a coordinator to be a referral point and a reminder of the values of Women Gathering.

This exciting partnership which brought with it the expertise of three agencies seemed to fulfill the women’s needs on a number of levels; intellectual discussion and exploration of thoughts and feelings, sharing of personal stories and connecting with new women and being given permission to create – or just experiment, with texture and color while learning a new skill. For some the experience allowed for the long forgotten artistic outlet; for others it was the outpouring of hidden emotions and yet for others it was about being absorbed in play.

Each week a group of women gathered at the Art Gallery for three hours and left the world outside.

Women Gathering at the Shepparton Art Gallery seemed to finish in the blink of an eye, but in reality lasted six rich weeks.

A second Gallery program is planned for 2008. This one attracts a small fee for materials and invites women to participate in decisions about the type of art they want to make and the topics they wish to explore. Women may lead the weekly discussions if they choose. They will also decide on how to structure morning tea to further minimise the costs. WHGNE’s role will diminish though financial assistance will continue to be provided where needed. No woman will be disadvantaged.

Plans for the partnership to secure funding to enable a longer, more complex women’s community arts project are in the pipeline. Most importantly, strong bonds have been forged between diverse agencies sharing common goals and diverse women, simply sharing time, space and themselves.

Evaluation

Time and resources are precious. No-one can afford to make the same mistakes over. However, if something is worth doing, it is worth doing badly, at least the first time. Then you learn.

Each Women Gathering day was evaluated (appendix 3). Each day of the 8 week programs was evaluated, with a summary evaluation on the last day. This allowed us to ‘stay on track’ and to identify what we could do better next time. Not all evaluations need to be written; simply asking the group what they liked or didn’t like is fine, as is using visual prompts like Strength cards (available from WHGNE library).

Below are some evaluation responses from the women:

Today’s Gathering was:

Fantastic, great content, lively presentation, exactly what I needed, the universe must have known

Good to meet people and get to know them

Good, a real blast

Unusual and great fun

Today I liked:

The new friends in Shepparton

Getting to know other women of the Shire

The companionship

Playing with crayons, having a laugh, companionship

The feeling of togetherness with women

I didn't like:

Speaking in front of everyone

Having to finish

Going home

The dominance of a couple of people in the group, it didn't give everyone a chance

Being on a diet and not being able to pig out on morning tea

To stop enjoying myself

It would have been better if:

A few more attended

People I know who couldn't come could have been here

It lasted longer

I came because:

I enjoyed the first group and wanted to do something for myself for a change

I wanted to make friends

I have to change my life and get involved and meet new people

I needed to do something for me, socialise

I needed interaction

I'm in need of assertiveness

I enjoy the company, everyone is so interesting and fun

I'd like a morning on:

Anything stimulating, or just talk on life as women

Guest speakers on inspirational women and their stories

Assertiveness, friendship (how to get along with people)

Coping with the unexpected in our lives

Dealing with stress

Ambitions and goals

Beyond

Finally, Women Gathering is a day workshop, a program, an event or simply and powerfully, an idea. It's not a new idea. Women have been gathering for centuries, to share, support, learn, laugh and cry. That we have to create workshops or design programs, and spend time, money and effort to encourage women to come along and be with other women, with no cost and just for sheer pleasure, says too much about our culture, what we value, what we allow ourselves and the demands on our lives and time.

Ideas have power; they spread, take root, change form and keep growing as each individual or organisation breathes color and life into them. Here we present you with a snapshot of our Women Gathering program and hand you over the idea of a community where women have friends, wake anticipating each day, are free to be themselves and are welcomed for who they are; where women feel safe to speak out and know their stories are safe, that they are listened to, that someone is thinking of them and that they have a role in the community that values them for who they are as much as for what they do.

As Sally Nansen writes: *"It takes only two women to start the waters flowing"*.

Appendix 1 Women's Health Goulburn North East Information packs

Please contact Women's Health Goulburn North East for information packs relevant to your area on 03 57223009.

Pack Contents:

- Book mark
- Membership form for WHGNE
- North East mental health info card
- Article – Dancing in the Street
- Article – The two of us
- Article Optimism runs dry in the bush
- Good group checklist
- Facilitator's checklist
- Active listening
- Cathy McGowan quotes
- About WHGNE
- Check list for working with groups
- Inspirational quotes
- Speaking and listening – The Zen of Groups

Women Gathering

Day Training



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What to bring

- Butcher's paper
 - Textas
 - Blue tack
 - Colored Textas
 - Thin card
 - Anne Summers Forum video cued to Cathy McGowan
 - Video/DVD player
 - Television
 - Extension leads
 - Information packs
 - Box for evaluations
 - Evaluation continuum
 - Copy of 'The Story'
 - Note pads for facilitators
 - pens
-
- Tea/coffee/juice/morning tea/lunch

Co- facilitated by WHGNE representative and a local community representative

Facilitator's note

- Recap findings after lunch break
- Slot in energisers after breaks or when group is flagging
- Ask "**How are we going so far?**" and tailor training to the response

Pre Workshop Evaluation

Write on a long piece of butcher's paper on the wall:

"I know lots of ways of keeping groups and friendships healthy and vibrant"

Ask the women to write their name where they think they are at -

1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10

One color texta only.

Remember:

At the end of the day ask women to place there name in a different color along the continuum - has anything changed?

Welcome and Introduction of facilitators

Why a Women's Gathering Day?

Don't we all know how women love to get together; have a talk, a cuppa or a drink, a good time? Sure we do, but for many of us and for many women who live busy or isolated lives in rural communities, the opportunities to do the things we do naturally are becoming less and less. And with them the skills that are needed for real communication and real friendship to happen.

Today is a result of two things; the *Women Gathering Literature Review* by Sally Nansen and the certainty that for many people living in rural areas life is not going to get any easier. We will need our communities and our friendship and support groups more than ever before.

Sally's report discovered some of the reasons that **prevent** women from developing close networks or friendships and support groups. Women Gathering is about discussing those issues and finding solutions, but every community has different issues and different responses. That's why it's up to us as individuals and as a group to identify this community's needs and solutions to problems you may anticipate or have already encountered.

One of the things that will happen today is story telling; what women do well is tell stories; about themselves, their lives, their families. A lot of today's workshop is based on your stories – they can be funny, sad, tragic or uplifting- it doesn't matter as long as we share them in the generous spirit with which they are offered and to keep them safely in these walls.

Write up on Whiteboard

We hope today's outcomes will be:

- ❖ A great day getting to know women and sharing stories and ideas.
- ❖ Inspiration to meet together more regularly with other women
- ❖ Some strategies about keeping groups and friendships alive
- ❖ Ideas about future gatherings

Features of today

- ❖ No PowerPoints
- ❖ No overheads
- ❖ Some butcher's paper
- ❖ No experts –we are all experts
- ❖ Confidentiality – whatever we share today stays here

Expectations and Introductions

In pairs:

Ask the person next to you their name, **why** they have come today and **what** they hope to get out of the workshop.

Report back to group with your partner's responses

Facilitator to note these responses for reference.

Some issues will be addressed today and those that cannot (because of time) we hope to include in an eight-week program which will build on today's learning and sharing.

Ground Rules

Before we get to know each other a bit better it's important to set some ground rules for us as a group so that we feel comfortable with each other and free to speak honestly.

Everyone needs a safe environment in which to be themselves

Spend two minutes with the woman next to you to develop a short list of **rules/ agreements** to ensure we achieve the best possible environment for our time together today.

Report back

- Write list on whiteboard
- Agree to list
- Ensure these are included:

- ❖ **Confidentiality** – our stories and comments and not repeated outside of this workshop
- ❖ **Everyone** has a chance to speak and be listened to
- ❖ **Acceptance of difference** – someone might think differently to you- it doesn't make them wrong

Warm up / Getting to know each other

Crayons and paper/card to fold into tent shape.

Choose a colored crayon and write your name on the card.

In pairs ask your partner the following questions:

- Why did you choose that color?
- Why were you named...?

or

- Describe the circumstances around the last time, or a memorable time, you wore high heels – when was it? What was the occasion? how did you feel etc.

or

- Describe an embarrassing moment you've experienced.

Report back with your partner's name and as much information as she'd like you to share with the group .

or

Find the Identity

Participants write four or five adjectives on a piece of paper to describe themselves. Papers are collected and redistributed randomly. Participants have to find and identify the owner.

Cathy McGowan Speech at the Anne Summers Forum (video)

Introduce Video and the context:

The Women Gathering project was inspired by Cathy McGowan's speech at the Anne Summers forum in 2004.

Cathy is a rural consultant, farmer in the Indigo Valley and academic.

Her speech inspired women to come away and talk seriously about how we can be more inclusive in our relationships with other women.

Some sections might not seem relevant to today, but cutting those small bits out is too difficult.

Play video or DVD (15 minutes)

Whole Group responses to video

Types of groups

“Group” in this case will be used to mean a formal or informal gathering that can include, but is not necessarily, a self-help group committee. This type of group has more formal structures than the friendship or common interest groups we are talking about today and generally have a facilitator. However, they do share some clear characteristics.

In groups of 3-5. Introduce each other.

Nominate a scribe and a reporter.

Ask:

“When do we get together as women?”

Make a list of formal and informal gatherings.

Highlight the ones you are interested in or belong to.

Read out

What conclusions can be drawn from these lists?

We need a common purpose or focus.

** This activity also provides women with a list to explore their community*

Why do some groups just work?

Butcher's paper/pens

Small group discussion:

- Discuss a **good** experience of getting together with other women i.e. a team, friendship group, committee or other.

- **What are the characteristics of a good or successful group?**
-
- **How do you know you are in one? What does it feel like?**
-
- **Examples of a great group you've experienced.**

***Refer to Good Group Checklist in Pack**

Share responses with group. Blu tack on wall.

Good Group Checklist

- ❖ Confidentiality – all members feel safe and trust each other
- ❖ Fun
- ❖ Everyone has the opportunity to speak
- ❖ Members look out for one another (i.e. if someone isn't present they find out if they are ok)
- ❖ Everyone is informed of activities
- ❖ Respect differences
- ❖ Have a focus or common goal
- ❖ Listen to each other

- ❖ Feel safe

- ❖ Can share facilitation, take turns to run the group or decide on activities

- ❖ Are well organised

- ❖ Have a safe, comfortable venue

- ❖ Good communication channels and skills

- ❖ Leave no-one out

- ❖ Celebrate achievements



Facilitator's Checklist

- ❖ Book or organise the venue.
Check again closer to the date to ensure availability.
- ❖ Is it accessible?
- ❖ Is it comfortable?
- ❖ Are there tea and coffee facilities?
- ❖ Will food need to be stored or heated?
- ❖ Are there enough chairs?
- ❖ Do you need tables for writing?
- ❖ Does everyone know the time/date/place?
- ❖ Transport – does anyone need picking up?
- ❖ Beginning and ending times.
- ❖ Other materials needed?
- ❖ Paper, pens, blu tack
- ❖ Childcare

Guest speakers

- ❖ Booked and double checked their availability?
- ❖ Speaker to be picked up or do they have clear directions or a map?
- ❖ Length of time a speaker will address the group.

Social outing

- ❖ Agree on venue
- ❖ Book venue
- ❖ Contact all members
- ❖ Any special access requirements?
- ❖ Transport/car pool/designated drivers/bus hire

Horror Stories or just Plain Disappointment

Discuss in your group a **bad or disappointing** experience you've with other women in formal or informal gatherings.

Share with group

Facilitator can lead with her Horror story then individual's tales.

Whole group or discuss in small groups

**Refer to facilitator's checklist*

Obstacles Checklist

Obstacles that prevent groups being terrific

- ❖ Physical obstacles – no venue to meet; transport issues/uncomfortable venue/too far/hard to access
- ❖ Lack of commitment
- ❖ Lack of time (to get to the group)
- ❖ No purpose or focus
- ❖ Domineering members
- ❖ No fun
- ❖ Not accepting difference/not inclusive
- ❖ Gossip
- ❖ Poor organisation
- ❖ Poor communication
- ❖ No care; no responsibility
- ❖ Factions or cliques
- ❖ Poor facilitation
- ❖ All work no play
- ❖ Forgetting about people with special needs

How are we going so far?

Recap on morning

- ❖ Why 'Women Gathering'

- ❖ Met new people or got to know something different about women you already know

- ❖ Basics of a group or gathering

- ❖ Good ones and bad ones

Acquaintances and Friends

A feature of rural living is often knowing many people or knowing of them. The 'acquaintance' level is high but that doesn't always equate to real friendships.

Activity

Make mental calculation of how many people you meet with socially on a fairly regular basis that you would consider **acquaintances**.

Now estimate how many of these people you would call '**friends**'.

Quick share with the group.

Friendship is a journey – sometimes it can be risky

Risks and Benefits

What are some of the risks of starting a new friendship?

Are they any different in the country than the city?
Why or Why not?

Discuss in groups.

Think about a woman you consider to be your friend.

What makes her a friend?

Share a story about your friend or a group of friends you belong to.

In small groups compile a list of characteristics on butcher's paper.

Heading: "A friend is someone who:"

Report back. Tack up lists.

Are we listening?

The Women Gathering Literature Review identified these obstacles to developing closer relationships with women-

- **confidentiality** or lack thereof;
- **gossip**;
- not being **listened to** or feeling **heard**
- a pressure to conform,
- staying with the '**pleasant**', and
- not knowing when to **refer on** when there is a real problem

Another major obstacle is **Time**. Women's lives today are so busy that often care for themselves, including their personal friendships are what gets sacrificed first of all. As is our ability to offer our undivided attention when it is needed. As someone once said "*the truth takes too long*".

Gossip

Chinese Whispers

To make participants aware of how passed on messages can become severely distorted.

Participants sit next to each other but about a metre apart. Read “The Story” quietly to first woman – she then passes it on, whispering.

The Story

Yesterday Lucy whom I met at the bank told me that Carol is going on holidays, with her husband Joel who has a bad hernia. Carol’s veins are giving her grief but the doctor says she might as well wait until after her holiday in Coffs Harbour before getting them done. I think she’ll go to the Private hospital because I’m sure she has private health insurance. Or she should have, after how much they got selling the house last year. Angus, who works at the real estate, says they make a packet. Over a million! Lucky Lucy!

Each person passes the story on (verbally, but whispering so that others can’t hear) to the person next to them in the group.

The last person in the group has been given the final version of the story; they are to tell the total group what they have been told.

How close was the final version to the original?

“Gossip can be the distortion or the truth, an untruth or a truth that the person didn’t want known.”

Group discussion

What is gossip? When is it information and when is it gossip?

Describe a time when you or someone you know was a victim of gossip. (You don’t need tell what the gossip was). How did it make you feel?

Share stories with the group if you want to.

***Gossip is the passing on of information about a woman that she would not pass on about herself, or else without that person’s consent. (On the whiteboard)**

**A statement beginning with
“*Apparently*” is very likely to be
gossip!**

Active Listening

Active listening is when we give our full attention to someone when they are speaking. We are all guilty of not listening well enough, mostly because our lives often hold so many distractions.

In pairs facing each other:

Person 1 talks about her day or something important.

Person two fiddles, looks at watch, gets up to get things etc.

2 minutes -Swap roles-2 minutes

How did it feel being the talker?

What are some ways we can listen actively?

- Body language
- Open questions
- Reflect on what the person is saying
- Nod
- Eye contact

Repeat exercise, swapping partners again.

How did that feel?

In groups:

Recall a time that you weren't listened to when you were saying something important to you or that you didn't listen to someone.

Active listening is an ongoing process. We need to remind ourselves all the time to do it.

Disclosure

Sometimes women are frightened or embarrassed if another woman discloses a problem. Often this is about being fearful of doing the wrong thing. However, it is still important to listen even if you feel you do not have answers.

Case study 1

At morning tea a woman you only know a little tells you she is having suicidal thoughts and she fears for herself and her toddler.

How do you respond?

Discuss in small groups and note down answers.

Report back

Case study 2

In your weekly walking group an older woman confides that her husband is getting increasingly violent especially on weekends when he has a drink. She doesn't know what to do about it.

How do you respond?

Discuss in small groups and note down answers.

Report back

***We can only deal with stuff to a certain degree, then refer on.
What are some places we can refer her to?**

Referral contacts are included in the Women Gathering pack.

Conclusion

Where to from Here? Activity

On the whiteboard/ butchers paper brainstorm:

1. Ideas arising from today's workshop
2. Ideas about future women's gatherings

Sum up the day and thanks

Suggested:

In one day we can only touch lightly on some of the issues preventing rural women from forming deep and lasting friendships with each other.

But it is a start.

Your input allows us to develop a longer program to address these obstacles and we thank you for your participation.

Between us I know we can come up with solutions or at least change the way we do things to become more inclusive and more sensitive to other's needs. Hopefully, others will be more sensitive to ours, too.

Each person to sum up the day with one word.

Conclude by:

Visual evaluation. Pre and post workshop evaluation – ask participants to *again* put their name on the continuum. Have they moved forward? Stayed the same?

Exchange phone numbers and emails if they choose to.

Fill in evaluation forms.

Appendix 3 Evaluation Handout

How did we do????

Today's get together was ...

Today, I liked ...

I didn't like ...

It would have been better if ...

In the future, I'd like ...

I came because ...

What, if anything has changed for you during the day...

And what's more ...