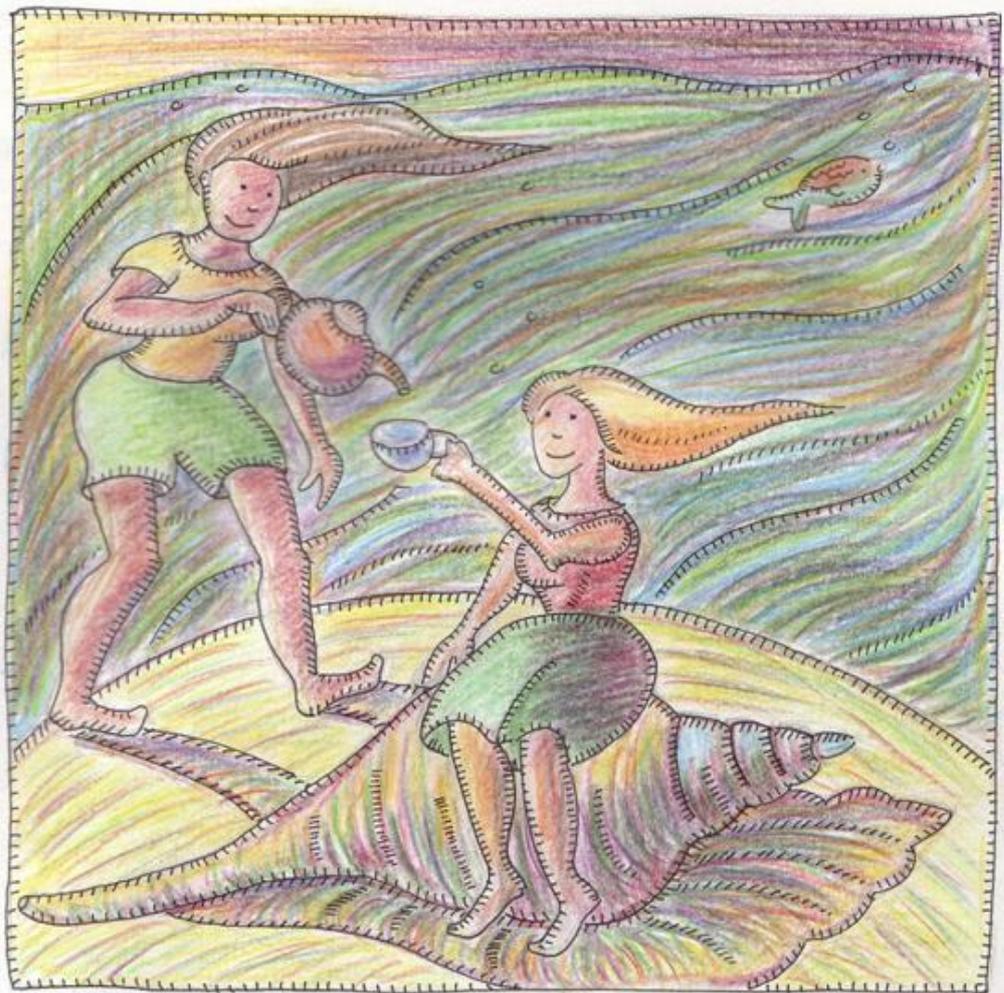


Women Gathering

Bringing women together because together we do better



Friendship, Fun & Support

For Community & Professionals



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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The Women Gathering Journey

2003	WHGNE identified many women were without a trusted listener	<p>WHGNE moved to a public location. The “Women’s Health” sign went up and in came the women. After listening to their story women were offered referral but mostly they said “Thank you for listening, I feel better now”.</p> <p>Around this time a WHGNE member sent a letter imploring WHGNE to do something for the lonely and isolated women. <i>What could we do? We wondered what are women who aren’t lonely doing?</i></p>	<p>Mental health agencies have been saying for some time how important friendships are to our mental health. ⁱ</p> <p>Study after study has found that social ties reduce our risk of disease – there is now no doubt that friends help us live longer ⁱⁱ</p> <p>Informally we were hearing that women were carrying a disproportionate amount of the burden, caring for depressed husbands, tending to children and ageing parents, working outside of the home or farm and contributing to the community. The message is: “If the wheels fall off women, the wheels will fall off the community”.</p> <p>When considering alternative theories about 'responses to stress' the traditional 'fight-or-flight' theory was found to have been developed largely from studies conducted with males. An alternative theory of 'tend and befriend', which refers to responses that protect safety and reduce distress whilst creating and maintaining social networks for protection, is still up for debate.</p> <p>International research however, made it very clear, that women are very effective at mobilising the community by forming groups and networks to meet the pressing needs of the community[iiii]ⁱⁱⁱ.</p> <p>Today, ironically, in times of stress the first thing that goes is women’s friendships, the very thing that can sustain them. ^{iv}</p>
2004-5	Cathy McGowan challenged us	Speaking at a WHGNE forum in 2004, Cathy McGowan asked the question of women present, “who is not here?” She threw out the challenge to each of us to next time ‘invite someone who would not otherwise come’.	
2006	Literature Review written	WHGNE volunteer, Sally Nansen, spent 2006 researching women’s relationships in rural areas. The result was <i>Women Gathering: A Literature Review</i> ; a passionate account of why women’s friendships are so important, the reasons they fail, or never get started in rural areas.	
2007	Women Gathering Groups up and running	WHGNE started to run groups, beginning with groups in Myrtleford and Shepparton. However WHGNE quickly returned to the core values of empowerment and sustainability, by supporting women to run their own group.	
2008	Women Gathering Workshops held	Women Gathering Workshops were developed, women gathered to share wisdom, gain skills and encourage each other to run a group in their own community.	
2009-10	Women Gathering After Fires funded	WHGNE was commissioned to implement Women Gathering for fire-affected communities across Victoria following the ‘Black Saturday’ tragedy.	

Introduction

Women Gathering is about bringing women together because together we do better.

It is important for women to spend time together. It is not a waste of time. It is good for women's mental and physical health, and when women are healthy and happy, homes and communities benefit.

This resource provides a model for how Women Gathering can benefit the women involved and have a flow-on effect in strengthening rural communities. Women Gathering is a simple concept, and the principles and the heart of Women Gathering can be applied to any situation when working with rural women and their communities.

This will take you through Women's Health Goulburn North East's (WHGNE) journey of Women Gathering. The journey began with the identification of social isolation in rural communities. WHGNE then produced a literature review of the issue and started some Women Gathering Groups. This expanded to Women Gathering Workshops to empower local women to start and run their own groups. This document explains what WHGNE did and what was learnt, along with what others have experienced.

For those who would like to join the journey there is a 'how to section': 'how to' get a group started, and for agency workers 'how to' encourage women to gather.

Principles of Women Gathering:

- Being inclusive and accepting diversity
- Respecting women's confidences
- 'Just getting together' because it's important
- Ask 'who else could be here?'

Literature Review

A review of the literature surrounding social isolation for rural women and its impact on their health revealed some surprising points.

- Rural women carry unique and heavy burdens and these burdens are further pronounced when women carry them alone and in secret.
- Rural women's mental and physical health is in jeopardy when there are limited opportunities for women to disclose at an honest and transparent level.
- There are social and cultural obstacles to rural women gathering together to share their lives at a deep level.
- Finally, rural women themselves can choose to confront these obstacles by practising an alternative way of responding to each other: committing to confidentiality, listening, being inclusive and a general goal to develop healthy life-giving friendships despite the risk of hurt or pain.

Nansen (2006)^v 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**. Limited or non-acceptance of **diversity** placed a further wedge between a woman and a potential friend.

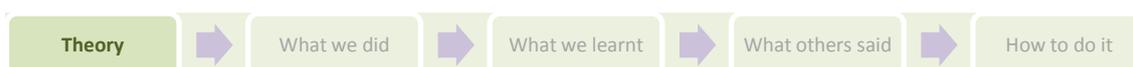
Women Gathering is based on the premise that *'together, women do better'*^{vi vii viii}.

Women Gathering centres upon people developing mutually supportive relationships and thereby reducing people's experiences of social isolation. Support is gained through respectful collective listening in small groups of people.^{ix}

Whilst Women Gathering does not seek to eliminate the role of professional counselling, it provides women with an opportunity for collective exchange of stories and ideas in a relationship with an equal power dynamic and the possibility of an ongoing friendship.

Key factors to create a friendship culture:

- Listening and Storytelling
- Confidentiality
- Inclusiveness
- Wisdom Together
- Communication Skills



The Heart of Women Gathering

The heart of Women Gathering can be summarised as the following. It is the wisdom of women respectfully listening to each others' stories in a confidential environment. It is women being inclusive of each other and embracing the diversity that contributes to their strength. It is good communication skills, allowing the exchange of ideas as women learn from and support each other.

The principles we learnt that make groups work, and can be applied widely, from two friends having coffee and a laugh together to a group of women getting together over a specific activity. These principles help form successful gatherings.

Listening & Story Telling

Listening cultivates a supportive environment where rural women can discover that their experiences and burdens are similar. Woman to woman conversation creates an environment where women can develop meaning for their unique experience. Story telling is spontaneous, informal and unstructured – people tell whatever stories they want, in whatever order, with no rules about what is 'important' or 'legitimate'.

Confidentiality

In a healthy friendship, women formally or informally have agreements about respecting the personal information shared.

Inclusiveness

Inclusiveness is actively providing opportunity for all to be involved. While it is impossible that we can like everyone all of the time, selectivity should not be the foundation or main feature of a gathering.

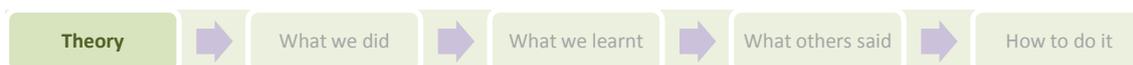
Wisdom Together

A Wisdom Well^x is made up of the individual stories and experiences. A collective source of wisdom gained through the sharing of personal stories. By listening others can add new understanding, validation, hope and action for their own lives.

Women Gathering is *not* about adding more burdens on the back of an already burdened woman. In friendship women exchange ideas and learn from each other and hopefully find their own burdens are not quite so heavy.

Communication Skills

Good communication establishes ground rules, expectations, expresses needs and uses 'I-messages'. Good communication talks 'to the problem person rather than about them'.



Theory to Practice

WHGNE was spurred to do something by the literature review and the identification within the Hume region of many women who were without a trusted listener or friend they could turn to. WHGNE decided to organise women's gatherings, inviting women who didn't normally attend groups or community events.

What was done

Throughout 2007, four initial Women Gathering get-togethers were held in the Hume region – Myrtleford, Shepparton, Seymour, and Alexandra, with a view to organising an 8 week program in each community.

Eight-week gatherings were organised in Shepparton and Myrtleford.

What women said

The women loved the eight-week gatherings; they enjoyed sharing their own stories and developing trust within the groups.

“New friends and older friends are more close now”.

“I feel like a new person”.

“The enthusiasm is back!”

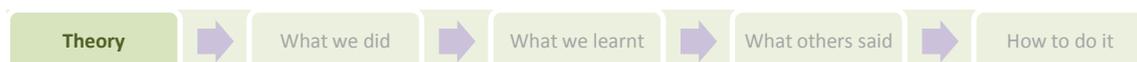
What was learnt

We learnt that it is worker intensive to run groups and women can do it themselves.

What was the result

In Myrtleford the group continues to meet once a month with a rotating leadership system (at time of printing 2011 they are still meeting).

This indicates that local leadership is effective and sustainable.



From Workers to Local Women

Recognising that organising groups is time intensive for workers, WGHNE developed the next stage of Women Gathering. Funding was received from Upper Hume Primary Care Partnership to build the capacity of agencies and community members by delivering Women Gathering in a more sustainable model.

What was done

On the 19th of March 2008, 20 agency and community women met at the Barunduda Community Centre for the first Women Gathering Workshop. The workshop set about developing the skills of women, stressing the importance of confidentiality and non-judgement, passing on the hints and the boost needed to give local women and workers the tools to organise Women Gathering Groups in their own communities.

What women said

In feedback from the workshops, women said:-

“Can’t wait to get my group going!”

“We’ve been talking about doing this project for a while so hopefully this kick starts us.”

What was learnt

The model of local women coming together at a Women Gathering Workshop and the provision of seed funding and skills to start a group in their own community, has proven to be a sound model.

What was the result

Twenty passionate women went away with a plan, \$500 and the confidence to start a group in their community.

The women who participated in the groups were able to meet new people, experience new things and share of themselves. For some it has meant that they can participate in activities they previously had no access to. For others it has been the opportunity to share openly with new friends in a safe, non-judgmental environment. Creativity featured as a high point and for some women it was a part of rediscovering themselves while exploring a craft.^{xi}

“Telling stories is extremely healing, listening can be such a gift. Listening to stories can also be healing as it becomes obvious to you that you’re not the only one with a story or it triggers a similar story of your own”.

Expanding to Communities

In 2008 as the drought continued to take hold, Goulburn Valley Primary Care Partnership funded WHGNE to implement Women Gathering in their drought affected localities in the shires of Shepparton, Moira and Strathbogie. Women Gathering in Dry Times was supported by 14 local agencies.

What was done

More than 22 towns and remote areas were represented by the 55 women who attended the three Women Gathering Workshops in Euroa, Numurkah and Cobram.

A high priority was to include multicultural and indigenous women. There was representation from the Aboriginal community, the Congolese and the Turkish communities and the Ethnic Council. The interaction and networking that happened at the workshops created opportunities for growth and connection.

What women said

The women said the workshops were welcoming and relaxing, yet challenged participants to think about their groups, particularly in regards to who was to be included.

“On the training day (workshop) talking about ‘making women feel included’ was a really good thing and it made us think.”

“Great to hear other people’s ideas.”

What was learnt

Evaluation highlighted that groups work best when two or more women support each other to run the group. They can take time out if needed, and the group doesn’t always rely on one person.

What was the result

Twenty-five women who attended these workshops were spurred on with a grant of \$500 to run groups across the three municipalities with an estimation of over 168 women gathering in total.

Women met and had fun together, they made friends.

“It’s a bit of a laugh, no men, a lot of talking and mutual support. We got closer.”

“We felt comfortable moaning and groaning – and we could leave it behind.”

For other women, the group provided emotional support for them at times of profound sadness, grief or depression.

“Women had started talking about families and family crisis and giving support. One lady’s husband died during this time, she was given support.”



Flexible for Rural Communities

Julie and Johanna wanted to start a group, so they arranged for potential group members to get together in the local church hall.

What was done

WHGNE co-facilitated a Women Gathering Workshop with Relationships Australia for these women who wanted to start meeting as a group.

What women said

“Thank you so much for facilitating our first meeting. It was wonderful for everyone to be involved in the learning and help set up the rules etc. We had our first gathering last Tuesday, everyone was very excited and we really enjoyed the day. Di’s offers of support were much appreciated and it’s great to know good advice is only a phone call away.

Thanks again “

What was learnt

Working with the group proved to be an efficient way of working, using the Women Gathering principles to skill up a group so they can run it themselves.

What was the result

The group had a shared experience of the workshop and began the journey of building relationships with each other.

The group was able to negotiate and agree on their group rules at the workshop.

All the women in the group now have the skills, knowledge and understanding of Women Gathering principles, not just the group leaders.

Responding to Local Women

Two community workers took the principles of Women Gathering and applied them to a local community in a way that suited that community.

The workers sourced funding and engaged with key local women to organise a Women’s Dinner. Funding meant they could offer it at no cost to the women. Following the Women Gathering principles, the theme of the dinner was ‘getting together because it’s important’ and women were encouraged to ‘invite your neighbours, friends and family’. Full to capacity, 100 women had a fun night together. The women were then asked what they wanted to do.

What was done?

As a result, a Women Gathering Workshop was organised where the women collated a list of groups in their community and new groups they would like to see formed.

What women said?

The women enjoyed getting together over food, building friendships and sharing ideas.

“The group gives me such a good feeling of belonging, of being safe, and of being ok, accepted. I was surprised to actually have fun at times.”

“A chance to mix with others a special time for me.”

“Great fun and so good for my physical and emotional health.”

What was learnt?

Again the flexibility of Women Gathering principles creates possibilities.

What was the result?

The workshop and dinner have strengthened networks in the community and energised the community, and the Progress Association in the district, to organise other community activities.

A group of women are working together to organise a Christmas in July dinner.

A group, ‘Slow Moves’, was funded. Women said they enjoyed being in a safe, caring, relaxing and friendly environment, with the companionship of others and an inspirational instructor.

Another unfunded group of 12 women regularly meets in each other’s gardens.

Black Saturday

Like others, WHGNE watched in horror on February 7th 2009 as what later became known as the 'Black Saturday Fires' swept across Victoria.

Our thoughts were with the women and our desire, like all others on the outside, was to help. We told anyone with whom we had contact: 'remember to get together'. Many women did, not because of WHGNE, but because gathering is what sustains women. ^{xii}

Women who regularly attended a group prior to the fires told us that they returned to their group the week after the fire and found great comfort and support. However, some groups were dislocated due to the fires.

Firefoxes, Ladies of the Black Belt and the Flameingoes, were groups of women who organised to get together and support each other (and their families) immediately after the fires.

The Office of Women's Policy heard of Women Gathering and made a successful submission to the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund.

WHGNE liaised with over 160 local workers or in some cases, local women, to organise 14 Women Gathering After Fires (WGAF) workshops in fire-affected areas across Victoria.

Women Gathering After Fires: Workshops

What was done

Fourteen Women Gathering Workshops were held across 19 Local Government areas.

What women said

Evaluations from the workshops indicated the women enjoyed the workshops and valued the sharing of information and ideas.

Women liked the format of the workshops; they liked being with and hearing from other women, getting ideas and “meeting new people”.

Women were personally empowered from simply attending the workshops. Networks and friendships were established at the workshops.

What was learnt

It became clear that co-facilitation is important. Rural Women Leading Change workers provided local knowledge and became key partners in co-facilitating the workshops.

WHGNE communicated through and with workers who were engaged with fire-affected communities. This prevented over-burdening communities with ‘another’ worker and eliminated the time-consuming process of gaining trust.

This was an efficient means of communicating. However, some women still missed hearing the message.

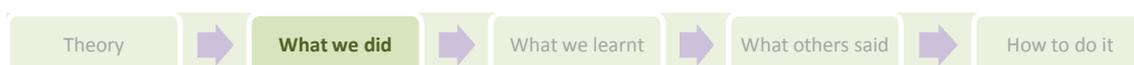
Due to the traumatic time the women had experienced there was uncertainty about participants’ potential reactions in the workshops. At the first couple of workshops a mental health worker was invited to attend. This strategy was discontinued as most participants didn’t engage at a level of conversation that would raise issues and it was easier to ‘handle it’ within the role of facilitator.

What was the result

Two hundred and eighty four women from bushfire affected communities attended a workshop to identify community projects based on the needs in their community.

Participants gained an understanding of the Women Gathering principles; what makes a group work. They also gained the confidence to run a Women Gathering Group.

Some women came to the workshop because they needed to be a part of a group, but didn’t have the capacity to run a group themselves at this time. These women were rewarded for attending by establishing friendships or links into their community via the workshop.



Women Gathering After Fires: Groups

What was done?

Eighty seven individual Women Gathering Groups were funded, the amount of grant received by each group was determined by the group's need.

What women said

About attending a group, the women said:-

"The environment of the group has been nurturing, friendly and exactly the sort of 'head space' we have needed".

Participant from Butterfly Women.

"We're motivated to exercise because we had company."

Participant from Get Active.

"I enjoy the togetherness and the laughter"

Participant from Callignee Potters.

What was learnt

The fires created mountains of paperwork for communities to complete. The funding needed to be easy for groups to access.

Support from local workers is vital.

More than one group leader to organise groups works best, "Three of us do it together, it works well and its fun. We hype each other up and have lunch to organise it."

The main factor affecting groups that did not meet or were slow to start was the physical and emotional wellbeing of the leader(s).

"I had a personal crisis and J... was ill as well."

What was the result

Eighty seven Women Gathering Groups with an average of 6-10 women meeting regularly across Victoria's 2009 bushfire affected areas. Most groups either plan to or are continuing to meet after the required six meetings. Fifty nine different workers from 38 organisations are supporting these groups.

All the participants now have a strategy in case they need support either by

"contacting my support worker" or other named professional or "Ask! There are lots of options for support".

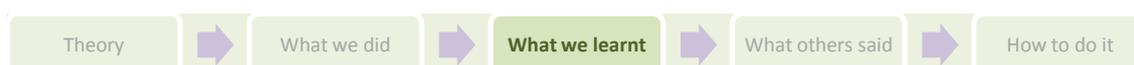


Women Gathering Works

Because it...

- Provides women with confidence, self esteem and resources.
- Realises the resilience and skills of women and gives them the opportunity to blossom.
- Provides opportunities for the power of story telling and listening to heal, motivate, encourage and empower.
- Builds community resilience, capacity and develops skills such as leadership.
- Empowers women and communities to be independent from service providers; it doesn't set up a dependence on workers.
- Is a positive response to disaster recovery.
- Highlights the ability of communities to heal themselves with support rather than 'help' coming in.
- Goes to the community.
- Is simple.
- Is transferable to many contexts.

Flexible
Simple



Our group works when . . .



Everyone has a chance to speak and be listened to.



Our stories and comments are safe and not repeated outside the group.



Everyone is invited and encouraged to join in.



We accept our differences – others might think differently, but it doesn't make them wrong.



We have a common interest or shared activity.



We have food to share and a suitable venue.



Our leadership is shared and everyone has opportunity to contribute.



Laughter, fun, trust, acceptance, respect and a positive attitude are part of our group.



We have a shared understanding about how our group operates.

Women Gathering Groups work when . . .

The structure is not complex, or expensive

Successful groups were low cost, simple to run and women are keen to keep meeting.

“There’s so little overheads that we can continue.”

The group is small with an activity or focus

Women enjoy being informed, sharing stories and doing activities. Relaxation and talking occur as part of a structured or semi-structured activity.

“Need to have a focus, even if it’s tenuous, it means you have a set date and time, and even structure.”

“Offering something to do has been a great success, rather than a talk fest. You don’t have to be good at it.”

There is a passionate leader for the group

Every group has one woman (or two), who is committed to bringing the group together and is able to devote time to do this. They are enthusiastic and motivated.

“It needs someone who is passionate who pulls it together.”

There is shared leadership

“We worked as a team. We could not have done it otherwise, it was someone to bounce off about how the day went; what we are doing next week.”

“Partnering with enthusiastic people [made it successful].”

There is group ownership

Successful groups are where the women are part of the decision making and the organising; where they own the group. The group leader is very much a part of the group rather than someone ‘running’ it.

Gatherings are regular

Having regular gatherings creates a sense of continuity and the women get to know each other through the regular contact.

“No-one knew each other beforehand. We changed the time so we could go out for dinner afterwards. Lots of friendships have established.”

Continued next page

There are group rules

Group rules are important in groups and work best when explicit and include:

Confidentiality – Our stories and comments are not repeated outside of this group.

Everyone has a chance to speak and be listened to.

Acceptance of difference – someone might think differently – it doesn't make them wrong.

Other rules and agreements are negotiable, for example 'be on time' or 'arrive when you can'.

What is important is that agreements or rules avert most potential difficulties and if difficulties arise, referring back to the agreement or rules can often resolve the issue.

"[Confidentiality] was laid down when we started; what is said here stays here. There's been no backbiting or anything like that. Everything stays in the room".

Food is shared

Research^{xiii} shows that sharing a meal together breaks down barriers and forges relationships. Women Gathering Groups work best when planned around a coffee morning or a meal.

There is celebration and fun

Women reported that they wanted fun when they got together and groups that worked well did this.

"We laugh a lot, sometimes over nothing, we enjoy each other's company."

"Every couple of months we met to celebrate birthdays"

Groups are inclusive

A central concept in Women Gathering is that isolated and marginalised women are included. Suggestions from group leaders are:

- Well-placed advertising,
- Hand-picking women who would benefit
- A phone call helps.
- Encourage the women in the group to help identify women who could benefit, "I got [Mary] to keep an eye out for people who wanted to come but couldn't afford it."
- "They are such a good group. They will ring each other and ask, 'Why haven't we seen you for a while?'"

What Others Say About Women Gathering...

Women Gathering as a Program

“The application was so easy for them to fill out. So easy, no hassle. Everyone flew with it. This enabled them to do something. It’s the best bit of funding that’s been around. Most brilliant thing.”

Support worker

“They were surprised they got the funding and they could run the group. It gave them confidence and got the momentum going. They were thrilled and quite tickled with themselves.”

Support worker

“Funding was a fantastic incentive to get people started on a new path.”

Group Leader from Painting and Pottery Ladies

“We wouldn’t have done it otherwise. It’s a breath of fresh air.”

Group Leader from Gourmet Girls

About the Workshops

What Agency Workers said...

“I gained a lot from attending and it was very clear that there is an absolute need for the project. On the table where I was sitting, the ‘vibe’ was of complete gratefulness for such a day to be available. I could see each woman taking something different from the day, whether it be from the group discussions or from the women next to her. The atmosphere was relaxed and welcoming.”

“Many thanks for organising this event – women were talking after it and one of the most beneficial things I thought came out of the workshop was the sense of camaraderie and shared stories.”

“Thanks for the day, it was a wonderful venue and some terrific women attended and information sharing.”

What women participating said...

“Fun, informative, loads of good ideas, nice food, great people.”

“Ability to speak freely and have a captive audience of like minded people.”

“The networking potential offered, meeting new people, provision of information.”

“Just wanted to say what a wonderful time I had at WGAF [workshop]. I believe I benefited so much from this day. I believe linking in with people from around my local community was wonderful and the small and less formal group and group work made it an all round fabulous day.”

“It gave me the skills and especially the confidence to go back to the group and negotiate change.”

Continued next page

Women who attended a group said they gained...

Friendship

“Long term friendships have developed.”

Participant from Neighbourhood Ladies Fire Guard Group.

“I enjoy getting together with women who are now my friends.”

Participant from Patchwork Collections Friendship Group.

Support

“The bond of friendship and the support we give to each other is invaluable.”

Participant from Craft Group.

“It’s nice to have the group to go to and know that it doesn’t matter if someone has a meltdown.”

Participant from Flameingoes.

Fun

“This group was a reason for me to stop everyday life for a while and relax and do something I enjoy - not what I have to do!”

Participant from Butterfly Women.

“We always have a laugh”

Participant from Boolarra Flora and Fauna Quilting Group.

Leadership

“I started the group up, it’s helped me tremendously.”

Participant from Women Gathering for Fun

“I have gained lots of self confidence in organising meetings and have enjoyed the talk and companionship.”

Participant from Colourful Yarns.

How to Plan and Run a Group

For Communities . . .

Planning the group

There are different starting points for every group: a group of women who know what activity they want to do; beginning with an activity and inviting women to join in; or knowing that something is needed in the community.

Sometimes planning can be done with the group, other times getting things started is necessary and then reflecting with the group to see how it's going and making plans for the future, together.

Questions to ask to help plan your group:

- What focus or activity will we have for our group?
- Who will we invite? Who could we invite who might not attend other events or groups?
- How will we invite people?
- What are barriers or reasons that might stop women from attending our group?
- What will we do to help them attend?
- When will we meet and how often?
- Where will we meet? Is it safe, comfortable and appropriate for the activity?
- Will we share food together?
- What ground rules might we have in our group?
- Icebreaker ideas we might use?
- How will we share the leadership of the group?
- How will we all be able to participate or contribute to the group's organisation?

Running the group:

- Have an appropriate and comfortable venue.
- Have an activity planned
- Be organised
- Welcome women as they arrive (ensure they can get there)
- Ensure the group knows everyone's name (do we need an icebreaker activity?)
- Have a process to talk about how the group will run. What rules or agreements will we have?
- Create an atmosphere which encourages diversity
- Develop active listening skills
- Attempt to be non-judgmental and accepting
- Learn to be comfortable with silences
- Allow everyone the opportunity to speak
- Observe the right of individuals not to speak
- Encourage everyone to look out for each other
- Encourage the group to reflect on their own participation and that of the group
- Celebrate achievements
- Remember to laugh and have fun



How to Plan and Run A Women Gathering Program

For Agency Workers...

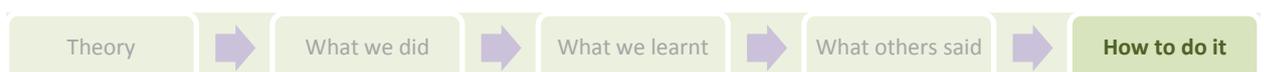
Steps:

1. Identify other agencies in your area and where the common work lies.
2. Can you partner with them?
3. Who are the key women in the community?
4. Research funding opportunities and funding partners for groups.
5. Organise a Women Gathering Workshop.
6. Invite key women from within the community
7. Develop a simple application process for women to access funding for their groups.

Suggested Funding Criteria

- Applicants are required to team up with a partner.
- Applicant (and preferably group partner) attend a Women Gathering Workshop.
- The group must be inclusive and meet at least six times.
- Have a support worker they can call, if needed.
- Women only.
- Complete a simple application form.

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A Women Gathering Program is successful when...

Groups are empowered through workshops

In a Women Gathering Workshop, participants gain an understanding of the Women Gathering principles and share wisdom together.

After the WGAF groups had met for six sessions the group leaders were asked “Did the Women Gathering Workshop you attended provide you with enough relevant and useful information to run your group successfully?”

The overwhelming response was yes.

“[The workshop] ensured we run as a group, no one person making decisions. All have input when recruiting ideas and made certain all could speak up and give view points. It’s working.”

“Mainly they empowered me with an ‘I can do it attitude’. The funding being made available meant it was not just a “good idea” but [ensured a] commitment to be responsible and make it work.”

Two years after the WGiDT workshops were held in the Goulburn Valley a review said the workshops were well received by informants.^{xiv}

Women spoke of making friends and learning and hearing about extended opportunities. They looked back on it as the first step that enabled their groups to take off. Without it, the groups may not have existed. The challenge offered to the women, came along with encouragement and belief.

Women spoke of enjoying the interaction and just being together ‘with company and food’. The chance to share ideas and experience was particularly valued and there was a sense from comments, that enthusiasm was catching. Women said they appreciated the training on privacy and confidentiality.

“It was interesting. The message I make sure everyone hears is that everyone knows that what’s said in the room stays in the room. It’s a key message. I have realised it’s imperative.”

“The gossip and inclusion [sections] boosted my motivation. I was reluctant at first to do this [the group].”

Groups have a support worker

Each group is encouraged to nominate a support worker or mentor: a professional worker who can provide planning, debriefing and referral information and is available for the group leaders to contact if needed.

In the evaluation of WGAF, most women reported not needing the support worker, but felt it was helpful to know they were available if needed.

“I didn’t ask for assistance but I’m sure they would have helped.”

“We didn’t feel we needed much support.”

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Groups are provided with funding

Evaluation has reinforced that providing 'money' or a grant is really important, even a necessary motivation to get the group started.

"It would not have happened without the grant."

Yet, it has been a revelation to many of the groups when they found they could actually do what they were doing without the money and many worked out how to make the 'money stretch a long way'.

Barriers are...

Capacity of leadership

If the leader of a group becomes unwell or has a personal crisis, the group often struggles to keep going. A solution to this is shared leadership, so if one fails another can take over, along the way they can support each other.

Even better is self-sustaining groups. In one example, the group leader from an established group had ill health, but the group continued through her illness.

"The group runs itself - no-one person runs it".

This demonstrates the value of long-term stable groups.

Suitable venue

A suitable venue is vital yet often a hire fee is required or it is inadequately heated/cooled. Many groups meet in homes. This can and often does work well but can be complicated because it is not a neutral space.

Recommended Guidelines for Funding Groups:

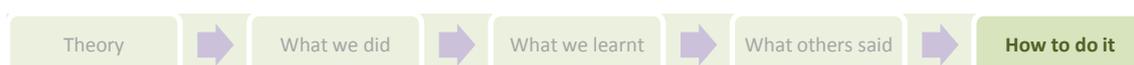
- Only **community women** apply for the grants. Agencies are encouraged to support groups rather than receiving the grant and running the group.
- Groups have **two or more group leaders**. This gives the greatest opportunity for the group leaders to have the support of each other and they can take time out if needed. Everything doesn't always rely on one person.
- Groups commit to meeting for least **six sessions**. This gives the group opportunity to grow and develop.
- A **simple application process**: "forms were simple - unlike other small grants."

Funding availability

Women Gathering is a very simple program and is great value for money. However, government and organisations are reluctant to fund community members directly. If money is available it often requires a complicated application process. The funding application needs to be simple and accessible.

Transport

Transport continues to be an ongoing issue for rural women. Some women don't have car licences for a variety of reasons; often there is no public transport. Many women are living in isolated situations and overcame this by car pooling. Groups are encouraged to use the grant money to overcome this obstacle, but it still persists.



Women Gathering Workshop

Outline

A Women Gathering Workshop aims to provide women with an understanding of *Women Gathering* principles so that they have the confidence to run a group with support from a local worker. Below is the session plan with activities and approximate time. Along side is the facilitator commentary to keep in mind while facilitating.

Activity	Facilitator Commentary
Food	WG workshops always begin with a welcome and food, either delicious morning tea for a day workshop or light dinner at 6pm for an evening workshop.
Welcome (5-15 min).	
<p>“I would like to welcome everyone here today and Acknowledge the traditional owners of the land (or country) on which we stand and pay my respects to their Elders and to the Elders of other Victorian Aboriginal Communities.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Background of Women Gathering. • House-keeping. • What we will be doing today. 	Once women have eaten, formalities begin with an official welcome, explanation of Women Gathering and the format of the workshop
Icebreaker (15 min)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain the chosen icebreaker. • Depending on number of participants, participants may need to be divided into smaller groups. • After the activity is completed, discuss why have icebreakers and how they can be used in groups. 	An icebreaker can be chosen either by the facilitator or participants. Suggestions are in the Tool Kit. ^{xv} Icebreakers help women get to know each other and create a positive group atmosphere.
Introduction Activity (5-10 min)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants consider the idea they may have for a group • Participants write why they are here today • Collate ‘why you are here’ on butchers’ paper as a group 	By asking participants about their expectations for the workshop, facilitators are able to be flexible in delivery
Group rules (15-20 min)	
<p>“We are a group here today & what is really important in a group is to have group or ground rules or a group agreement”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask “What agreements should we have for today?” • Check that the essentials are included: • Participants might like to consider the ground rules that might be included in their group 	As early as possible in the workshop group rules are explored. How to develop group rules is modeled in the workshop, as participants are encouraged to develop them in their own groups.

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Activity	Facilitator Commentary
<p>What makes a great group (30 – 40 min)</p> <p>Divide participants into small groups (of 4-6). Participants discuss and write down their experience (on butchers' paper) of groups they have experienced:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask: "What stops you going to a group? What were bad experiences?" • Ask: "What makes a great group? What was good about attending that group?" <p>After groups have discussed, told stories and created two lists, bring the group back as one and ask groups to share what they learnt.</p> <p>Discuss and ensure these are included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confidentiality/gossip • Diversity • Inclusiveness, welcoming and inviting other women • Handling conflict • Activity or purpose for meeting • Group ownership • Food • Respect and listening • Venue <p>Participants can consider:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Our group will be great because we will..." • Barriers that might stop someone from attending our group. What will you do? 	<p>'What makes a great group' is a key activity for the workshop. The key learning that evolves as participants share their points and stories to the whole group includes:</p> <p>Confidentiality – A discussion about what this means, what it looks like, what's the differences between gossip and caring.</p> <p>Diversity – A strong group or community embraces their diversities.</p> <p>Inclusiveness – Welcoming, and inviting other women. Ask: 'who is not here?' 'Who could I invite that doesn't normally attend other events?'</p> <p>Handling Conflict or Difficult People – This important discussion highlights the need for group rules and for everyone to have input to the rules and to agree to them.</p> <p>Activity or Purpose for Meeting It's vital that a group has a purpose for meeting. The history of other groups indicates that those without a focus or activity fade quickly.</p> <p>Group Ownership – Shared ownership of the group. There maybe a driver but everyone has opportunity to contribute.</p> <p>Food – The importance of sharing food together.</p> <p>Listening and letting everyone have a turn.</p> <p>Appropriate Venue</p>
<p>Funding information (5 – 20)</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain the funding criteria you have decided on. (see recommended criteria) • Discuss having a support worker; a professional person who can be a contact for support and referral information. • Explain flexible options for filling in an application, i.e. hardcopy for handwritten or electronic for emailing. 	<p>Interestingly when we ask participants about their expectations for the workshop. 'To access funding' is often the motivation for attending. In the evaluations completed by participants, they state that the best thing about the day was not related to funding, but to ideas, inspiration and networks gained.</p>

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Activity	Facilitator Commentary
Planning your group	
<p>As time allows, participants are given opportunity to begin planning their group idea with others. How it might work? What they might include? Who they might invite and how? Planning sheets are provided to write ideas as they occur throughout the workshop or to be a prompt at this planning time.</p>	
Conclusion	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Check we have covered “why you are here”, the reasons listed in the introductory activity for attending the workshop. • Evaluation for this workshop 	<p>Possible evaluation questions: Today’s workshop was... What I liked best was... What could have been improved... I feel confident to run a group...</p>
Listening skills activity (15 min)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instruct participants to choose a partner. Once in their pairs one person will talk or tell a story in 2 minutes. The listener of the pair is not to show any listening skills. Demonstrate some non-listening behaviours (have fun doing this). • After 2 minutes get them to swap and the listener becomes the talker or story teller for another 2 minutes. • Discuss. What happened? How did it feel? How did you react? • Do it again, 2 minutes each of talking, but this time showing listening skills. • You will have trouble stopping them from talking, as it will become a conversation. • Again discuss what happened? How did it feel? The importance of listening and showing that you are listening. 	<p>This activity is a great energizer and can be slotted in where appropriate in the workshop schedule.</p> <p>‘Listening skills activity’ is a fun activity that illustrates the importance of really listening and the importance of showing that we are really listening.</p>

Conclusion

Women Gathering is about bringing women together. We have told you our story: what we learnt and what works. You can take the principles and heart of Women Gathering and apply it to your life, your community or your work.

Where there are women – where there is community – the principles of women gathering apply. Go forth and gather.

Glossary

Women Gathering Group (Group)

A group of *women* who get together for fun, friendship and support.

Group Leader

A *woman* who has usually attended a *Women Gathering Workshop* and is the driving force and organiser for a *Women Gathering Group*.

Woman or Women

Any woman who is attending a *Women Gathering Group*.

Women Gathering Workshop (Workshop)

Workshop run by a facilitator with the aim of providing *participants* with an understanding of *Women Gathering* principles so that they have the confidence to run a *Women Gathering Group*.

Participant

Someone who attends a *Women Gathering Workshop*.

Facilitator

Usually an *Agency Worker* who organises and facilitates a *Women Gathering Workshop*.

Agency Worker

Someone who is 'working' out of a funded agency; a professional. They may have a title such as: Health Promotion Worker; Community Development Worker; Case worker; Recovery Officer; Co-ordinator etc.

Support Worker

An *Agency Worker* who agrees to support a *Women Gathering Group* and is available if needed for the *Group Leader* to contact for support with the group or for referral information. Ideally the support worker would keep in regular contact with the *Group Leader* to provide encouragement.

Tool Kit

A written resource available on the WHGNE Website with information and resources to assist *Group Leaders* and *women* to have a successful *Women Gathering Group*.

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