



Birth Cafe

A Case Study – 2019/20

Dr Tracy Breathnach &

Eleanor Shaw, Director People Speak Up





“In all honesty I feel it has changed my outlook on my whole life”

Birth Café participant

Background

In 2017 People Speak Up held a women’s gathering storytelling project supported by Fusion and Communities First Llanelli. Singer-songwriter Rachel Taylor-Beales was invited to share her birth experience with the group and following the sharing process, participants expressed the need to come together and share their stories especially when they had experienced trauma or post-natal depression.

At the same time, Dr Tracy Breathnach (Evans) was completing her Practice as Research PhD which explored new ways of telling birth stories especially when there had been trauma. ‘Giving Birth to Maternal Subjectivity – Narrative, Rhythm and Caesura in an autobiographical practice of birth storytelling’ (Aberystwyth University, 2018), was funded by Arts and Humanities Research Council. As a result of her performance practice Tracy was invited to be part of the Maternal Performance network established by Dr Lena Simic and Dr Emily Underwood-Lee in 2016-2018, attending events and making presentations in Liverpool, Edge Hill University and University of South Wales.

Tracy’s research identified a number of studies in which the number of women who suffer from post-natal depression and PTSD after giving birth is alarmingly high, including:

- A 2017 international study shows that that around a third of women experience trauma whilst giving birth (Reed et al 2017);

- An earlier study found that almost 20% of women experience some Post Traumatic Stress symptoms after giving birth (Beck 2011);
- In 2014, the Royal College of Midwives reported that nearly 60% of women felt down or depressed after giving birth (Pressure Points Report 2014);
- We know that a mother's mental wellbeing effects the bond she has with her baby (Fancourt & Perkins 2018).

And yet there are very few programmes to support women emotionally after this life-changing event, and none that we know of in Wales. There have been 2 series of workshops in London organised by midwife and artist Laura Godfrey-Isaacs, Maternal Journal and Creative Birth, which offer 'holistic antenatal programmes using art, midwifery and movement practices to promote positive wellbeing and support for pregnant women and new mothers.'¹ There are also specialist creative programmes developed by agencies such as Action for Postpartum Psychosis.² Using art as a method of exploring birth has been researched in The Birth project by Professor Susan Hogan.³ With a focus primarily on visual arts in these programmes, Birth Café aims to extend the creative enquiry into movement, voice and storytelling.

“Programmes which enable women to explore their pregnancy and birth stories are vital, and to work through these as embodied experiences enables empowerment that is otherwise overlooked by maternity services focused more in fetal and child welfare.”

Dr Alys Einion-Waller, Associate Professor and Fellow of the Royal College of Midwives
Personal communication

Tracy ran an initial Birth Café session in 2018 as part of Swansea University Midwifery Student Society's research day at Cinema & Co in Swansea. 9 women and 2 babies attended. The feedback confirmed the need for and interest in a safe space like this for women to share their birth experiences. Tracy & Eleanor met in 2018 and once the connection was made between their identified needs and interests, Birth Café was fully born.

¹ <https://www.ifwip.org/2018/04/11/meet-laura-godfrey-isaacs-an-artist-midwife-and-birth-activist/>

² <https://www.app-network.org/news-events/workshops/art-workshop/>

³ <https://connected-communities.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/The-Birth-Project.pdf>

Aim of Birth Café

To support women to express and share their birth stories in order to empower them so they have more agency and self-determination, leading to an increase in wellbeing, as well as increasing social connections through a caring and supportive peer community.



Objectives

- To creatively construct a welcoming café setting in which women will feel safe and comfortable;
- To use a somatic (embodied) approach to storytelling from the body;
- To introduce somatic resourcing as a technique for supporting women to feel safe while they are speaking;
- To create a non-judgmental and non-hierarchical structure for sharing stories;
- To use sound and creative activities to support women to feel more embodied;
- To signpost any women who require specialist support to appropriate professional services.

The Pilot Project



PSU **PEOPLE SPEAK UP** *Birth Cafe*
A time and place for women to connect and share their birth stories in a supportive, creative and gentle environment with Dr Tracy Evans

*Giving birth changes us profoundly.
Take some time out to reflect on your birth experiences in a safe and friendly environment.
A friendly, gentle group to share your birth experiences and the impact it has had on you, with space for creative reflection and compassionate listening.*

Ffwrnes, Llanelli
15 & 29 January - 10:00
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CRONFA GYMUNEDOL COMMUNITY FUND

Between March 2019 and February 2020, we ran 15 Birth Café sessions. The first block was run over 5 weeks in March/April; the second block of 4 sessions was in September/October and then 2 one-off sessions in October and November 2019, followed by a series of 4 workshops on a fortnightly basis in 2020. Each session lasted 2 and a half hours. Most sessions took place on mid-week mornings, with a couple of sessions being held in the evenings.

Where

The sessions took place in the Crochan Studio in Ffwrnes Theatre and Ffwrnes Fach, the home of People Speak Up.

Participants

There was a total of 39 women and 9 babies under the age of 7 months attending, with 9 of these attendances as repeat visits. 1 woman attended 3 sessions in the first block and 1 woman attended 6 times over 4 blocks.

How we collected feedback

Open-ended feedback was gathered verbally and written at the end of each session. Participants were emailed within a day or two of each block ending to invite any further written feedback. 2 women gave individual semi-structured interviews after the first course, and one of these, who also took part in the second course gave another interview, part of which was recorded. We also received a testimonial from a third woman about the impact it had on her wellbeing.

Outcomes

**“It’s a safe place to express pain and have it acknowledged –
it validates you as a person.”**

Birth Café participant

Reported benefits included:

- “Beforehand one is busy with preparing and expectations and after one is busy to keep up with that little bundle, so there is no space to deal with it.”

- “It’s so healing.”
- “The slowness is really helpful.”
- “There was a calmness which makes my fear of exposure disappear.”
- “I was worried about sharing because I don’t want to impact others negatively.”
- “I realise there are more connections within my experience than I did before.”
- “It’s a safe place to express pain and have it acknowledged – it validates you as a person.”
- “It’s important because of the pressures on women to be successful as mothers, as wives... Here the playing field is flat. Everyone is equal.”
- “It’s good to open it up – there are so many aspects in the experience.”
- “It was also good to be a listener- not to be expected to have a certain reaction, yet to know I could be there and just provide a listening space for another lady.”

For women who attended multiple sessions they reported that they had different experiences every time they attended and additional benefits were:

- “I was able to go a bit deeper, especially with the grief stuff.”
- “I had time to think about it in between and find more connections that I had just forgotten about.”

The participant who attended 6 times also provided a testimonial about her experience which focused on:

- The relief to be able to speak about her birth experiences when other people in her life no longer wanted to listen to this;
- Feeling supported to open up to talk with people she didn’t know;
- Glad to take time out and connect honestly to her body and mind;
- The connection to bodymind was empowering;
- Being able to consider both of her birth experiences with a new, integrated perspective;
- The experience has helped change her outlook on her life.

[See soundclips for full details]

“Childbearing represents a force for radical change across the life course – not just in relation to the physical experience of pregnancy, birth, and breastfeeding, but in relation to the adaptation of the woman’s identity to socially constructed and embodied dimensions of motherhood”

Dr Alys Einion (2018) ‘Maternal surveillance, maternal control: the paradox of the childbearing body’ in *Bearing the Weight of the World, Exploring Maternal Embodiment*, edited by Alys Einion and Jen Rinaldi, Canada, Demeter Press.

Dissemination



In September 2019 we held a hands-on demonstration of the Birth Café approach for 13 health professionals working across Hwyl Dda and Swansea Bay Health Board areas, including community midwives, perinatal mental health workers, trauma specialists and community healthcare staff. The overwhelming feedback from the session was that there are many women in the community who need access to a range of types of perinatal support. As a result, professionals referred 4 women into the Birth Café programme.

In June 2019 we presented the work as part of the International Storytelling for Health 2 conference, organised by Swansea Bay Health Board & University of South Wales.

In October 2019 we presented the work to a public audience of 40 people in Glynn Vivian Art Gallery, as part of Swansea Fringe Festival.



Also, in October 2019 Tracy had meetings with both Mark Williams, author, campaigner and trainer for Paternal Mental Health and Action for Post-Partum Psychosis to explore ways of sharing practice and developing the infrastructure for programmes for perinatal parental support.

In October 2019 Tracy & Eleanor met with Mandy Rayani (Director of Nursing), Julie Jenkins (Head of Midwifery Hwyl Dda UHB) and Nicola Llewellyn (Head of Hwyl Dda Health Charities) to explore the possibility of a commission from the Health Board to roll the programme out across the 3 counties in the Hwyl Dda footprint. Unfortunately, no funding was available to commission this programme in 2020/21.

In November 2019 Tracy visited Garnant Family Centre and met with 7 women and their babies to share information about Birth Café and to gather their feedback on the need for a programme like this after birth.

In December 2019 Tracy met with Dr Alys Einion, Associate Professor in Midwifery at Swansea University. They had plans to run a pilot programme at the Health & Wellbeing Academy in Summer 2020, but due to the lockdown, this has been postponed.

In January 2020, Tracy presented a Tedx talk on Birth Café to a live audience of 100 people in Bridgend College (Tedx Nantymoel).



“You’re such an inspiration! Thank you for sharing a taboo topic in an open and welcoming way. I will listen to myself and others in a different way, purposefully!”

Audience Member

Tracy was invited as to present the work as a guest speaker at the Motherhood & Storytelling Symposium, University South Wales in April 2020, but again due to the lockdown this event was cancelled.

Next Steps

- Run a pilot course at Swansea University Health & Wellbeing Academy;
- Obtain funding to run a training course with a Published 'How to' Guide – for approx. 4 women + adapt for Birth Professionals;
- One off sessions & short series in the community with trainees co-facilitating;
- Offer talks about the concept + approach;
- Explore how we can reach a wider audience using technology and online platforms.

Thank You

Thanks to our funders who made the work possible. The first course was funded by PSU and Carmarthenshire County Council. The subsequent activities were funded by Carmarthenshire County Council, National Lottery Community Fund and supported by Llanelli Town Council, Hwyl Dda University Health Board and West Wales Action for Mental Health.

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