



W + H Maternal Wellbeing Service – Pilot

Evaluation – Summary

1. Introduction and Aim

In 2013 Women + Health received funding from a private donor to set up a pilot project providing a service to a small group of young mothers and/or mothers-to-be who were struggling with maternal depression and finding it hard to bond with their (up to two year old) infants.

The project was named 'W + H Maternal Wellbeing Service' and offered friendly, non-judgemental and impartial early-intervention support to seven women. This consisted of an integrated programme of talking and body therapies. The women could choose whether to use the free crèche or keep their young babies in the therapy room with them.

The basic programme consisted of 4 body therapy sessions and 10 counselling sessions.

Our aim was to investigate how women would respond to the mix of interventions offered and gauge how our intervention might assist them to -

- Learn how to take better care of their own health and wellbeing, so that they could then take better care of their children, and
- Improve their experience of motherhood, experiencing less isolation, greater self-confidence and better reflective skills – in relation to parenting.

2. Referral Pathways

Referral pathways were established with local organisations - Home-Start in Camden, Camden Futures and Euston's Children Centre. Referrers' responses were overwhelmingly positive and the pilot was seen to be an important and different resource to those already being offered in Camden. Providing body therapy and counselling in a non-medical and all female community setting was seen to be unique, and the crèche a vital enabler to women being able to participate. Currently, unless a mother is referred to the psychiatrist, there is nowhere to signpost mothers. Therefore, the service was positioned as offering support before difficulties turn into a major crisis.

3. Attendance

Seven women attended the programme, 5 mothers and 2 mothers-to-be.

1 mother left the programme to return to her home country, and 6 women have now completed the programme.

4. Feedback from the Participants

All mothers scored themselves as suffering both physical and emotional difficulties which was one of the reasons behind offering this integrated mind/body pilot. The most frequent difficulties experienced by the women were:

- **Physical difficulties:** Exhaustion, difficulties sleeping, feeling stressed, hate my body
- **Emotional difficulties:** Feeling low, angry, alone, depressed, not enjoying motherhood as hoped

- **Barriers to enjoyment:** Baby's sleeping difficulties, death of husband (during pregnancy), being a single mum

When asked about their level of enjoyment/wellbeing **pre-treatment**, the women scored themselves 4 - 7 (out of 10).

When asked the same question **post-treatment**, they scored 10 (out of 10). Comments included 'feeling active, with more energy, feeling calmer, and feeling able to look after myself and the baby'.

Benefits of the programme

Mothers reported the usefulness of both counselling and body therapies in supporting them through challenges in early motherhood. Counselling was appreciated for providing a valuable space to talk through difficulties, and also to explore potentially inherited parenting patterns. Women were very vocal in their appreciation of body therapies to help them relax, decrease stress and being taken care of physically. For some women, the non-verbal aspect of body therapies was particularly beneficial. The crèche was also named as an important aspect of the service in giving women some rest away from their children, and to come back feeling more engaged and able to relate.

Specific comments on benefits of counselling:

- "Being able to look at where my different feelings about myself and the way I parent my children comes from"
- "Helped me to talk out my problem, I had no one to talk to"

Specific comments on benefits of body therapies:

- "Helped my body feel more relaxed and recover from birth"
- "Gives me energy to take care of my baby and helps my sleeping"
- "She (the therapist) is an angel, I've really enjoyed these sessions, it has really helped me relax and distress"
- "Helped me sleep, relax, forget about my troubles, felt looked after, an amazing experience"

Other comments:

- "Crèche is invaluable to give some space for me so I can be better for my children"

Some mothers did not attend consistently, particularly the counselling sessions. This fits in with the experience that mothers with attachment difficulties can be erratic in their attendance, and equally there are the realities of sick babies/children that can get in the way of regular sessions.

5. Feedback from the Referring Agencies

W+H referrals were seen to be conducted quickly and smoothly with high scores given, 5 out of 5, for the running of the project. The service was seen to be unique, especially the body therapy aspect and the additional crèche support. The flexibility and willingness to fit the service around an individual mother's needs was also appreciated. All referrers said they would recommend W+H to other organisations and stood behind the value of this pilot.

Some Comments:

- “The one parent I referred found it very useful. She was offered alternative therapies while she was in a crisis. It was the only space she had to go and feel contained in the midst of extreme distress. She felt understood and she reported that the treatments she received helped her to sleep, where nothing else had. Therapy sessions were also in her own home as she did not feel well enough to go out at first.”
- “I think the fact that it takes a non-judgemental, healing approach to women who are pregnant and in some kind of distress makes it quite unique. Many women fear disclosing that they feel disconnected with or ambivalent about the developing life in their womb and are anxious that such admissions will be met with a punitive approach. This project is extremely valuable in that it is offering women with these kinds of experiences and extreme life stresses, the chance to explore such responses in a therapeutic, non-clinical, non-judgemental environment.”
- “It would be fantastic if this service could continue and not just be limited to parents of babies. There are many mums out there struggling, especially mothers of teenagers where there are much fewer supportive services available. Many parents are depressed and on medication and cannot see any way out. I really hope this service can continue and be opened out to a wider remit of parents, ultimately their children will benefit also.”

6. Learning and Conclusions

The feedback we received from the recipients and their referrers was positive and in support of continuing a service such as this – without exception.

Although the actual group of women was relatively small, we were able to demonstrate a clear need for this kind of friendly, un-clinical, non-judgemental service for mothers and mothers-to-be before they reach crisis point. This aspect is crucial, as often mothers and mothers-to-be have nowhere to go, because they fall under the threshold of acute psychiatric criteria. The women who engaged with the programme all reported how useful they found counselling and body therapy. Even those women who had never had body therapy before were surprised by how powerful it was in aiding them in relaxation when they were suffering from highly stressful external factors. The crèche was a vital component of the service, enabling women to take a little bit of time out to look after themselves, to then feel more resourced and able to look after their babies. Given that the majority of women on the pilot were single mothers, this moment of respite was even more important.

The women benefited from counselling to give them a space to explore challenging responses to their babies and their own attachment difficulties. The body therapies enabled them in self-soothing, and learning about the importance of touch. The success particularly of the body therapies might mean that there is more work to be done in this area – to run informal workshops around touch and babies, play and babies.

Working with Groups

One aspect we did not explore in this pilot was groups. Yet the women were asking for a group where they could meet other Mums, and this is something we want to offer in the future. W+H is in a strong position to build a friendly group service offering informal and fun psycho-educational courses and group activities using creativity and movement. We also want to build on the expertise the women themselves have of their challenges and how to overcome them by starting a mentoring programme to support our other interventions.

Working with Parents of older Children

Referrers such as Home-start, Camden Futures, Euston Children's Centres have asked for details to refer other clients who did not fit the referral criteria for the pilot to Women + Health, either for counselling and/or body therapy services, (including home-visits) re-confirming the importance of the Centre's position in the community. Home-start asked if W+H could provide a service that extended beyond early years, to support parents with teenage children.

On top of the existing referrers, there is potential for W+H to build strong networks with local GPs, hospitals, children's centres, midwives, health visitors to promote this unique service in the community and build a reputation as "sanctuary" for mothers who are struggling.

Action

To design and seek funding for an extended service, based on the findings above.

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