

BEING THERE FOR EACH OTHER

A PROGRAMME EVALUATION FOR MOTHERS UNCOVERED



Matrescence (-noun)

DEFINITION: The psychological and emotional transformation that a woman undergoes as she transitions into motherhood, marked by significant changes in identity, relationships, and psychological wellbeing as women adjust to their new roles as mothers (Raphael, 1973).

1. Introduction

Mothers Uncovered is a non-profit organisation dedicated to providing support and empowerment for mothers experiencing the transition into motherhood, particularly those navigating the complex psychological, emotional, and social changes associated with *matrescence*. It was founded in 2008 by Maggie Gordon-Walker after the birth of her first child. Her personal experience of isolation, anxiety and loss of identity in her motherhood journey led her to start *Mothers Uncovered*. *Mothers Uncovered* programmes aim to create safe spaces for mothers to explore their experiences, share challenges, and receive emotional and social support from peers and facilitators who understand their unique needs.



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2. Executive Summary

Mothers Uncovered offers unique set of programmes aimed at providing mental health and social support to women experiencing the transformative phase of becoming a mother. The programmes seek to foster supportive communities through peer-facilitated group sessions, where participants, including mothers in varying stages of their maternal journey, come together to share experiences, access information, and gain emotional support. This evaluation, based on focus group data from mothers who participated in *Mothers Uncovered's* programmes, examines their impact on maternal mental health, social support, and overall well-being.



The findings highlight the positive effects of shared lived experiences in creating a safe and inclusive environment, particularly in promoting feelings of safety, normalizing struggles, and encouraging resilience. Participants valued the groups' diversity, where mothers at different stages of their journeys and with different experiences come together. This created opportunities for empathy and new perspectives on motherhood. The report concludes with several recommendations to ensure the organisation's sustainability, enhance its impact, and improve accessibility for mothers in need of support.

3. Context & Rationale

Mothers Uncovered offers a community-based intervention designed to support mothers navigating the emotional and psychological challenges associated with *matrescence*. *Matrescence*, a term coined by medical anthropologist Dana Raphael in the 1970s, refers to the psychological transformation women experience during motherhood (Raphael, 1975). As with adolescence, *matrescence* is marked by a period of significant emotional, social, and physical change, often accompanied by challenges related to identity, self-worth, and mental health (Laney et al., 2015; Ruble et al., 1990).

The rationale for this evaluation arises from the growing recognition of the importance of mental health support for mothers, especially as they navigate the complexities of parenthood. Research highlights that new motherhood is often accompanied by feelings of isolation, anxiety, and identity shifts (Mauthner, 1999; Nicholson, 1998). Many mothers, particularly those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, report insufficient emotional support and resources during this critical period, leading to increased risk of mental health challenges such as postpartum

depression and anxiety (Beck, 2001; Lim et al, 2022).

Mothers Uncovered addresses these challenges by providing a safe and supportive space where mothers experiencing *matrescence* can connect, share their stories, and receive support. The programme uses peer support principles to combat isolation and empower mothers by fostering a sense of community (Mauthner, 1995). This evaluation seeks to understand the effectiveness of the programme in promoting positive maternal mental health, building social support networks, and enhancing participants' sense of well-being. It is crucial to assess the impact and effectiveness of the programme to ensure its continued growth and sustainability.

'Matrescence offers a strengths-based framework that acknowledges both the challenges and opportunities of motherhood, emphasizing the normative aspects of a mother's self-development.' (Athan, 2024)

What do the Mothers Uncovered programmes offer mothers transitioning into Motherhood?

What are the key benefits of the programmes? What can be improved?

How can the programmes effectively reach more mothers?

4. Method

4.1 Research Design

This evaluation employed a **qualitative approach** with past participants of the *Mothers Uncovered* programmes. A qualitative design was selected as qualitative methods provide deep insight into the personal experiences and perceptions of individuals, which is crucial in understanding the subjective impacts of support services (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This approach is well-suited for exploring the lived experiences of mothers, allowing for flexible yet structured conversations about the effectiveness of the programmes. The data collection was carried out via **two focus groups**, one consisting of two mothers, Abigail and Audrey (all participants have been given pseudonyms), and the second consisting of Olivia and Mia. The participants contacted the researcher directly to volunteer to be part of the focus groups after receiving a recruitment message that was sent on behalf of the researcher by *Mothers Uncovered* as part of their regular newsletter, and as a separate recruitment email through *Mothers Uncovered*.

The study was reviewed and given a favourable ethical opinion by the University of Brighton Research Ethics Committee.

4.2 Participants

Six past participants in total had responded to the recruitment efforts, however only four could eventually make the time planned for the two focus group sessions. These mothers were at various stages of motherhood, including one who were pregnant and others with young children during the time they engaged with Mother's Uncovered programmes. At the time of the focus groups, Olivia was a first-time mother who had recently given birth, Mia had four children, Abigail was navigating the early stages of motherhood, and Audrey had a 2.5-year-old child.

4.3 Data Collection

The data collection involved recorded focus group discussions on MS Teams, which were transcribed verbatim on Teams. The discussions were guided by open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed responses about participants' experiences with the programmes, the impact it had on their emotional and social well-being, and any challenges or suggestions for improvement. As there was some minor risk of emotional distress that could be triggered through the focus group discussions, a distress protocol was in place. To mitigate the risk, specific care and steps were taken to remind the participants through the information sheets, and again at the start of each session, to focus the discussions on their feedback and outcomes of the programmes. The participants were requested to be mindful of their sharing so as not share personal accounts personal accounts that may potentially be triggering or distressing for themselves and others in the group.

4.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the focus group transcripts. The process involved identifying patterns and themes within the data that reflect common experiences and perceptions. The themes were categorized, and each participant's responses were triangulated to ensure the findings were representative of the broader group experience. This analysis is based on the principles outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which emphasize the importance of identifying patterns and drawing meaning from qualitative data to generate rich insights.

5. Findings: Key Benefits and Characteristics of the Programmes

Five main themes were identified from the two focus group discussions. These themes were recurrent in both groups. Even though all four participants attended different *Mothers Uncovered* programmes which focused on different topics, they converged on these key benefits and characteristics that the programmes offered them.





5.1 Safe Space

A recurring theme throughout the discussions was the importance of the safe and supportive environment created in the programmes. The participants felt safe in the space because of a number of factors:

5.1.1 Non-judgmental space

Participants described the space as **non-judgmental**, which allowed them to feel heard, valued, and understood within the group setting. Olivia shared:

‘It was a really nice safe space for people to open up and have a heart to heart about things... because these people understand... I was able to open up about things, my worries and things like that. And they were they were really supportive of everyone.’

This sense of safety allowed participants to open up about their experiences and share vulnerabilities that they might not have expressed elsewhere.

5.1.2 Quality of facilitation

The facilitators were consistently described as kind, approachable and empathic, which contributed significantly to the group’s atmosphere of trust. One participant talked about an incident when a member of their group appeared to have a different intent at the session which made the participant and others feel awkward, and that member was not invited for following sessions. The care taken by the facilitators to safeguard the participants and focus on the purpose of the programmes was important in fostering a sense of trust and safety.

Participants also highlighted the importance of the facilitators in maintaining the programmes’ structure while allowing room for open conversations. Olivia appreciated the flow of the sessions which allowed gradual deepening of conversations:

‘The structure in a way, kind of really encourages specific things and topics, and I think having the people sort of there to run the session helps as well. It just keeps things on track with really kind of going deeper.’

The creative activities, such as the art making or creating of timelines of their birth stories were seen as helpful in breaking the ice in the sessions and allowed for casual conversations, especially for people who may experience social anxieties in groups with new people. However, some such as Abigail, were mainly looking forward to sharing stories and experiences:

‘I think when we finally got to the part where we were sharing stories, I think I was waiting for that. So we did have a couple of exercises writing down your birth story... but that I felt like for me, I was mainly there to share and to listen to other people's stories. So that was the most interesting part for me. But I do understand why they would use it as like a warm up.’

5.1.3 Alignment of expectations

Participants spoke of feeling safe to share as they knew everyone in their group was there with the intention of sharing and supporting each other in specific stages of their motherhood journey. In the discussion with the first focus group, both participants found it helpful that everyone in their group was there for the common purpose of talking about their birth experiences. Abigail said:

‘What was really helpful is that everyone came knowing that this is what’s going to happen. In any other situation, I would be a little worried, like does this person really want to hear this? Am I oversharing? Am I spending too long talking about it?’



5.2 Peer Support

5.2.1 Shared experiences

The opportunity to connect with others facing similar challenges provided a sense of solidarity and reduced feelings of isolation. The programmes offered ways to share their experiences that family members or friends might not fully understand. Audrey shared:

‘Most people have friends or family or like other people that you can talk to about it. But it's not quite the same. I think when it's like there are other people who've also had similar [experiences], I think that's really, really helpful.’

Their common experience of navigating motherhood, despite the differences in personal circumstances, fostered deep empathy and a sense of connection. This aligns with existing literature that stresses the value of shared lived experiences in building solidarity among mothers (Suzanne and Reiss, 2023).

‘It was nice to be in the space where people felt like they could do that [share birth stories]. And you could just kind of like you could just listen to them and be like, oh, wow, this is like we all acknowledge that this was something huge that happens in people's lives. And that was nice.’ - Audrey

5.2.2 Reciprocation

Besides the opportunities to share and process their own experiences, the participants valued being able to reciprocate and be the listener for others. Audrey echoed this sentiment:

‘I felt like I could make space for the other people to speak... And just like hearing other people talk about it was nice and useful.’

3

MENTAL HEALTH

Emotional Benefits of
the Programmes

5.3 Mental Health

One key benefit of the programmes mentioned was that the participants were given a platform to discuss emotional challenges. Abigail explained how she felt **validated** by knowing others shared her struggles:

‘Maybe not only feel as if... it’s not just me who didn’t succeed... Having this feeling is quite normal, which obviously made me feel like it wasn’t about a failure... It was a lot to go through for me, and for everyone else.’

The programmes provided relief from isolation, particularly during difficult moments in their motherhood journey. What set the *Mothers Uncovered* programmes apart from other mother and baby groups, is the **attention on the mothers**. As Audrey mentioned:

‘The first year felt a bit lonely like even with groups and because... so much of it is focused on the baby, I guess.’

Participants emphasized that the shared experiences helped normalize their struggles, making them feel less alone in their journey through motherhood.

As discussed by Mauthner (1995), shared experiences in a group context can foster resilience and a sense of solidarity. By facilitating such a community, the *Mothers Uncovered* programmes effectively combat the isolation that many mothers face and provides a platform for collective healing.

The participants also mentioned how the programme had helped them process the mental distresses caused by their birth process. Audrey was particularly grateful for the opportunity to share and process her difficult experiences:

‘It was good to process that and to revisit and then, yeah, I just, I think it was like that just everybody was waiting for the time for us to talk about it... I’m so glad it existed. Like it probably saved me quite a lot of money in therapy. Yeah, it was just super, super helpful at the time.’



4

CONFIDENCE
BUILDING

Addressing self-doubt
and identity formation

5.4 Confidence Building

One important aspect of *Mothers Uncovered* programmes that was explored was confidence building and addressing **emerging maternal identity**.

Olivia described “feeling like a bit of an imposter” as a new mother.

‘I couldn’t believe I was a mother and everything, and but it’s slowly kind of dying down a little bit, but I just think it’ll just help with that, just to be around other moms and just be able to open up, you know, in a place like that.’

Mia described the sessions as helping with confidence and identity (“take time for yourself”), echoing Audrey’s comments about feeling seen and heard as a mother, not just a parent.





Olivia echoed this, describing a refugee mother with a newborn who opened up about her feelings of loneliness and uncertainty:

‘There was a lovely lady who was a refugee and she was living in a hotel room at the time with a newborn baby, a single mother living in a hotel room with a newborn baby who was literally a matter of weeks old. And she didn’t know anyone in Brighton at all. And she really opened up to us all about how she was feeling. She had a good cry and like, we were all sort of comforting her.’

5.5 Diversity

Another critical theme that emerged was the **diversity** within the group, which enhanced the richness of the shared experience. The participants described how mothers from different walks of life brought a variety of perspectives, helping participants see that their struggles were not unique, and that their feelings were valid. Diversity, in the context of the two focus group discussions, mainly referred to varying stages of motherhood that the other mothers they met in the programmes were experiencing, and who possessed different opinions. One participant in particular mentioned that her group included a refugee. No other specific references were made to diversity in terms of age and racial or socio-economic backgrounds in the discussions.

Mia noted that the group in her programme was made up of mothers with vastly different life situations, but all shared the common experience of matrescence:

‘Yeah, it was just really, it was just a really lovely group and everyone got on really, really well. Everyone had completely different lives and we were just all completely different people.’



The diversity led to different perspectives and opinions which Mia, in particular, found helpful in thinking about her own problems:

‘But you know, you could talk about things, talk about things that were happening and they could sort of say, oh, what about this? What about that, you know, different ideas, different ways to help.’

6. Discussion

This study was designed to evaluate the programmes offered by Mothers Uncovered, to identify the benefits as well as areas for improvement, including ways to reach more mothers requiring support in their motherhood journeys. The emergent themes all point towards the value the participants placed on emotional social support that the programmes provided.

This is congruent with research with new mothers which showed that social support is the most important factor in their coping strategies, especially in the early postpartum stage (Razurel et al., 2011).

The range of programmes that Mothers Uncovered offers address different issues mothers face. These range from difficult birth processes to general confidence building and wellbeing. The gap that Mothers Uncovered fills is an important one, where the focus is not just on the problems and challenges of motherhood, but the process of *matrescence*, which offers a holistic lens to look at the motherhood journey without bias towards the problems and challenges of this transitional phase in a mother's life. This allows the mothers to define their evolving identities in ways which consider growth, opportunities and possibilities that their new position offers them (Athan, 2024).

As the programmes brought together mothers who may not have met otherwise, they created a diverse mix of mothers in each of the programmes. There is growing research in sociology and social psychology showing that people open up to others with whom they do not share strong ties, especially regarding issues that carry stigma or because the support is deemed more accessible (Small, 2015; Small & Sukhu, 2016; Moreton et al., 2023)

7. Conclusion

Mothers Uncovered provides unique and valuable intervention at a vulnerable life stage. It bridges the gap between professional support and informal friendships by offering a structured, compassionate, and safe environment to explore the emotional realities of motherhood. The blend of peer support and skilled facilitation makes the experience both personally transformative and socially meaningful. The diversity of the groups further enriches the experience, offering a wide range of perspectives and advice that resonates with participants.

8. Recommendations

One of the biggest challenges of most small nonprofit organizations is sharing the good work they do and recruiting more service users. As the findings in this report has shown, *Mothers Uncovered's* programmes are unique, and can serve to benefit many mothers. Some of the issues brought up by the participants of the focus groups pertain to **accessibility of information about *Mothers Uncovered***. The mothers included in this study had all found out about the programmes via referrals, from their midwives, health visitors or a link worker. Two of the participants lamented that if they had not pressed on with their health workers about their need for emotional support, they might not have been referred to Mother Uncovered. The participants all felt they would recommend the programmes, however, they do not do so actively as they feel the personal and reflective nature of the *Mothers Uncovered* groups felt intimate and not something they would casually mention. Thus there is a need and a clear call for **broader visibility** of *Mothers Uncovered* through active engagement by the organization through various channels.

Mothers Uncovered already is being seen as a championing voice for mothers. The podcasts, research and other resources that the organization has been actively producing are valuable assets. Below are some recommendations to further the organization's reach, based on feedback from the participants as well as others resources :

1. Partner with Health Services and Maternity Clinics

- **NHS Maternity Services, Health Visitors and GP Practices:** Collaborate with hospitals, local maternity clinics, health visitors, midwifery services to provide information about your services. Offer leaflets, brochures, or host information sessions at maternity clinics.

2. Online and Social Media Outreach

- **Create a Strong Online Presence:** *Mothers Uncovered* already has a webpage full of resources. Share relatable content about matrescence, parenting, maternal mental health and self-care regularly on social media on platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter.
- **Online Support Groups or Webinars:** Offer virtual support groups or webinars on topics related to matrescence. This can reach mothers who are unable to attend in-person sessions due to childcare or logistical challenges.
- **Partner with Instagram and Facebook parent resource pages:** Share your work with local parenting pages and family event listings that have large following. One Instagram page which has been mentioned by two of the mothers in the focus groups is @TheBrigthonMummy.
- **Instagram/Facebook Ads Targeting New Mothers:** Use targeted advertising on social media platforms to reach new mothers in East Sussex. Ads can be geographically targeted to the region, and focus on topics such as mental health for mothers, maternal well-being, and local support services.

3. Collaborate with Local Community Centres

- **Mother and Baby Groups:** Partner with community centres or playgroups that offer sessions for new mothers, such as postnatal yoga and pilates classes. Provide leaflets or posters at the venues.
- **Public Libraries:** Leave brochures or posters at public libraries and other community spaces.

4. Build a Network of Referrals

- **Referrals from Local Professionals:** Build relationships with local professionals who work with new mothers, such as doulas, lactation consultants, psychologists, and baby massage instructors.
- **Peer Networks:** Encourage mothers who have previously benefited from the *Mothers Uncovered* programmes can refer or recommend the programmes to other new mothers.

5. Outreach through Maternity and Parenting Blogs

- **Local Parenting Blogs or Websites:** Connect with local parenting bloggers or influencers who have a significant following among mothers. They can help promote *Mothers Uncovered* through posts, reviews, or personal recommendations.
- **Guest Articles or Features:** Offer to write guest articles or features for parenting blogs or websites. Topics could include navigating the challenges of matrescence, recognizing the signs of postpartum depression, or finding support as a new mother.

6. Targeted Outreach to Marginalized Communities

- **Culturally Specific Outreach:** Consider the cultural and linguistic diversity of Brighton and Hove. Offering support services tailored to the specific needs of ethnic minorities, refugees, or migrant communities could provide access to a group of mothers who may not be aware of, or may be uncomfortable accessing your services.

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