

Mums face PND best together

By Matt Crossman

Many women experience some form of "baby blues" in the days after having a child. But when Sunbury's Leanne Schultz gave birth to her daughter almost 12 years ago, she became enveloped by something quite different.

"She was born on a Monday and I started crying on the Wednesday, and it just didn't stop," Ms Schultz says. "By the time she was 10 days old, I had a brief episode of psychosis."

After a stay in hospital, Ms Schultz began attending Sunbury Community Health's "mother to mother" post-natal depression (PND) support group.

She says the non-judgmental nature of the peer to peer group was crucial to her recovery.

Women who have experienced the lifesaving assistance provided by the group are being invited to a reunion this Wednesday.

The group was run out of the Macedon Street centre for 24 years before going into hiatus in March.

Ms Schultz, whose daughter Angela turns 12 this week, said while she had been referred to a psychiatrist and put on medication, it wasn't until she connected with SCH counsellor Terrie Hollingsworth that things began to really improve.

"The group became my lifeline. We didn't have any family here," she said. "They say it takes a village to raise a child. We didn't have a village, but we formed one there."

Ms Schultz, who has gone on to complete a psychology degree and now works as a counsellor, said the group helped create real and lasting relationships.

"My best friends are women who were in that group when our children were babies.

"It's the power of peer support. What's behind PND might be different for every woman, but

at the end of it, every woman there is having a terrible time."

SCH's Ms Hollingsworth said she had no doubt the group had saved the lives of a number of women, with some actively suicidal when they were first referred.

Members frequently maintained contact in between meetings and, after the advent of social media, kept in touch via a closed Facebook group.

"It allowed women to feel safe enough to disclose what they thought were really quite frightening thoughts and experiences about motherhood," Ms Hollingsworth said.

"They learned to trust themselves ... able to share those fears" - Terrie Hollingsworth

"They gained a tremendous amount of reassurance and learnt to trust themselves and their own abilities by being able to share those fears."

The group was put on hold due to declining numbers, but Ms Hollingsworth hopes something similar will take its place. Both Ms Schultz and Ms Hollingsworth said while online forums could be helpful, nothing could replace face to face contact.

Ms Hollingsworth said the pressure on mothers and the stigma surrounding PND hadn't changed from one generation to the next. "It's subtle, but it's there," she said. "PND is not restricted to first-time mothers ... it can happen to anybody."

The reunion is at 12-28 Macedon Street from 10am-noon this Wednesday. Details: 9744 4455. Perinatal Anxiety and Depression Australia: 1300 726 306. Lifeline: 13 11 14.



Leanne Schultz with her daughter Angela. (Shawn Smith)