



Being you...and the parent you want to be too - with drawing therapy

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Being You – first and foremost

It was World Maternal Mental Health Day on 4 May 2016. I was honoured to present at the Maternal Mental Health Forum at the Otago Medical School on the same day. It was a great celebration of the services, research, and passionate people out there – all working in support of mums. This article is based on that recent presentation.

I'm so lucky to work with Mums and learn so much about what works to keep true to ourselves, and therefore help us be the parents we want to be too. Drawing therapy is one of the more 'out of the box' ways to help with being you and being a parent too. I've seen the benefits personally and professionally – it's definitely inspirational, and magical too at times. In this article I'll talk more about the pressures of parenting, one solution to cope – drawing therapy, and the benefits of it.

Ever feel like going away with the fairies?

Imagine that feeling of curling up in bed, or flying away to some warm, exotic, quiet place. It sounds very attractive especially when our independence feels totally consumed by a little, completely dependent little (or not so little) being. In my experience of having an early-riser toddler and a very unsettled baby, at times I wanted to just fly away with the fairies. Although I didn't, instead I just pushed harder and harder and tried to fix my baby's sleep, pain, crying, issues – by myself. It would have been great if I'd had a nice way to take a break from the pressure and relax. Since then, I've learned through my counselling career and working with so many mums, that drawing therapy is an awesome, realistic, easy and gentle way to go away with the fairies.

The pressures of being a parent

Parenting is rife with pressure. Ironically, this comes at a time when you and your baby are so vulnerable and need more support, rather than less. It brings pressure on all levels: socially, intellectually, physically, and situationally. At a time when you need good nutrition and sleep, more often than not this is

when we're most sleep deprived and not eating well. We find ourselves bombarded with opinions, when mostly all we need is a listening ear and trust in our own instinct. Sometimes we feel drained by all the different theories and advice out there – on ways to parent but also the gadgets you do and don't need. This is at a time where we'd benefit from a manual – but of course there isn't one for our baby! Socially and situationally we find ourselves in all of these new places and different faces, this can be tiring – and this is when we would benefit more from familiar faces and places, support and security.

Parenting pressure can knock our confidence

After a while this pressure may knock our confidence. The confident part of ourselves might initially be saying 'It's ok, I'm learning', but after a while the fearful part might start getting a little louder and start comparing itself to others 'They're doing things better than me'. The fear of being judged may become bigger, and may start to outweigh your own instinct and judgment. We might feel afraid of rejection, or failure, and that might trigger behaviours that make things worse. We might try harder and harder to avoid that feeling of loss or failure. For example, we may increase our social outings because of fear of being left out, or try even harder to implement sleep training, even if we are too tired to do so. The problem is that our fears are almost always not true, so it's the 'solution to the problem that becomes the problem' i.e. the futile (and exhausting) effort involved in trying to control the uncontrollable.

Reduced confidence can make us lose our way

Our fears may start to overtake our desires and what we value in life, and this can mean we lose our way a bit. We may feel lost at sea, not satisfied with where we are at, and disconnected from what truly matters to us. As a result we might feel anxious, low, envious, frustrated and confused too.

Being you through drawing

Drawing therapy uses right and left-brain processes. The left-brain is associated with the more rational and logical processes, and the right-brain with more creative ones. By using page and crayons we use all processes - talking, and listening, as well as drawing and viewing images and words. It means we are using all of our senses – seeing, hearing, smelling (crayons smell nice!), and feeling the page and crayons. Using both hemispheres of the brain helps us to better absorb the potent messages and images we write and draw.

Drawing therapy helps us access our subconscious to come up with different ways of being. It takes you away from your over-thinking self. This helps us come up with different ways of being and behaving, that we wouldn't normally come up with by doing our usual modus operandi of only thinking our way out of problems.

How it works

With drawing we first externalise ourselves, so instead of using first person pronouns we use 'her' or 'it' or 'the', this helps us have a different perspective on who we are and where we want to go. Here's an example of how a drawing session might go:

- Start with a feeling 'I feel like...' '...The world is on top of me'
- Draw it, her (externalise)
- Add more detail: Who else? What else?
- How does she feel?
- Write it down
- Add more detail: Who else? What else?
- How does she feel?
- Write it down
- And so on...we can also ask: What might happen next? What would she say to you right now?

The benefits of drawing therapy for being you and the parent you want to be too

The process of drawing can be therapeutic and cathartic in itself but also it can help you rediscover the other parts of you, such as the vulnerable part, the cautious part, the good bits, and the work-in-progress bits. It can help you realise what's important to you, what's bothering you and how to remedy it.

Drawing can help you to align your beliefs and behaviours too. It can help you find your own inner assertiveness, connecting with your inner child (vulnerability), and expressing and receiving love and comfort. It helps you meet your needs for physical strength, internal and external support, knowledge and skills, and creating the right conditions around you – to bring you a sense of safety and security.

Inspirational examples of drawing therapy in action

I am privileged to see my clients grow, especially through their drawing. Here are some examples of inspirational drawings I've seen. Thankyou again to my clients, who let me share these at my presentation on Maternal Health Day.

Drawing can help remind you of what's important. With drawing, you can initially feel one way, but by tapping into the subconscious we find what's truly important and that gives us strength from within. For example, initially you may draw a girl as being pushed and pulled by others but you can also add colour and strength and support to show she can protect and surround herself with the people and things that are important to her.

Drawing can help you to face your fears. You may externalise yourself into another being, such as a bird. This way it is easier to imagine finding the tools, support and adaptability you need in life. Although a bird might find itself

in difficult circumstances it shows you that you can be brave in times of strife, adapt where possible, and use its skills, strength and support to get to where it wants to be.

Drawing can help you nurture your inner child, as well as your adult self. You can draw yourself surrounded by support, for example a partner represented by a tree, and other things you love, such as your children and your pets. You can talk to yourself through drawing, for example; 'Take time for yourself and take time to look out of the window'.

There are many ways to go away with the fairies with drawing therapy, if you want to try it or find out more about drawing therapy see interactivedrawingtherapy.co.nz.

Next steps

It's best to have a few sessions with a therapist before you do DIY drawing therapy. Drawing is a very gentle therapy, but it still involves a shift in mindset and it is best to have extra support with you while you do this – especially at first.

Extra support

If you would like to try some drawing therapy, or just get some extra help with developing new skills, or looking at other aspects of your well-being, then PND Wellington's Counselling service can help. Just see our contact details below. However if you feel unsafe then it's important to get immediate help from your doctor or emergency.

A word from the author...

I am Emma Heaney-Yeatts, PND Wellington's Lead Counsellor and Extension Manager. I am a mum of two young boys. I'm a fully qualified Counsellor and also have an honours degree in Education. I use Interactive Drawing Therapy, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Client Centred Practice in my work with clients.

Wellington is so fortunate to have a new and in-demand free/low cost counselling service for parents who are finding it difficult to adapt to pregnancy, or life with a baby. You may or may not identify with the term PND, it does not matter - our service will have something that suits you.

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