

We are a group of 11 women in a social and unofficial support group of 37 years standing. Most of us first met in 1983 when we had our first children and after the ante and post natal groups we continued to meet up, enthused, encouraged and inspired by our legendary midwife Jan Menell. A few moved away and a few others joined the initial core group. We go out for meals, walks and get involved in each other's activities and campaigns. Over the years the group has assisted each other and the ethic of the group is 'here for you, here to help'.

Between us we have 27 children and so far 26 grandchildren, the majority living reasonably local to Saffron Walden, but there are a few living in other parts of the country. The worst thing of all of about 'lockdown' has been separation from our children and grandchildren, not being able to meet and not being able to help in shaping the lives of young children, including taking up our role in assisting with childcare.

In March 2020, after lockdown, we decided to keep in touch through FaceTime, but this was not very stable and was not easy to connect as a group, so we swapped to Zoom and established a regular weekly meeting every Wednesday at 16.00. This has worked reasonably well apart from cut outs after about 40 minutes and then the need to sign in again, but we have managed.

Two of our group wrote notes about their experience of the Covid 19 period and these can be found at the end of this section. We feel these pieces are emotive and poignant in capturing the feelings of many, especially those living on their own and those with, or responsible for those with, an increased need to take sheltering measures.

Two of our group lost their husbands in the last year and one of our group is divorced.

At our Zoom on 1st April we agreed that we would, as a group, submit a paper to the Walden archive. We agreed that the new 'normal' might be in place until the autumn. We also recorded that in essence we felt privileged to be living in this area with a lower infection rate, we did not have money worries and have gardens and houses with space. However, we recognised that we were concerned about others, especially those in larger towns and cities who do not have facilities, funds, support networks or access to technology. Generally, we have been impressed with the way people have helped each other, the role of volunteers and the recognition of staff in health, social care and essential services. Also, there is some evidence that people are being kind and finding time to talk.

However, since relaxation of lockdown the group expressed a real concern about people travelling long distances for recreation, getting too close (not social distancing) and leaving litter.

In order to keep our Zoom lively and provide a chance for everyone to share we instituted a weekly activity and then provide other feedback by email. Some of the things we discussed and shared:

- What we are reading - e.g. books by Tracey Chevalier, Elizabeth Strout, Imogen Hermes, Ben Aaronavitch, Ruth Ho and Tom Bradby.
- We sent round by email a recipe each and everyone had to choose one, then cook it and circulate a photo of the prepared dish. At Zoom we discussed what we had made.
- Bring an item from your wardrobe, show it and explain what it reminds you of or a

memory it brings. We had everything from a shoe that resulted in a blister on a walk in Italy to a hat worn on a 'plane, on way to a wedding, that survived a snow storm, an 80's batwing jumper, knitted by mother still in brilliant condition, a blue chiffon top bought in Shrewsbury and a hat worn at Christmas family meals.

- TV programme or film you would recommend and why. Suggestions included: Springwatch, House Through Time, Long Lost Family, State of Happiness, The Story of God, Killing Eve, Unorthodox, Lion, Cardinal, and Normal People.
- Write a short poem, like a Japanese Haiku.
- Your favourite music album or type of music and memories it revived - Rod Stewart, Fleetwood Mac, Free, Graham Nash, John Denver to choral production of the Irish Blessing.
- The flower/shrub you like best - sweet peas and freesias, sweet williams liked by all, but also Japanese peonies and japonicas (especially plants given to us by others).
- Bring along an arty item of interest to describe. A bracelet received as a 18th birthday present, a musical jug, grandma's teapot, pottery and bark paintings from New Zealand, a vase given as a work leaving present, candle holder, antiquarian book, photo from 1967, bowl received as an engagement present, polar bear and a wooden 'old lady' sculpture from a grandmother.
- Photo caption competition.
- Best place to go on holiday resulted in suggestions for visiting Sydney, France (anywhere), Tuscany, Cuba, Tanzania, Marrakesh, cruises landing in Portugal, cruising the Nile, music tour of the USA, Galapagos, Nepal etc., but also the Lake District, Cromer and the Northumberland coast.

Much walking has been undertaken separately, in order to try to keep fit and since the relaxation in lockdown rules we have walked first in 2's and then walks in larger groups (with distancing). Three of the group have been involved in virtual choirs. One of the group is still working, from home. Much knitting has taken place and 3 people have been involved in making scrubs (which were tough) and one has been undertaking an artistic embroidery challenge. Much nutritional food has been planned and cooked and locally brewed beer has been sourced and enjoyed.

We have been supporting local businesses as they have good products and have been providing an excellent service in difficult times - we want them to be there for us when the Covid 19 period is ended.

None of the group has had Covid 19, as far as we know as no one has been tested. We are continuing to be very careful, using common sense in relation to government guidelines.

Janet Drysdale
24 June 2020

What has Lockdown meant to me?

I am 66 years old, divorced, live alone and I have been diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease for 12 years. I attend Parkinson's Group Exercise sessions twice per week and go to the Lord Butler gym on two afternoons to the GP referral session with Kelly.

In September 2019 I came across We Are Thrive run by Uttlesford District Council. I was intrigued, especially by a piece written by an Alexander Technique Teacher living in Saffron Walden. I made a note of her number and called her the following day. I made arrangements for my first appointment with Kathy Ponter, the Alexander Technique Teacher. I have been interested in the Alexander Technique for a number of years and have two or three books on the subject. I have been meaning to find a teacher in this area for a couple of years but never quite seemed to get around to it. I can honestly say the day I made that phone call to Kathy was the best thing I have ever done in my life. After the first session my head was no longer twisted to one side. After three sessions I felt I had been given back at least two years of my life.

I am used to living alone and I enjoy my own company - when I choose. Originally Parkinson's Disease was not in a High Risk category, but then the powers that be changed their minds and said we were in one of the High Risk groups, not the Very High Risk Group, but higher than average risk. This meant that, along with those people who were 70+, I was unable to go to the supermarket to do my own shopping but I was allowed to go out for a short walk each day.

I am used to living alone and I enjoy my own company - when I choose. And then we had Lockdown, and that changed everything!

I did sewing, knitting, gardening - all enjoyable but my interest waned after a couple of days. No face-to-face interaction with people. I was used to popping to Scotsdales or popping to B & M or Aldi. But now I had to stay home. The days, the weeks, the months all rolled into each other. Every day the same. **Exactly** the same.

By week 6 I was getting really down but I didn't realise just how bad I was feeling until talking to my daughter on FaceTime. She was really miserable "Oh Mum, I need real people. Why is everything so difficult? Why does everything take so long?" Suddenly a bell rang in my head - did that sound familiar or what? I was concerned that my daughter was heading for depression due to lack of contact with real people, not just via a computer screen. She lives alone and, although able to go out for daily exercise and to shop for essentials, the lack of human contact was clearly a major issue. I had been thinking that everything I tried to do seemed

extremely difficult and would take me forever and I had put it down to my Parkinson's deteriorating, due to lack of exercise. Could it be possible that I too was heading for depression due to lack of human contact, isolation and just being completely out of routine?

This lockdown is really making me miserable. The deterioration in my health is, I am sure, due to lack of exercise and not being able to see Kathy, my Alexander Technique Teacher and Matthew, my Osteopath on a regular basis. All the months of work done with Kathy and Matthew seem to have evaporated so quickly.

Bo Jo's Cabinet are talking about a gradual easing of restrictions. I read somewhere that there will be a very strict enforcement of social distancing for at least a year after lockdown has finished. Does this mean hairdressers, health spas and nail bars will be a thing of the past or in order to practise will they too have to wear protective clothing - like the NHS in full visors and scrubs?

Without my wonderful group of friends, I think I would verging on breakdown. The majority of us met at antenatal classes 36 years ago, and we still meet at least once a month for coffee or lunch. We have been through a lot together over the years and recently these fantastic friends have done my shopping, collected my prescriptions and best of all we have a weekly Zoom meeting that has kept me sane. I do not know how I will be at the end of lockdown, but I consider myself so lucky to have these ten women in my life.

Sharon Hayler
16th May 2020

SWAN during Lockdown 2020

I still enjoy watching the mixture of puzzlement and incredulity on people's faces when I announce to them that I'm going to the pub to meet up with my ante natal group. They don't want to be rude, but surely, at 59, I'm a little old to be producing a baby?

The SWAN (Saffron Walden Ante Natal) group was formed 37 years ago when our lovely local midwife Jan Mennell encouraged some of us to keep in touch with each other after giving birth to our first babies. Jan knew, long before the advent of social media, how helpful contact with others going through a similar experience can be. Nine of us are friends from those early days, with a couple more joining later and between us we have produced 27 children and 26 grandchildren to date. Most of us have remained in the Saffron Walden area and a surprising number of us are still living in the same homes and married to the same (extremely lucky!) men.

Initially we bonded over the feeding and sleeping regimes of our precious offspring, followed in swift succession by toddler tantrums, choosing schools, exams, universities, relationships – and suddenly our babies had grown into full size humans with their own independent lives. SWAN members have supported each other through all the exciting and challenging moments of the last 37 years, meeting regularly and even occasionally inviting our partners to join us. Of course, life has had its share of difficulties for most of us, including bereavement, illness and divorce. We are a diverse group of women who have had varied careers and interests, but our long friendship is of great importance to each of us, never more so than during 'Lockdown 2020'.

Our weekly Zoom meetings have resulted in an even closer bond between us as we have shared our frustrations and fears about this unprecedented situation. Those of us who are shielding for health reasons have been able to count on others to help with shopping and collecting medication. Those living on their own have drawn strength from knowing that the others are always available for a chat at the end of a phone. I have my elderly mother who suffers from dementia living with me during this period and have been very grateful for the practical support (a stair gate to ensure she can't wander out of her bedroom at night) as well as the good humoured banter which lifts my spirits when I've had a difficult night with her. During the lockdown period each of us has experienced moments of joy as well as despair, but belonging to our group has somehow made the difficult times more bearable. We are grown up enough to recognise that we are all fragile and wise enough to know that these difficult times will pass. We have got to know each other even better than before over the past few weeks as we've shared our preferences for books, music, flowers, tv viewing and recipes. I have marvelled over the lockdown weeks at the courage, honesty, creativity and wonderful common sense of these amazing, strong and self sufficient women whom I am delighted to call my friends. We are able to point each other towards the positive aspects of our situation during this time and remind ourselves how fortunate we are to be enjoying good health in a lovely rural environment without the money and employment worries that so many are experiencing. The most difficult aspect of this time for each of us has been the enforced separation from our children and grandchildren. These relationships are fundamental to who we are and have profoundly changed us as people over the past 37 years. Motherhood has brought us many rewards, not least the support of our SWAN group during Lockdown 2020.

Alison Knights June 2020