

Description

Nourishing Goes Deeper – Bringing Psychological Safety to Work

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Introduction

So often when we think of caring for the caregiver, whether a maternity worker or a new mother, we go first to nourishment: to nourish the belly and mind with food, the skin and overall health with water, to remember warmth and rest. It's why the cup of tea (a UK stereotype yes, a midwifery staple, absolutely) is synonymous with soothing, with pausing, with making it better, even just for a while.

Focus on you, your body and your mind

Nourishing our body by keeping hydrated, eating well and having enough sleep is the foundation of good health. We can also try to mindfully nurture our skin, the largest organ in our body, and an often-forgotten part of our busy midwife schedules. Simple daily rituals such as moisturising after showering and handwashing not only helps us to maintain skin vitality but can be moments to focus mindfully on touch sensations and our breathing. These are basic needs and impact on our lives at home and at work.

Of course, safety, and psychological safety, is a basic need too – and a physiological one. Without it our systems are wired to be on the alert. I've long wondered how we can nourish the caregiver by bringing psychological safety to the shift and sway of ward life where the team changes all the time. While it's so tempting to just get on with the job, tiny things like the handover can nourish the caregiver and increase a sense of belonging:

"*Warmth, a welcome, introductions – especially of new people, small celebrations, a leader indicating clear intentions: 'My job today is to provide you with the psychological safety you need: to enable you to feel well fed, watered, rested and trusted enough to be able to raise questions or concerns, to admit without fear the inevitable mistakes that are part of life and this work, and to ask for what you need*'."[1]

Being vulnerable

We know from Brené Brown's research that vulnerability beats armour in these moments, encouraging the maternity

staff gathered to be more open and vulnerable themselves.[2] So, from the shift leader at the labour ward board: "*I'm feeling a bit low tonight because I've just come back from seeing my mum who's not well. It's likely that some of you are bringing things with you this evening, especially if you didn't sleep well. That's okay*." Or from a midwife colleague on antenatal ward working alongside a newly qualified midwife: "If we can give each other what we need, it also makes it so much easier to advocate for each other/make requests from the doctors/unit lead. What's going to make a difference to you today?"

This kind of interaction offers a gentle emotional holding of another person in that moment and makes space and (even fractional) time for emotions, concerns or needs to arise and become more manageable. The fear here is an old one – that letting our guard down is dangerous or weak or even a waste of time. The reality is quite the opposite: strength and safety get a victory parade when a leader chooses to model vulnerability.

How different would you feel if a shift started like that? I might cry with relief. It's a moment full of potential; a moment of being and nourishing among all the doing, and a mark of person-centred and compassionate leadership.[3] It might just feel like our cup is filled enough to pour out to others – to colleagues and the women and families. **TPM**

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