



Circles of life: Mariana Gagula runs a monthly circle from her home in Templestowe; (right) Margaret Ioannidis joins a healing circle at her Berwick home; and (below and inset) Bronwyn Murphy (in red) believes in open, non-judgmental discussions.

PICTURES  
NICOLE CLEARY

## SPIRITNESS

ANNA Johnston felt lost when she started attending a women's circle in Berwick three years ago.

Johnston, 47, of Beaconsfield, is married with two teenage boys and her life revolves around her family but, as a result, she lost a sense of purpose beyond serving others.

"I used to be such a hot-headed, typical Italian, swearing and getting angry," Johnston says. "Now I'm in a much more calm place and nothing gets to me like it did before. I have self-control."

Meditation has been a crucial part of Johnston's transformation. She learnt the mindfulness technique when she started attending Spiritess, run by Margaret Ioannidis.

"I had to learn to take control of my body and there really has been a massive shift in my life," she says. "I also had to learn to put myself first. I realised that everything runs better when you put yourself first."

Ioannidis, who also runs women's retreats and practises reiki and kinesiology, set up Spiritess five years ago because she wanted

to create a place where women could be themselves and to share their secrets, whether that be secret recipes or secret emotions.

"They're all allowed to be a bit messy if they want to be," Ioannidis says. "We all are sometimes."

"I invite them to release whatever they like with no judgment. Then we can create vision boards together. Sometimes I have guest speakers and we talk about menopause, family, all sorts of things."

"Some of the girls become friends. Some like to be here and go but the majority connect and I encourage that."

Usually there are 10-15 women gathering, but sometimes there are 20. There is a philosophy that "whatever happens in temple, stays in temple".

Cynthia Rugari, 38, says it's the kindness of the women that motivates her to travel from her home in Moorabbin to Berwick once a month for the meeting.

During a time of financial stress the women secretly raised \$1000 for her, and

when one of the members lost her grandson to cancer last year, they all bought him a star and presented it to her in a basket with candles and incense.

"One of us usually cries, but it's like being in a container," Rugari says. "Everything that happens there, stays there."

"Some people talk for 10 minutes and some people talk for two minutes but we're all there for each other. By the time it's over I feel so replenished."

"You live your everyday life, work crazy hours, have a busy family life and you feel empty, but you go to circle and it fills your cup."

Ioannidis says feedback suggests people feel more revitalised after being at the circle.

"Women really just don't have time for themselves but they come here and purge," she says. "Some of my friends roll their eyes about all this, but I can't see what is wrong in giving women some time to think about themselves and release some emotions in a healthy, supportive environment."



## THE MODERN GODDESS

WHEN Bronwyn Murphy moved to Melbourne from her home town of Benalla as a teenager, she felt disconnected.

The feeling grew as she completed boarding school and tertiary study until, a few years ago at 36, she decided to start a goddess circle.

"It came from an almost selfish need because I found it strange to walk down my street in St Kilda and not have any contact," Murphy says. "I wouldn't talk to anyone, I felt uncomfortable and it's just got worse."

The owner of Sacred Places Yoga and reiki master now has up to 15 women meeting weekly in the group, ranging in age from 18-74.

They drink water, eat food free of most "nasties", meditate and have themes they follow at each session. Each member is invited to share her name and anything she wants to discuss.

"I believe in open, vulnerable conversations in a non-judgmental forum," Murphy says. "I don't encourage everyone to sit there and talk about their problems for two hours because in my experience, it doesn't help."

"I find more strength in shifting your story and we are all there to offer advice without ever judging. It's about trust, but it's not like you come in and sign a form."

Amelia Goss, 29, of Caulfield North, met

Murphy at the yoga class she teaches at South Pacific Health Club in St Kilda six months ago. She had broken up with her boyfriend and was going through an emotional transition.

"I was very introspective when I'm normally very positive," she says. "I bonded very quickly with Bron and she invited me to her circle."

"What I found there, apart from a lovely group of girls, was to gain a lot of insight through other people's perspective. It was a very comfortable environment where I could express what was on my mind."

"I really learnt how to flip my mindset when I wasn't feeling so good and it really worked."

Now in a new relationship, she has been going through changes at work and some other circle members have offered their assistance as she works towards her dream of being a medical sales consultant.

"I can help some of the ladies have more of my happy-go-lucky approach and they can help me make new contacts," Goss says.

"It's a bit like networking but more than that."

"My intention with the group has been to get myself closer for any opportunity as it arrives."

Jen Mason's circumstances were quite different when she joined the circle a year

ago after separating from her husband. The 50-year-old mother of an 18-year-old runs three businesses and says she was severely depleted when a friend suggested meditation.

"I didn't want to sit at home meditating by myself and needed to find a group of like-minded people I could spend some time with," Mason says. "Most of my friends were shared friends with my ex-husband and it was important I find my own people."

"The group was my way of giving to myself."

Initially scared, she feels she has made a new set of lifelong friends who may not all be the same age or from the same background but who feel connected.

"I would cry at the drop of a hat before I joined the circle," she says. "But I felt like I could walk in and be my true self and everyone embraced me. It's been very healing for me."

Murphy says there is follow-up between circle meetings to make sure everyone is coping and working towards their goals.

"We keep each other accountable," she says. "These women want to be at the top of their careers, at the top of their relationships."

"They're not broken women. They come to work and so that's what we do, whether it's instilling more self-love, knowing who you are, sexuality, life direction, relationships or career."

"Gone are the days when this type of thing was seen as being for hippies. It's really the way forward and it's really time for it to be taken seriously."

