

Beating the isolation

By **Cam Findlay** -

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Dorothy Cahill, Rostrata Family Centre manager Dianne Graves, John Mitchell and Wendy Beeson take part in the centre's new bridge club sessions. Photograph – Aaron Van Rongen.

Mental Health Week means different things for different people.

For some, it's simply another week of fundraising for what is clearly an important cause.

For others, it's a timely reminder of the issues that can pervade a person's life and break down their connection to the outside world. Places like the Rostrata Family Centre exist for that reason.

During Mental Health Week – September 30 to October 6 – the centre is reinforcing the message of connectedness, something which centre manager Dianne Graves said has become the central purpose of the small non-profit organisation. “We’re a small community centre,” she said. “We’re partly funded, but in the realm of things we do what we can with what we’ve got. It’s important we work with the community as closely and as directly as we can. That means it isn’t about doing for, it’s about doing with.”

The centre has recently started a new bridge club for seniors, but also runs play groups for kids and various social networking sessions for people of all ages.

It all ties back to the idea of mental health, as the centre attempts to promote the idea that healthy social cohesion is not just good for the individual but for the community as a whole.

“We’re pretty much inclusive of anyone who wants to walk through the doors, and we have programs on for everyone from eight to 80,” she said. “The thing we’ve found as we’ve gone on is that it’s increasingly important to harbour social connections between people.

“Isolation is growing, I think that’s a pretty clear thing.

“What’s become our major driver is making sure those people are connected. Often that means just getting people over the hump of leaving their house.

“There’s people everywhere who are suffering in silence, who don’t feel like they have anywhere to go or anyone to talk to.”

Dianne Graves said this is the biggest barrier for people with depression or anxiety.

The action of simply walking out the front door and interacting with other people can be immensely daunting, so gradually welcoming people back into the fold often becomes an act of patience. “Our purpose here is not to push anyone into a circumstance they don’t feel comfortable in,” Ms Graves said.

“We just want to provide a space where people can come and socialise at the start, but maybe find a bit of strength from that, and get a little bit of confidence and purpose themselves.”

Rostrata Family Centre will hold a Mental Health Week conference on October 10, with a talk by much-respected local psychologist Judy Marty.

If you or anyone you know is suffering from mental health issues, contact Lifeline on 13 11 14 or kid's hepline on 1800 55 1800.

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