



*Let's
Normalize
it!*

**STORIES & DISCUSSIONS ABOUT
MENOPAUSAL MENTAL HEALTH**

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank everyone who generously contributed their experiences, stories and images to this project.

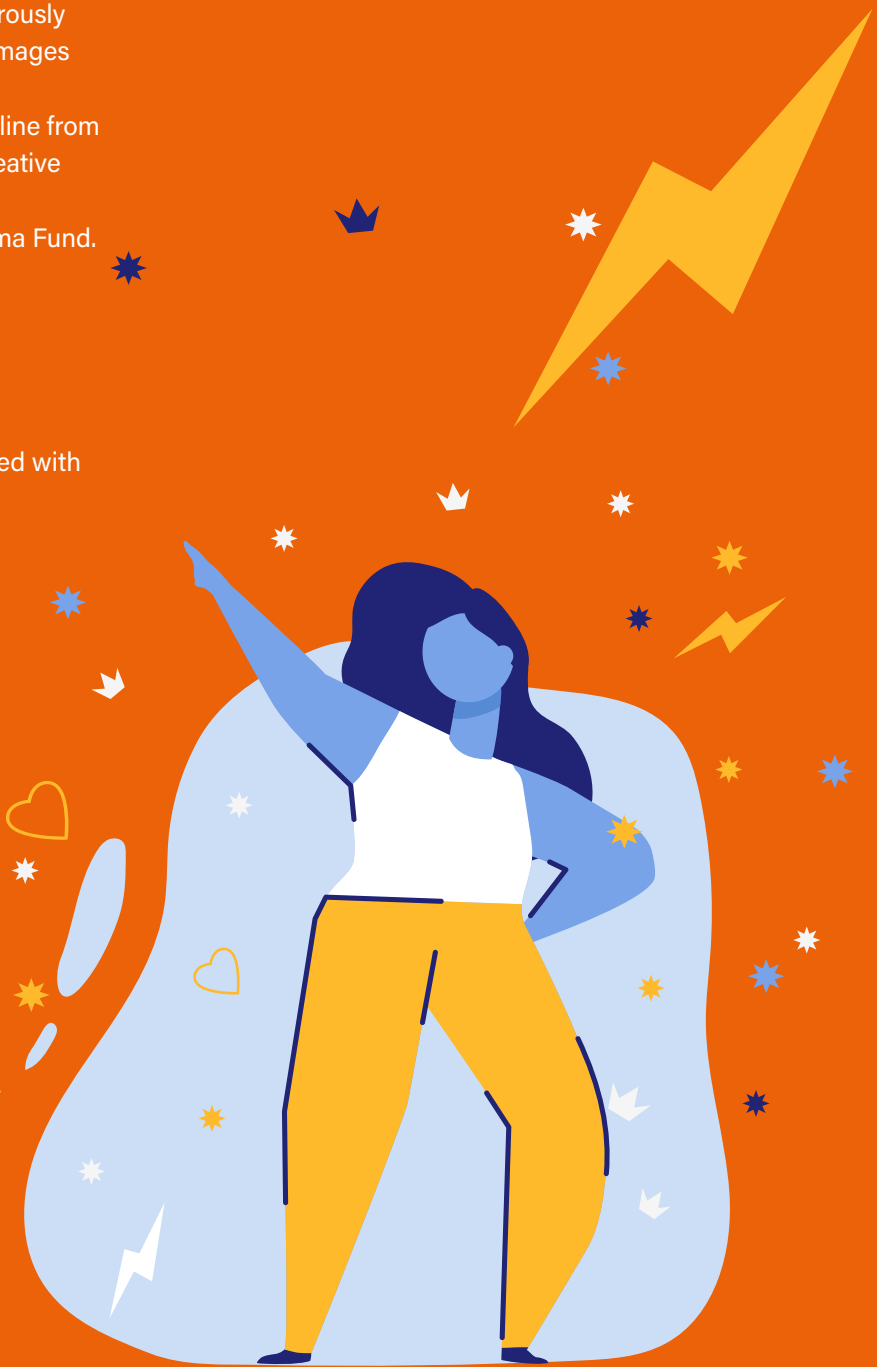
A special note of thanks to Jacqui and Caroline from The Menopause Warriors, The Women's Creative Company, MILK Café, GoMA Library, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde Anti-Stigma Fund.

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All direct quotes from the group are indicated with the use of inverted commas.



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Over the course of 8 weeks a group of women and non-binary people from Glasgow met to share their lived experiences of perimenopausal and menopausal mental health. We discussed and debated. We laughed, cried, and got angry as we tried to unpick the tight knots of stigma associated with this physiological process that affects around half the global population. The more we talked, the more determined we became to share our stories to educate others, and help improve the lives of those yet to experience it.

This booklet is a collection of images, creative writing and direct quotes from the group on the topic of perimenopausal and menopausal mental health.

What we're dealing with

Here's a list of the most common perimenopausal and menopausal mental health symptoms.

- **Low mood**
- **Anxiety**
- **Crying spells**
- **Irritability**
- **Mood swings**
- **Loss of confidence**
- **Reduced self-esteem**
- **Brain fog**
- **Loss of interest in sex/difficulty in experiencing arousal**
- **Feeling tense or nervous**
- **Memory problems**
- **Panic attacks**
- **Difficulty concentrating**
- **Loss of interest in most things**
- **Feeling unhappy or depressed**



And here's a list of the most common physical symptoms of the perimenopause and menopause, which we agreed can actually cause or exacerbate the psychological ones.

- **Dry or itchy skin, skin conditions**
- **Night sweats**
- **Thinning hair/ loss of hair**
- **Change in menstrual cycle**
- **Weight gain**
- **Allergies**
- **Hot flushes**
- **Heart Palpitations**
- **Insomnia**
- **Fatigue**
- **Feeling dizzy or faint**
- **Headaches**
- **Tinnitus**
- **Dry mouth and eyes**
- **Sore gums**
- **Burning tongue**
- **Muscle and joint pains**
- **Breast pain**
- **Digestive problems - including bloating, constipation, diarrhoea, excessive flatulence**
- **Incontinence**
- **Breathing difficulties**
- **Urine leakage**
- **Vaginal dryness**
- **Painful sex**

These lists of symptoms are not exhaustive. Everyone's experience of the perimenopause and menopause is entirely unique. The age range of our group spanned 4 decades.

Beginnings

"I remember mine's starting exactly, I was 48 and I didn't really put it down to that at the time, but it sticks in my mind. My husband was watching football on the telly downstairs, and I went upstairs to watch 'Location, Location, Location' and just as it was finishing, I thought 'I feel a wee bit odd' and all I could think of was, 'I need to get out of the house!'. I was kind of warm and I ran down the stairs and opened the back door and I got the air and that was better. I didn't feel faint or anything, I just had to get out. It was claustrophobia, I started to get that."

"I've been menopausal for a really long time because I had a hysterectomy and so I had an early menopause in my 30s. One of the first symptoms I had was forgetting words, but I didn't realise it at the time and I was really worried because I have always had quite a good memory, and I used to work in libraries so I used to be able to remember these very long codes for books and then all off a sudden, it was like really common words were hard to recall."

"My relationship broke up because my personality changed, but I had no idea it was perimenopause. My doctor just kept offering antidepressants. The way I can describe it is that all of a sudden it was as if I was in grief, I just became really unhappy almost overnight. Then I had to find another house. "

"Perimenopause and menopause sneaks up on you."

"I had heard of the menopause obviously but it's maybe only in the last 2 years I ever heard the term perimenopause, cos when you think of menopause you think of women in their 50s, 'They're dried up, they're going nuts,' that's what people say isn't it? But when it first came around for me it was a couple of years ago and I was losing the plot, I couldn't think, I couldn't focus, I was questioning myself, all the things I know now are really common. But when I went to my doctor who was around the same age as me, 49, the first thing she said was 'Antidepressants! You'll be fine, you've had a breakdown,' and she signed me off work. And when I went back to see her, ready to start work again after doing my own research and watching the Davina documentary, I asked her, 'Could it be perimenopause?', and she rolled her eyes, but she said 'Oh what age are you? I hadn't thought of that.'"



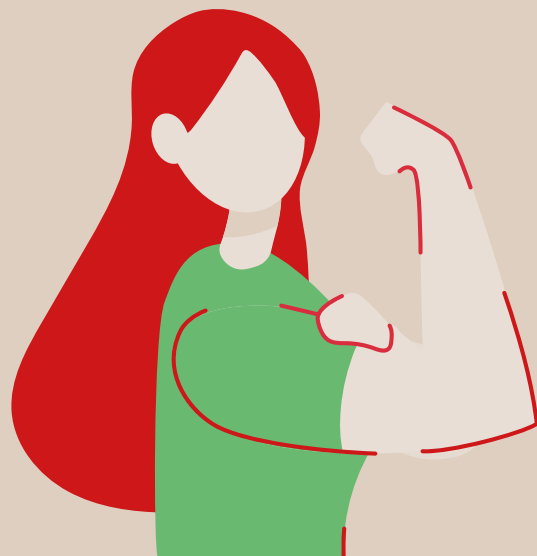
"Some women are kind of like, if they haven't experienced it in the same way, they can't understand it. You should just be able to get on with it, cos they did, or it wasn't a problem for them, 'Och, just a wee flush here and there.'"

"I'm on a chemically induced menopause so my doctors can actually work out what is wrong with me and if it's maybe endometriosis. I've had a lot of fatigue and I'm just trying to fight the feelings of being useless cos I'm not working at the moment and my partner has been working long 40hr weeks. We joke about me being the housewife but I can't even really do that, so we have to share the chores out as well. I'm trying to rest and relax and also trying to fight the guilt of that. Older women like my mum who have gone through the menopause 'naturally' don't see me as going through the same experience. There's not been much empathy."

"I'm perimenopausal, and it was somebody else who realised that about me, but at no point over the last several years of going to the doctors with different symptoms – did any of them say that's what it could be."

"I have been menopausal for 2 years now and at 27 I don't know anyone going through the same thing."

"I'm at the other end of it now, I've become complacent and numb, but getting together with others going through the same thing you realise, 'I'm in there somewhere.' You feel like you've lost yourself for so long and you forget you're allowed to think, allowed to have a memory, allowed to even say that out loud, that you didn't feel right. You do become numb and then you think, 'Oh this could have been so different for me if I'd asked for more help 13 years ago.'"



This is me in my house smashing plates because I felt trapped. Even stuff that we'd saved up for for ages, I would just smash it. Sometimes I'd wish I hadn't done it and then there was stuff... I was glad that I'd done it. And I wasn't the only one. We all did it. We all smashed plates.



Anxiety and The Rage

"Irritability, that's been a big one at work. Huge! People who are doing really simple things that ordinarily wouldn't bother me, I'm having to go into the changing room at work and kick lumps out of the changing room, and I know I'm being completely irrational, but I just can't shake the madness and the anger. It's been quite horrendous."

"Normally, when you're worried about something you can do some breathing or something and try and talk your head out of it basically. For some reason the anxiety you get with the menopause, nothing is going to stop that once it starts. It's away and it's running with you. And it's quite scary cos because it's so uncontrollable, it really does make you feel like you're losing your mind a wee bit. And then you don't get enough sleep which leads to more anxiety, and you're stuck in this sleeplessness anxiety loop."

"I was getting really crabbit. I'd snap at the ticket inspector in the station and I'd get so embarrassed cos she was only doing her job. I'd lose it and be so rude to her just because she asked me for my ticket, but because I couldn't find my ticket and couldn't remember where I'd put it, I'd lose it. I'd go from 0 to 100 in the space of a second. Then you internalise it and think 'Oh my God why am I being like this?', and then the guilt and the self-loathing sets in."

"It's not linear. It's not a slow gradual decline. One minute you feel absolutely fine and the next minute you're a raging bull and then you're crying. It fluctuates so much that you can't predict how it's going to be."

"When I've got the rage or my mood is really bad, there's a wee voice in my head telling me I'm being crazy and I need to take time out and calm down and then there's the big loud voice telling me to let it all out otherwise I'll explode."

"When it comes to stress and anxiety, anything you experienced before the menopause you get it again but it's as if the volume has been turned up by 1000 per cent. Over thinking, catastrophizing, doom thinking."

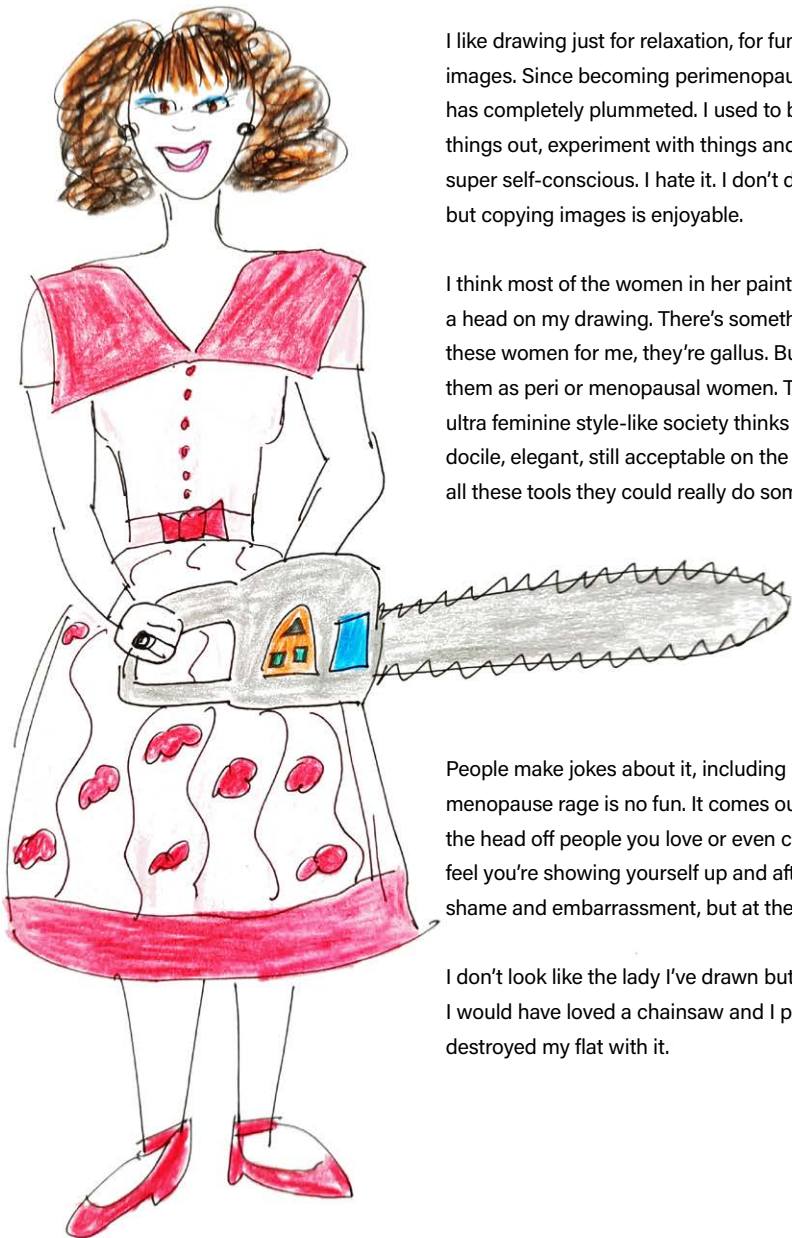
There's this brilliant artist from the States and she paints pictures of women in flouncy dresses holding power tools and gardening tools. The images make me think of Stepford wives who've forgotten to take their HRT. I love them!

I like drawing just for relaxation, for fun. I tried to copy one of the images. Since becoming perimenopausal my self-confidence has completely plummeted. I used to be quite happy to try things out, experiment with things and not worry. Now I'm super self-conscious. I hate it. I don't draw from my imagination, but copying images is enjoyable.

I think most of the women in her paintings are headless. I put a head on my drawing. There's something Glaswegian about these women for me, they're gallus. But I also like to think of them as peri or menopausal women. They're dressed in an ultra feminine style-like society thinks we should be at this age; docile, elegant, still acceptable on the eye. But they're holding all these tools they could really do some damage with.

People make jokes about it, including myself, but having the menopause rage is no fun. It comes out of nowhere. You bite the head off people you love or even complete strangers. You feel you're showing yourself up and after there's all the guilt and shame and embarrassment, but at the time it's uncontrollable.

I don't look like the lady I've drawn but there have been times I would have loved a chainsaw and I probably would have destroyed my flat with it.



Heritage

"My mum never spoke about it. I don't think they did in those days. But when I think back, cos now it's so out there, my mum would have an extra drink. And I'd think 'Well that's not like my mum.'. Wee things... the house wasn't getting tidied, and I've always been a clean freak even at that age so if my friends were coming over I'd do the tidying and hope that mum was ok. When I think back, I think that was my mum going through 'The Change'-that's what they used to call it but she would never have told you. She would never discuss menopause."

"I'm 49 and you look back and remember your mother, your grandmother or friends of the family suffering through it and it was always like 'Shhh! Don't talk about it.'"

"She had always been so capable, one of those women who was always ten steps ahead. I literally used to run behind her to catch up, but the menopause hit my mum like a ton of bricks and I watched her become so vulnerable and fearful. I couldn't identify with this new her. I was used to the powerhouse. I don't think I offered her enough support at the time. I know I didn't, she's become quite reclusive. I should have persevered more. It must have been so lonely going through all of that alone. Now I'm perimenopausal and sometimes I really hate the person I seem to be changing into: angry, disorganised, fearful, anxious. I have to ask the question, a generation down the line, what's really changed for us in terms of support?"

"I started talking to my doctor when I was only 43 and he's the one that's on the watch out for mental health attachments cos I said to him 'For my mum it was not a good time and I don't want to live through that myself.'"

"My mother had a terrible time with her menopause, but I never knew about it because she saw it as shameful."

"My mum had cancer and it got mistaken for menopause. I think there are a lot of crossovers of symptoms for other health conditions and that's why we end up not talking about some of the aspects of it, because we don't want stuff like that to happen to us, so we bury away all the menopause symptoms. We don't want to talk about it if we feel a bit mental because people tell us we're mental all the time as women."

"It's not just stigma about the menopause, it's stigma about periods, it's stigma about a woman who enjoys sex, it's stigma about a baby coming out of your vagina, it's stigma about breast-feeding, it's stigma about a woman who doesn't want a baby coming out of her vagina! If you're a woman there's just stigma full stop!"



Revered Instead of Feared

Ah'm knackered. Shattered. Exhausted. Scunnered. Ah jist want peace.
The weans havnae stopped aw day. No had 5 minutes tae masel.
Lay doon on the lounger for a wee rest, ootside the gaff.
Slipped aff ma bra, turned down the straps on ma top,
cos o the sun but.

Too hot for me this weather.

Jist rested ma eyes for a minute when
There's this wumman's voice come up tae the gate-

"Your form," she says

"Your form is wonderful."

[An ahm thinkin, "you frae the dole?"]

But ah squints at her, under ma haun, an says,

"oh aye, whit form?"

"Your curves, like a Willendorf Venus."

"A whit? Hen, only Venus ah huv is they shite razors, do ah look like ahm frae

Bananarama?"

She laughs, no wan o they snorty, condescending laughs that posh folk usually do,
a proper earthy chuckle.

"I know this sounds weird, but I'm an art student, would you pose for me?"

"Aye that is weird- money in it?"

"of course, I'll pay you, just a couple of hours, going rate for an artist's model is £15 an

hour, so say £40?"

[Ahm thinkin, "easy money, 40 quid tae sit about" but ah huv tae think o the weans.]

"Ahm no getting ma kit aff"

"No - nothing you feel uncomfortable with, there's a form you can sign, a Disclaimer"

"aye, well, Ahm a Broo claimer, as long as it's cash but, no wantin the social sanctionin me."

So here's me, 2 weeks later, at the Art School.

She gies me a blanket hing, to wear, cos it's a bit o a riddy, tae be honest.

"You'll no show ma face?"

"No, it's a pottery model, like a sculpture, I'm not that good."

So Ahm stretched oot like wan o they wummin in the etchings.

Rubenesque?

Lying on ma side,

[thinkin "This is rare, no noise, no weans, no housework, just gettin tae lie wi ma thoughts."]

But,

about 20 minutes in Ah feels it.

The rush.

Ah know what this is.

Bloody flush.

The panic. The sweats. The fear.

"Scuse me hen, scuse me- Ah know Ah said 'naw' but, can Ah move the hingmy, Ahm, Ahm
bloody roastin."

"Ok, but only if you're sure, that's no bother, it's early in the process, it can still be changed"

So there's me,
baps oot,
blanket is noo across ma waist an legs,

[no way is ma fat arse gettin exposed]
wonderin how long this will really take,
but it's amazin where yer pride an shame goes when the panic an heat takes ye.

It's a few months before Ah hear frae her again. Would I come to the exhibition?

"Well, only if no-one knows it's me but"

"No-one will know unless you tell them," she laughs.

So Ah goes, to the Art School.
Feel like Ahm sneaking in somewhere Ah shouldnae.
There's wine,
there's wee stupid bits o burgers that wouldnae feed a cat,
vegan of course.
There's posh folk. University folk.
Talking.
They always like the sound o their own voices, eh?

"The form is so reminiscent of a prehistoric goddess..."

"A prurient view of motherhood and the essence of..."

"Sekhmet, the lioness, a sleeping warrior..."

"Of course in the time of Rubens the curved female form of the goddess was seen as healthy"

Should Ah tell them it's aw pish-
It's just a wee Glesga wummin havin a flush?

But from somewhere,
deep inside,
from the essence of my being comes the words-

"I think you'll find that this piece is reminiscent of the Hal Saflieni Hypogeum Goddess, and I've
always thought of that as the earliest representation of menopause."

Cos wee menopausal wummin frae Glesga read books too.

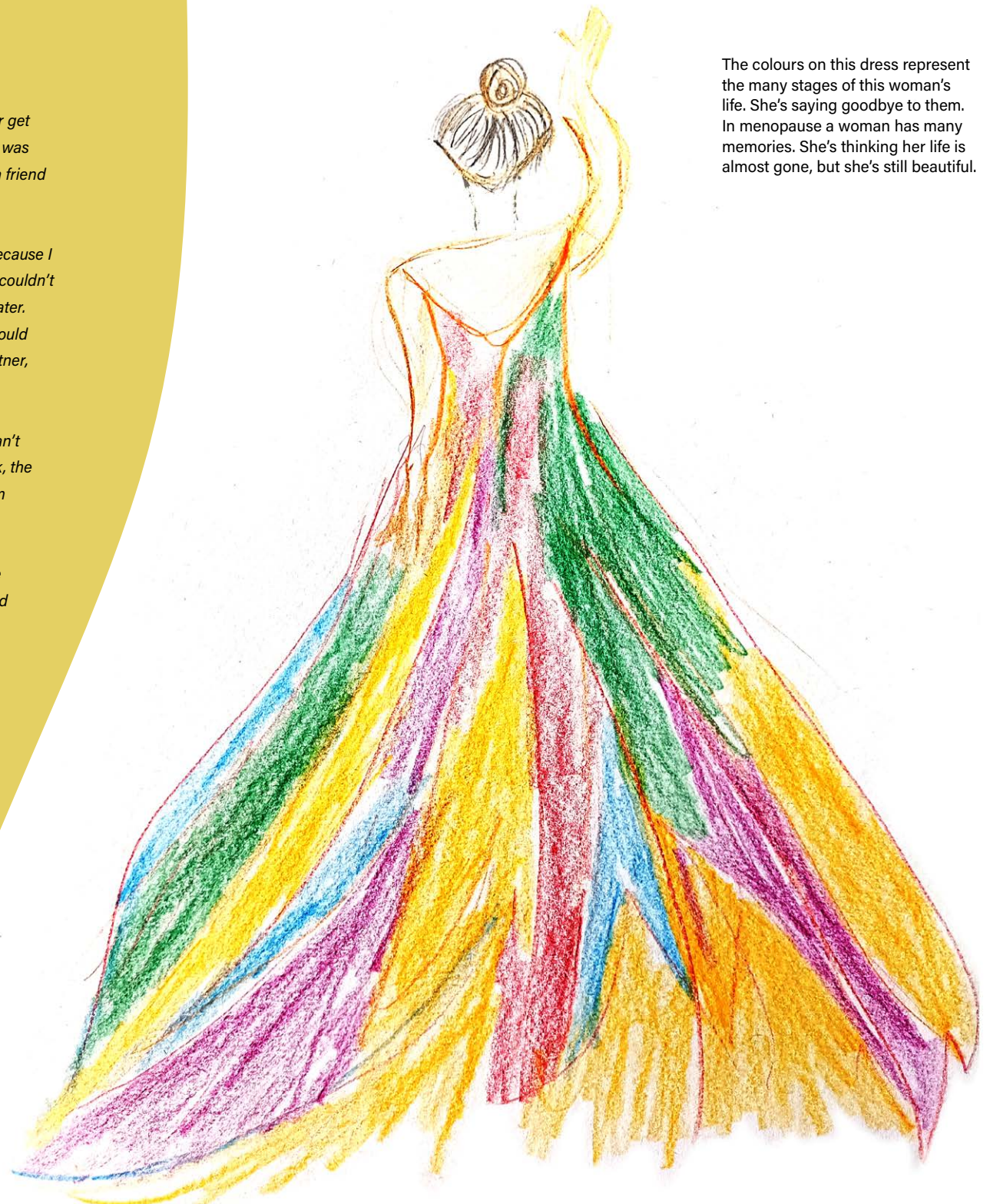
Collective Memory

"When I was forgetting things, a few women that I knew would say to me, 'You better get checked, I think you've got dementia,' and that was friends that said that to me and I was shocked, and it really scared me cos I don't think they were menopausal. But when a friend says it, you think to yourself, 'Is that what it is?'"

"You're scared to learn anything new. I used to really enjoy studying but I stopped because I thought 'I won't retain it, so what's the point?' I used to enjoy going to quizzes but I couldn't remember anything, any of the answers, and then I'd get them, maybe half an hour later. So, I stopped going to quizzes. And I'd be scared to start studying now, because it would reinforce bad memories. I can't even remember what books I've read. I say to my partner, 'Have I read that?'. It's horrible."

"I'm struggling to find words again; I've taken to describing people at work when I can't remember their name... you just can't find the words. I was just getting my brain back, the low mood and anxiety had passed but now I can't sleep, or I have night sweats or I'm finding words difficult. You just fix one thing and then it's something else."

"I've noticed myself becoming a lot quieter than I ever was and that's partly because when I get mid conversation, I forget what I'm saying obviously with the brain fog and the forgetfulness and then I feel incredibly stupid."



The colours on this dress represent the many stages of this woman's life. She's saying goodbye to them. In menopause a woman has many memories. She's thinking her life is almost gone, but she's still beautiful.

In The Workplace

"Just now we're meant to be so inclusive in our work environments and if I went into a meeting and started with 'Everyone, I'm dyslexic, I might sometimes need some help.', that would be perfectly acceptable and people would make allowances. If someone said 'I'm hard of hearing, could you help me in this?', people would make allowances of course! Imagine a world where you could just be like 'I'm menopausal currently, can you please help me with some things?' "

"So many other health conditions are affected by menopause. Since menopause I can't walk, and I used to go on big hikes and work 60hr weeks."

"Now I'm at a point that in work, I'll just stop and not even engage in the conversation sometimes because I've seen the rolling of the eyes and stuff when I've got mid flow then completely forgot and I think to myself 'You sounded like a complete idiot there!' "

"We do a lot of technical things in my work, things I know I could do with my eyes shut. But now I get anxious. If I give myself any time to think about it, I'll back out of it and say 'No, I can't do that.' Or I'll make an excuse to get somebody else to do it. There's that wee bit in my brain that says, 'No. You're going to muck that up.' "

"When I was off sick my doctor just put it down as anxiety and depression, not perimenopause and I'm glad, because if it came to me applying for a promotion, my boss wouldn't consider me with that on my record."

"I've got a stressful job: I code, I program and I wasn't doing the job I knew I could do. The manager I knew well had retired and there was nobody in place, so I found myself on the phone to this line manager who I'd never met. I had an extreme anxiety attack and panic, serious panic, and he told me to take an hour off. An hour! So, I phoned the doctor who signed me off and then I called the manager back and he laughed! He said, 'I don't know how to deal with this, I don't know what you're going through but whatever you need that's fine.', but he couldn't get off the phone quick enough and I don't blame him. He didn't have the tools or the skills to deal with it, but it didn't help me either."

"All the male presidents and prime ministers in the world are all 50 years old if they're a day, that's their peak of career and that age is when women are often forced to give up."

"If I'd got some help at 50 when it had all started, my life would have been so different. I wouldn't have had to give up my job, and I would have had a bigger pension cos now I'll have to rely completely on benefits."

Self-care for the Scunnered and Flustered

You do you- what's self-care for some is torture for others. You'll get no hippy candle and breathing advice from me.

Find space for a good greet- bottling up leads to explosions and regrets.

Singing is better than screaming, even if you are out of tune.

Embrace the flush rush, if it makes you want to run? Run! Move! Shake it off!

Kitchen discos mean you can dance with no-one watching.

Buy those expensive cotton sheets, they are self-care for Sweaty Bettys.

In the olden days most people never had 8 hours straight sleep, so stop worrying about it and making insomnia worse! Get up! Clean, read a book, write down your thoughts, make a hot drink, prep for tomorrow, whatever works for you. Guaranteed better than lying awake worrying about how you are not sleeping, and you'll have more "me time" to (nap) relax after work if you clean the bathroom for 30 minutes at 3am.

Get your hair cut short, more trips to the hairdresser's but you deserve to be comfortable & to spend that hour a month focussing on yourself.

Eat more of what makes you happy! No point in counting every mouthful if you are going to be thicker round the waist anyway?

Find something you wanted to do when you were wee but never had the time. And go do it!

Stick on an extra-large pad & go a walk up a hill- fresh air is good for flushes.

Do more of the things that you are naturally good at, to build self-esteem.

Make time to laugh. If you don't laugh, you'll greet.

Stop feeling guilty for things you couldn't do.

Say "No!" more often. Sometimes feeling it's a bad day is a good enough excuse to take a bit of time for yourself.

If you don't think you are important, then no-one else will. Speak up!

Healthcare, Self Care

"There's so much in the media just now about how there's all these extra people over 50 and they're claiming benefits and they're all women, and you think, 'But that's because menopause can be that bad for people!' But they've also raised the pension age so of course we're on benefits cos we can't claim our pension! Also there's all this talk about 'Oh all these middle aged women are on painkillers and sleeping tablets.' Have you actually any idea about how bad the menopause can be?"

"I talk about my anxiety, my panic, my depression, how I feel about my menopause. I speak to everybody about it. They must be fed up to the back teeth! But you know what, you have to get it out there!"

"Facing repeated negative responses to your requests for good healthcare makes you on the defensive and also makes you question if no one actually cares about women's health?"

"The anxiety for me was crippling and not one doctor, and I went to see a lot of doctors, said that's what it was, the menopause. And I thought, 'What are we women putting up with all the time?'"

"There's been a huge influx of products I've seen on online and it's all about how you look. Menopausal hair products, menopausal creams, stuff for you hair, skin, nails, and then there's the vitamins, collagen, supplements to help you sleep. Like everybody else probably, I've read various books and articles and they advise us to take this supplement, that supplement, but it's an industry. There's people making millions out of our vulnerability."

"Accessing health care is really, really difficult because you're self-stigmatising your own symptoms. You're thinking 'Oh well everybody has that, I must be overreacting, it's not a critical problem, it's just my mental health.' Then you don't see a doctor. You think, 'Everybody else is coping with this, why am I not?'"

Feral
adjective
1. (especially of an animal) in a wild state, especially after escape from captivity or domestication.
"a feral cat"

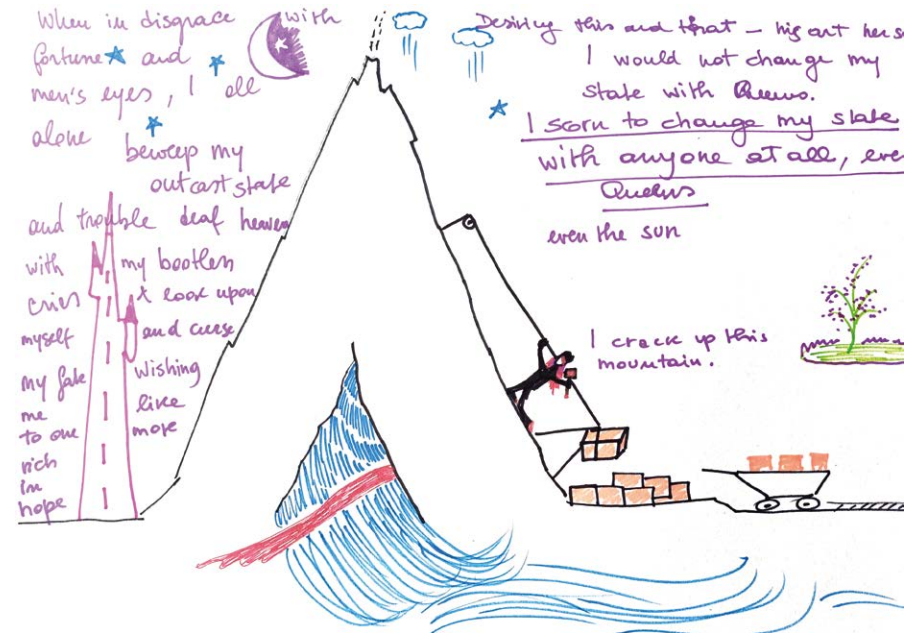


"What we're doing is, we're trying to empower ourselves. This could be what I'm feeling? I'm going to look into it, I'm going to read about these things, I'm going to get knowledge and I'm going to make informed decisions about my care and my health. I'm going to take responsibility for it. I'm going to speak to my medical practitioner and say, 'This is how I'm feeling, this is what I think I need, can you please help me?'. And they don't seem to like it, cos they just think, 'Another Davina!'"

"When you've got a Prime Minister whose annual income is £4 million, he's not going to care about menopause prescriptions. It's not in his stratosphere. He sees no sense of urgency to push anything through parliament like recognising Menopause Leave and getting it done. And the parliamentary process is too slow, there's no such thing as immediate change. Topics have to be raised and questioned and debated and debated again. The MPs who are raising the subject and insisting that they are heard, are up against folk who are not struggling with the menopause. They don't care, they can all afford private treatment, they don't have to wait for months to be seen in clinics or wait for their HRT to be re stocked. They can all see the best doctors. There's such a lack of empathy and understanding in government. They've no desire to put themselves in the position of ordinary people who are struggling, and these attitudes drip down through society."

"I've been a bit more politically active since going through my menopause. If I think something is really shit I'll try and do something positive about it and I hope that my age and wisdom will be respected a wee bit, although it never is. I'm trying to use my experience to make things better for other people. You can make something positive out of a negative experience if you can get people to listen to you but sometimes it makes you feel extra shit when people still don't listen to you."

"Oh you've got to keep fighting. What happens when there are no supportive menopausal healthcare systems in place? It keeps women in their place!"





Glossary

Perimenopause: Fluctuating hormone production in the body, leading to changes in your regular monthly period and the experience of one or many menopausal symptoms. This can last for up to 10 years until menstruation completely stops.

Menopause: When 12 months have passed since your last period.

Postmenopausal: When you no longer have periods, however you might still experience menopausal symptoms.

Oestrogen: Regulates the menstrual cycle and impacts women's health in a variety of ways, from protection against memory loss and dementia, to management of sleep. It also affects the heart and blood vessels, bones, breasts, skin, hair, and the brain. This hormone protects emotional wellbeing. Oestrogen hormone is also produced by men.

Progesterone: Progesterone is a natural hormone produced in the ovaries after ovulation. It is necessary for pregnancy because it gets the womb (uterus) ready to accept, implant, and maintain a fertilized egg. Progesterone hormone is also produced by men.

Testosterone: Testosterone is produced in the ovaries. It helps with the growth, maintenance, and repair of the reproductive tissues, as well as with bone mass and human behaviours. Testosterone hormone is also produced by men.

H.R.T: Hormone Replacement Therapy, a way to treat perimenopausal and menopausal symptoms by replacing the fluctuating hormones. If you still have a womb (uterus), both Oestrogen and Progesterone are prescribed. Testosterone can also be added to your HRT treatment.

Endometriosis: A chronic disease in which cells similar to the lining of the uterus, grow outside the uterus, It causes severe pain during periods, sexual intercourse, bowel movements and/or urination and can also lead to depression, anxiety, and infertility.

Hysterectomy: A surgical operation which removes all or part of the womb (uterus).

Useful Resources

Menopause Matters- up to date info about symptoms and treatments <https://www.menopausematters.co.uk/>

Daisy Network- information and support for premature menopause diagnosis <https://www.daisynetwork.org.uk/>

Queer Menopause Collective- seeks to raise awareness on the issues facing LGBTQIA+ people on the issues of perimenopause and menopause <https://www.queermenopause.com/>

The Menopause Charity- evidence based info and advice <https://themenopausecharity.org>

Menopause Support - a not for profit community interest company, home of the #MakeMenopauseMatter campaign <https://menopausesupport.co.uk/>

Helplines

The Counselling Helpline- when you need to talk about mental health, emotions, or a relationship problem. Call free on 0808 802 2088 (Mon- Thurs 9am-9pm, Fri 9am-4pm)

The Samaritans

Call free on 116 123 (24hrs a day, 7 days per week) or email jo@samaritans.org if you prefer to write down your thoughts and feelings (response time may be several days)

NHS Living Life- offers support to people in Scotland over the age of 16 through cognitive behavioural therapy. You can refer yourself for an assessment and if suitable you'll receive between 4-6 telephone sessions. Call free on 0800 328 9655 (Monday to Friday: 1pm - 9pm).

Breathing Space- a confidential phoneline for anyone in Scotland over 16yrs, who is anxious, feeling low or depressed. Call free on 0800 83 85 87 (Monday-Thursday 6pm to 2am, Friday 6pm-Monday 6am)



#at Saflieni Hypogrom Goddess Glasgow Version.



The Village Storytelling Centre

Langton Halls, 69 Langton Road, Pollok, Glasgow, G53 5DD

T: 0141 882 3025



www.villagestorytelling.org.uk