

# We work, we play, we change: Women's lived experience of the transition to natural menopause

PhD Research Study

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## Background:

- PhD Project.
- RN Adult & Mental Health with an interest in women's health.
- Average age of menopause is 51 years in UK (NCC-WCH 2015).
- 71.4% of women aged 16 to 64 years are now employed compared to 66.5% in 2008 therefore more women are likely to be working during the transition to and post menopause (ONS 2018).
- The NHS employs predominantly women (77%) many of whom may be working until retirement (NHS Digital 2017).

## Research question:

What are women's lived experiences of the transition to natural menopause?



## Objectives:

- To explore how women make sense of their transition to menopause and the meaning they attribute to their experiences within the context of their lives.
- To understand the shared perspectives of women as they transition to menopause.

# Design & methods:

- Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith 2009)
  - Phenomenology
  - Ideography
  - Hermeneutics
- Data collection – An in depth individual audio recorded interview.

With a focus on personal meaning and participants making sense of the phenomenon IPA as a methodology offered both structure and flexibility to explore individual nuanced experiences of the transition to natural menopause.

## Participant characteristics:

- Five women in healthcare or healthcare education.
- Aged: 45 to 58 years old, mean 52.4 years old.
- Post menopause: 1 to 10 years since last menstrual period (LMP), mean LMP 5.2 years.
- 3 participants were married, 1 divorced and 1 living with a partner.

# Data analysis:



# Findings: Higher Order Concepts



# Awareness of changes:

- *“I suppose it came as a little bit of a surprise so I wasn't sort of erm cognizant that I was coming towards the menopause coz it was quite early erm.. I think the first signs were when my periods became very heavy and it wasn't till then I realised that the menopause was happening I suppose..”* (Rose).
- *“I always had trouble with my periods, I had breakthrough bleeding which would cause anaemia and things like that erm but then that all sort of slowed down and then I'd miss a month to the point where I thought **“Oh My God I might be pregnant”** (Emma)*
- ***Losses: “I kind of assumed that it was something that lasted for a year or two and then it went and you went back to normal”*** (Kate)

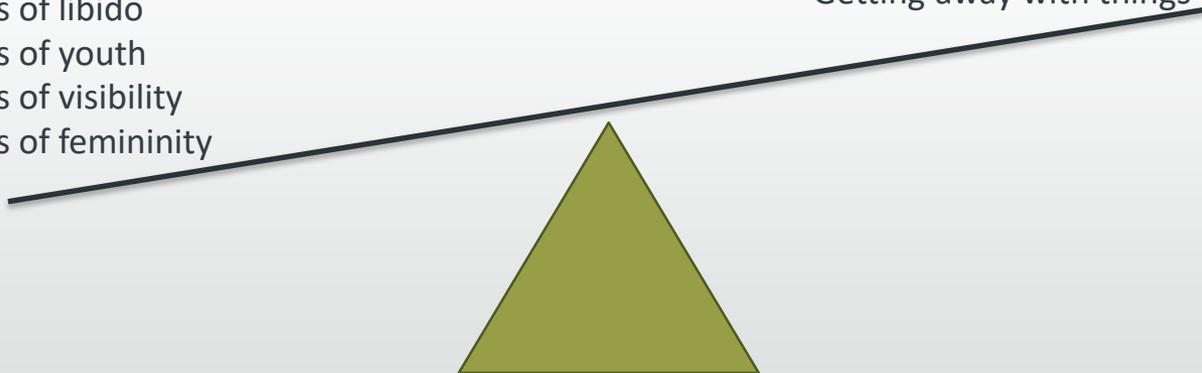
# Losses & Gains as participants' changed

## Losses:

- Dryness
- Skin condition
- Sleep
- Energy
- Health
- Physical Strength
- Bladder responsiveness
- Change in vaginal secretions
- Reduced self confidence
- Increased emotions
- Embarrassment
- Change in body shape
- Loss of libido
- Loss of youth
- Loss of visibility
- Loss of femininity

## Gains:

- Freedom from menstruation
- Freedom from contraception
- Freedom from reproductive expectations
- Increased self confidence
- Increased self awareness
- A focus on self
- Less worried about upsetting people
- *"Becoming yourself"* (Kate)
- Liberation from expected behaviour
- *"Right to say how I feel"* (Emma)
- Argumentative streak
- Getting away with things



# Losses:

- *"I'm not firing on all cylinders all the time and I do get tired, I like a siesta now whereas it never entered my head, I'd be up doing the horses then go home, do the housework so yeah it's just it's very strange.." (Emma).*
- *"It's just I'm generally more tired but it also feels like physical energy levels, which are kind of different from being tired aren't they? If you, you kinda feel a bit tired you think "Oh maybe I won't do something I was going to do, I'll leave it for tomorrow" (Kate)*
- *"I'd had very heavy and quite painful periods in my teens and early twenties so it was a bit of a return to that, I thought 'mmm something's changed'" (Kate)*
- *"It [ skin] was always in good condition now it's [skin] like dry beyond belief and I get spots! I mean what is that about? [laughs] Teenage spots!" (Lisa)*

## Emotional losses:

- *“I think it was very noticeable to other people so I'd be working kind of with one person in a room very closely and I'd kinda feel like they [the other person] were noticing it [the sweating] and it was a bit distracting and it was a bit, I dunno, I felt a bit like, needed to go home and sniff your armpits.....You know, three showers a day [laughs] and that kinda thing and do I, you know, do I smell and am I not noticing?” (Kate)*
- *“you know it's [hot flush] gotta be volcanic but that is how it makes you feel” (Lisa).*
- *“They [not making decision] would be a repressed side of me and that would cause anxiety and that was even fuelling flushes sometimes because I was like this pressure cooker.. **building up** and building up” (Emma:672).*

# Becoming an older woman

- *“I was thinking about it [menopause] the other day actually erm and I wasn't expecting that [to feel older] and I think in my head I knew it [menopause] was going to happen but I wasn't expecting to feel so old afterwards” (Rose)*
- *“There is so much cultural baggage around it [menopause] and all the cultural baggage around getting older but then you know there's the specific stuff about women and their fertility and their sexuality and all that stuff that erm.....I suppose I'm very aware of the prejudices you know there's a kind thing that you get to a certain age and become invisible” (Kate)*

**Gains:** *Freedom from “cultural baggage...to feel that you’re becoming yourself finally” (Kate)*

- *“the cessation of periods erm you know sometimes when I go to the toilets at work and I see a little spot of blood at the bottom I think 'thank god I don't have to cope with that anymore' you know erm so that that was a [plus]” (Rose)*
- *“Yeah... no periods which **is great** [emphasis]” (Lisa)*

# Liberation from social expectations

- *“so you know you do kind of feel that you're becoming yourself finally and you're not hemmed in anymore by all those expectations and having to conform to what people want you to be” (Kate)*
- *“It wasn't that I couldn't of controlled it... [becoming angry] I didn't want to [laughs] it was like sort of pleasant for me in a way [laughs] that sort of you know I would throw my toys out the pram and not really worry.” (Rose)*

## Time for me

- *I think "just say no" or don't answer the phone or no I've gotta answer it because [something might have happened] I've got to juggle all these balls and I can do this [keep juggling] and I'm just starting to [take time], for myself" (Emma:)*
- *"it's just time for me to enjoy myself, to do [whatever], that's how I look at it, it's my time now and if the menopause is part of that, which it is, then you know then, then that's what it is" (Lisa)*

## Potential Impact:

- 77% of NHS staff are female, of these 89% work in nursing and health visiting (NHS Digital 2017).
- The individualised challenges of midlife women need to be recognised by employers.
- Consideration needs to be given to:
  - Being able to access information, advice & support
  - Environment
  - Clothing/uniforms
  - Washroom facilities
  - Flexible working

**Thank you for listening.**

**Any questions please?**

## References & Additional Information

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