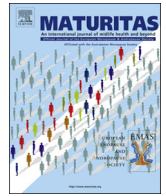




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## Menopause Cafés: It's good to talk

*'The menopause is such an isolating experience which saps your confidence and which left me feeling quite useless and helpless.*

*Attending Menopause Cafes has enabled me to share my experiences with both laughter and tears, and be visible in our workplaces and communities. I now know that it's 'not just me' and I'm part of a network who really understand.'*

*'I headed homewards feeling more positive and buoyed by the entire experience. What an amazing group of people. The sheer energy in the room showed that we are all far from a spent force, and in fact, quite the contrary.'*

These are comments from some of the 2000+ participants in the 250+ Menopause Café which have taken place in the UK and Canada since the first one was held in Perth, Scotland in June 2017.

### 1. What is a Menopause Café®?

A Menopause Café® is a pop-up event, hosted by volunteers where people, often strangers, gather to drink tea, eat cake and talk menopause. It is offered in accordance with the following principles:

- in an accessible, respectful and confidential space
- open to all, regardless of gender or age
- with no intention of leading people to any conclusion, product or course of action
- on a not-for-profit basis

There are no experts and no expectations; topics are generated by the participants, who swap stories, questions, tips, tears and laughter. These are not support groups and there are no speakers. About 2% of participants identify as male.

Menopause Café® follows a therapeutic model as opposed to the medical model. While recognising the importance of accurate information provided by medical profession sites, the aim of a Café is different. The purpose is to break taboos around the menopause by creating space for conversations. A Café empowers participants to seek out information themselves and draw their own conclusions. Some want a one-size fits all “solution” to their menopause and are disappointed by what we offer. Others find it supportive to share their questions and experiences. I believe our events encourage the ancient use of oral storytelling and sharing experiences as a means of gaining knowledge and wisdom. Topics range from the physical, eg symptom relief, to the philosophical eg what does it mean to be an older woman in society today? What is my purpose in life now?

*“Persons in midlife rely strongly on their relationships with other people as support. Emotional and social support are closely interwoven, professional supports are known to be available, but they would rather rely on a network of support. They seek community.” [1]*

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Menopause Cafes build community. Volunteers sign a working agreement to join the social franchise. They find a venue and advertise the event. Venues are usually cafés, which offer a familiar environment for participants, conducive to conversation. The volunteers create a safe space bounded by the above principles. Participants gather at tables in small groups and every 20 min. or so are invited to move to a different table for a new conversation. Having space where we are genuinely listened to empathically, without judgement, is powerful [2]. This is the ideal environment at a Menopause Café. Of course, some participants are not able to hold such a space for others, which is another reason for moving tables regularly and for the volunteer hosts to facilitate.

*“What does it mean to hold space for someone else? It means that we are willing to walk alongside another person in whatever journey they're on without judging them, making them feel inadequate, trying to fix them, or trying to impact the outcome. When we hold space of other people, we open our hearts, offer unconditional support and let go of judgement and control.” [3]*

Menopause Café is a registered charity. The Menopause Café® model is based on the Death Café® model created by Jon Underwood and Sue Barksy Reid. It is a trade-marked term.

### 2. Why successful?

There is a need, due to taboos and ignorance around menopause. I believe women aged 30+ have been raised to hide all signs of menstruation, at work and at home. It's not surprising that having never talked much about periods, they find it hard to talk about the menopause. Perhaps it is also associated with some shame around ageing, or appearing less competent?

The timing is right: Menopause Cafes would not have been so popular if we had started them 10 or even 5 years earlier. Three factors contribute to their success: There has been a spate of celebrities talking about their menopause [4], which has helped to open the conversations. Also, there are increasing numbers of women aged 50–64 in work [5], so employers are realising the economic necessity of attracting, supporting and retaining this demographic. Menopause Cafes at Work are an accessible, low-cost part of becoming a menopause-supportive employer. Finally, parts of society are becoming more open which encourage less of a stiff-upper-lip, just-get-on-with-it approach eg Friendship Benches in Zimbabwe [6], post-natal support groups in Britain, the #MeToo movement. This reduces the stigma around mental health, making it easier to discuss the anxiety and depression which may occur around menopause. There is less shame about discussing sex, which can make it easier to talk about vaginal atrophy or reduced libido. The younger generation are more open in talking about menstrual health [7].

“Participants indicated that informal education about midlife, and coping with perimenopause and menopause would be helpful, either online or in person. Overall they sought support in a safe space from people that they could trust with their experiences.” [1]. We have created an online community in the form of a closed Facebook group, an open Facebook page and Twitter and Instagram accounts. There is a proliferation of online communities with many now aimed at menopausal or midlife women. These ease the sense of isolation which many women experience, as well as sharing information in an easily digestible manner.

“However, it was discovered that social change on a wider scale is needed in order for the overall societal attitude towards the menopause to become more positive and accepting.” [8]

### 3. Offshoots of Menopause Café

The conversations at Menopause Cafés can lead to political activism, to action in the workplace and to friendships. Some participants have become involved in the #MakeMenopauseMatter and Pausitivity campaigns. Over 30 employers, including universities, utility companies, government bodies and charities, have held a Menopause Café at Work (open only to employees) which often lead to menopause policies, support groups and speaker events. Another outcome is a decrease in loneliness through the companionship forged at Cafés, which sometimes leads to friendships outside the events. Watt(2019) [8] concluded that “social cohesion is an effective method of reducing loneliness and stigmatisation experienced by menopausal women, with the ‘Menopause Café’ appearing to be the most successful way to facilitate this.”

Menopause Cafes have led to the creation of women-only support groups (Edinburgh), of groups who hold regular speaker events about menopause (Lincoln, Hampshire, Nottingham) and to the world’s only Menopause Festival held annually in Perth since 2018. This latter event aims to “Break the silence and have a laugh” with a programme of seminars, workshops and entertainment. The next Menopause Festival, aka #FlushFest2020, will be held on May 29<sup>th</sup> & 30<sup>th</sup>.

### 4. Future plans

Our long-term aim is to become redundant, when menopause becomes an acceptable topic of ordinary conversation. Our short-term aims are to increase the number of men attending our events and to widen our spread geographically beyond the UK and Canada.

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### Declaration of Competing Interest

RW is the chair of Menopause Café® [www.menopausecafe.net](http://www.menopausecafe.net).

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