



Employee
Assistance
Programme



EAP Newsletter

The women's health edition

Issue 22
October 2023



Making People Better

The women's health edition

In this month's newsletter we talk about menopause and mental health, the link between mental and physical health, busting myths about back pain and supporting someone with breast cancer.

This newsletter includes information about sensitive and potentially triggering topics.

Menopause and mental health

World Menopause Day is held every year on the 18th of October. The purpose of the day is to raise awareness of the menopause and the support options available for improving health and wellbeing.



Breaking the menopause taboo

Menopause has long been seen as a taboo subject, leading many people to think little more about it than ‘women of a certain age’ getting hot, sweaty and flustered and reaching for the nearest thing to fan themselves with whatever comes to hand.

In reality, the menopause is much more than that - whilst some women experience a symptom-free menopause, others find it to be a very difficult time, significantly impacting them both physically and psychologically.

Menopause myths

Myth one: The menopause begins for everyone at 50

Whilst the average age for the menopause to start is 51, the menopause actually occurs anywhere from 45 to 55*. Some women even experience menopause before the age of 42, which is considered to be ‘early menopause’.

Myth two: The menopause is just hot flashes and night sweats

Although three-in-four women** do experience hot flashes that can go on for years throughout perimenopause and menopause, there are many other mental and physical symptoms that can occur during this time, including:



Anxiety



Anger and irritability



Muscle aches and joint pain



Depression



Forgetfulness



Reduced sex drive



Difficulty concentrating



Mood swings



Weight gain



Myth three: There's no way to treat the menopause

Whilst there is no way to prevent menopause - it's a natural event and usually a transition that women experience as they get older - there are different treatments available that can help women manage the symptoms of menopause.

If you or someone you know does need help to manage symptoms, support can be accessed through your GP practice.

Treatments and lifestyle changes to help manage symptoms may include:

- Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) - tablets, skin patches, gels and implants that relieve menopausal symptoms by replacing oestrogen
- Vaginal oestrogen preparations, lubricants and moisturisers for vaginal dryness
- Talking therapies including cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)
- Eating a healthy and balanced diet
- Building exercise into a daily routine
- Taking supplements such as vitamin B6 and vitamin D

Myth four: Symptoms will be the same through the entire menopause

Menopausal symptoms may change and evolve for individuals as they journey through the menopause. If they do, you or the person experiencing the menopause may want to consider trying different treatments or coping techniques.

Keeping a diary of menopausal symptoms including how and when they affect you can help you find the best treatment.



Myth five: The menopause is only a 'women's issue'

It's estimated that **13 million** - or around one-in-three women - are either currently going through, or have reached, the menopause. For every individual going through the menopause, there will be many who are indirectly affected including:

- **Partners, family members and friends**
- **Colleagues and employers** - one-in-10 women who worked during the menopause has left a job due to their symptoms and a quarter of employees experiencing menopause are likely to retire early because of it***
- **Economy** - a lack of menopause awareness and support is costing the UK close to £10 billion****
- **Those who do not identify as female including trans, non-binary and gender fluid people** - these are all communities that have suffered in silence when it comes to the menopause.

*NHS Inform ** HealthTalk.org *** Fawcett Society **** Balance Menopause

How to help someone who's managing menopause

We know that many people suffer physical and emotional symptoms with menopause and this can make it a difficult and complex time.

If someone you know is going through perimenopause or menopause, it's useful to know ways you can help them.



Educate yourself and learn more about menopause

Understanding more about what your loved one or colleague is going through is a really important step. Learn from trusted sources such as the www.nhs.uk, www.themenopausecharity.org, and our mental health experts at Vita Health Group.



Be patient

Menopause is a time of change and it may take some people a long time to come to terms with the changes they are experiencing. Be patient with those who are going through the transition.



Encourage an open dialogue about sex

Many people experience a loss of sexual desire or drive during menopause which can be very upsetting for both them and their partner. If you are supporting a partner who's experiencing menopause, it can really help to keep an open and non-judgemental dialogue about sex and be honest about the impact it's having.

There are many ways to show love and care towards a partner that do not involve sex.



Actively listen and be inquisitive

We've already learnt that everyone has a different experience of menopause, so it's important not to make assumptions about what someone is going through. Ask them about their symptoms, how they are feeling and what support they would like from you. Remember, not everyone will be ready or open to talking but letting them know you're there if they need will help to ensure they feel supported.



Help manage menopause symptoms

Encouragement can help an individual feel uplifted and empowered, particularly if they're struggling with self-esteem and low mood. Invite them to join you in activities such as walks, a yoga or stretch class or cooking a meal together.

Offer to be a sounding board so they can talk to you about the treatment options they've been offered and let them know you can accompany them to healthcare appointments if they'd like a buddy.

Understanding the link between mental and physical health

People with mental ill health may find that they experience migraines, headaches, fatigue and stomach problems. Whilst people who suffer a physical injury may find they suffer with low mood, sadness or anger.

Our minds and bodies are not separate so it's no surprise that mental ill health can impact your body and vice versa.

In fact, new research by King's College London has shown that people with mental health conditions can suffer from poorer physical health and have more age-related diseases than the general population.



How mental ill health can impact physical health

Low motivation and energy

Mental health problems can impact your energy, drive and motivation to look after yourself and exercise

Difficulty with planning and organising

If your mental health problem impacts concentration, you may find it tricky to arrange and/or attend medical appointments

Less likely to receive medical help

Your GP or another healthcare professional may think your physical symptoms are a consequence of mental illness and are less likely to investigate them further.

How does physical activity improve mental health?

Moving your body, even if it's just for five minutes, can have a positive impact on mental health. Here's how:



Stimulates the body and improves mood

Study-upon-study has proven that physical activity has a positive impact on our mood. A Mental Health Foundation study found that people felt more awake, calmer and more content after physical activity than people who were inactive.



Boosts self-esteem

Movement and physical activity can greatly impact how we feel about ourselves and our perceived self-worth. People with higher self-esteem tend to better manage stress.



Reduces stress

Exercise can have direct stress-busting benefits because it bumps the production of your brain's feel-good neurotransmitters called endorphins.

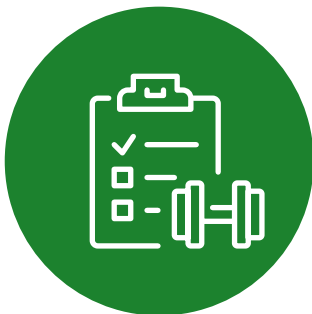


Manage depression and anxiety

Exercise is a fantastic tool for helping individuals to overcome depression and manage anxiety.

How to overcome barriers to exercise

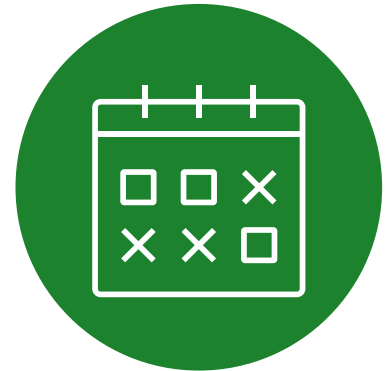
It can feel difficult to make changes to your life and it's normal to feel nervous about trying something new. However, there are a few things you can try to overcome the barriers that are standing in your way:



Set goals
and targets



Embed activities
into daily life



Schedule time
in your diary



Start small
and slow



Make the most
of the outdoors



Choose an activity
that you love, not
one that will feel
like a chore



Buddy up with a
friend or family
member

The myths and reality of back pain

Did you know...

Low back pain is the **single leading cause of disability worldwide** and the condition for which the greatest number of people may benefit from rehabilitation*.

The number of people leaving the workplace because of neck and back problems has **risen by 62,000** since 2019**.

Four in five adults experience low back pain at some point in their lives***.

* World Health Organisation ** ONS *** National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke

Three back pain myths, busted

More often than not, acute back pain comes on without any specific injury to your back. But whether it's acute or chronic, back pain can be distressing and prevent you from carrying out day-to-day activities.

Despite how common it is, there are many myths and misunderstandings about back pain that can prolong discomfort and delay recovery. If you suffer from back pain, it's important to understand the facts.

Here are three myths about back pain that our musculoskeletal experts regularly hear from patients:



Myth one: "Bed rest is best"

Although rest is important to recovery, the best thing to do is to carry on with normal activities, modify exercise and switch to low-impact exercises like walking and swimming. When a pain is related to nerve compression, a disc issue or joint degeneration, inactivity can worsen pain.



Myth two: "After tests and scans on my back, the results are normal. I must be imagining my back pain"

Your healthcare specialist may have carried out a series of tests to check for specific diseases and it's usually good news if your results are negative. But this does not mean your pain isn't real. Back pain can occur for a number of reasons and you are not imagining the pain you're feeling.



Myth three: "Surgery is the only solution for chronic back pain"

Back pain is most often caused by issues that do not require surgery. Non-surgical treatments such as physical therapy, medications, injections and lifestyle modifications are often effective in managing and reducing chronic back pain.



When should you seek help from a healthcare professional?

If your pain persists, becomes chronic (has lasted 12 weeks or longer) or you're worried about your back pain, contact your GP. They may refer you to a physiotherapist or a specialist spinal team to help with your recovery or investigate your condition further.

Breast cancer awareness

October marks the arrival of Breast Cancer Awareness Month, an awareness campaign where people all around the world show their support for everyone affected by breast cancer.



Eight symptoms of breast cancer



Puckering/dimpling



**Swelling in your armpit or
around your collarbone**



Lumps and thickening



Nipple discharge



**A sudden, unusual change
in size or shape**



**Nipple inversion and changes
in direction**



**A rash or crusting of the nipple
or surrounding area**



**Constant, unusual pain in
your breast or armpit**

How to support someone who's been diagnosed with breast cancer

It can be difficult to know how to support a friend, family member or colleague who's been diagnosed with breast cancer. But even small acts can go a long way.



Practical ways you can help

Side effects of the cancer, treatment and processing of a diagnosis can make it difficult for an individual to continue with everyday tasks. But it can be tricky to ask for help and some people may feel embarrassed about reaching out for support.

So, what can you do?

Instead of asking 'What can I do for you?' which is vague and can feel overwhelming for someone who is unwell, think about which tasks you can help them with and be more specific. It might be better to say, for example, 'Would you like me to cook some meals for you?' or 'I can pick the children up from school tomorrow - would that be helpful?'

"Would you like me to cook some meals for you?"

"I can pick the children up from school tomorrow - would that be helpful?"



Emotional ways you can help

It can be really difficult to know what to say and how best to speak to someone who's been diagnosed with breast cancer.

One of the best and most important ways you can support someone is to be with them and allow them to express their feelings.

It's important to know that a cancer diagnosis can trigger many different emotions including sadness, frustration and fear. Some people may feel angry and may direct this emotion at you. Remember that this is likely because they are upset with the diagnosis or the situation, not because they are upset with you.

"Do you mean that...?"

"I think you mean... Have I understood that correctly?"

Ways you can emotionally support someone:

- **Ensure they know you're actively listening to them.**
Make eye contact, nod and respond calmly
- **Check you've understood what they've said.**
Ask questions such as: 'Do you mean that...?' and 'I think you mean... Have I understood that correctly?'
- **Be inquisitive and encourage them to share.**
Ask questions such as: 'How did that make you feel?'
- **Avoid talking while they're talking.**
Although it can be tempting to jump in with suggestions and ideas, try to let the other person talk. Allow for silences and breaks in conversation and don't feel you need to rush the conversation along
- **Talk about everyday things.**
Sometimes people may prefer to have a conversation that isn't about cancer, especially if they're finding it all-consuming. It can bring some 'normality' into the everyday and help them feel the cancer isn't taking over their life.

There are other ways you can emotionally support someone if they do not want to talk:



Sit and watch a programme/film with them. Even if it's just for an hour, the very act of you being with them often helps people feel they are not alone.



Send a text message. Let them know you're thinking of them and are here when they need you. Let them know that you're not expecting a quick response from them.



Write a card or send a gift. A written note or card with words of encouragement and support can be a lovely surprise.

Men can get breast cancer too

Did you know...

Although it's very rare, it's important to **be aware**.

Around **370 men** are diagnosed with breast cancer each year in the UK.

Most men diagnosed with breast cancer are **over 60**.

The most common symptom is a **lump in the chest area** which is often painless.

Other symptoms may include:

- **Liquid**, sometimes called discharge, that comes from the nipple without squeezing and which may be blood-stained
- A **tender** or **inverted** (pulled in) nipple
- **Ulcers** (sores) on the chest or nipple area
- **Swelling** of the chest area and occasionally the lymph nodes under the arm.

*Breast Cancer Now



It's important to look after yourself

Supporting someone - a friend, relative or partner - through cancer and treatment can feel overwhelming and demanding. It's really important that you also make time to look after yourself.

Eat well, check in with yourself regularly and be honest with yourself about how you feel. If you're finding it difficult to support someone or become overwhelmed, try to speak to a friend, family member or a healthcare professional.

As well as your GP, there are some great resources and places that can give you additional support, including:

- **Breast Cancer Now** - [helpline](#), [online forum](#) and its [Someone Like Me service](#). Through the Someone Like Me service, Breast Cancer Now will match you with a trained volunteer who's had a similar experience to you.
- **Samaritans**
- **Carers UK**
- **Breast Cancer UK**



Our tip of the month

The one thing we ask you to do today if you do nothing else...

Quiet your mind.

Many of us go through the day constantly stimulated which can make it hard to switch off and relax. But taking a few moments to calm your mind can be a really useful way to destress and process.

Everyone is different and what works for others may not work so well for you. Here are some things to try when you want to calm your busy mind:

- Focus on your breathing - count your breaths in for four and out for six
- Stand outside and look at the sky - moving from the position you were in and the change in temperature can benefit your body
- Make bread - some people find the repetitive act of kneading to be a great mindfulness technique
- Write a list of your thoughts - jot down all of your worries and then put the list aside and move away.

SilverCloud Programmes on the Wellbeing Hub

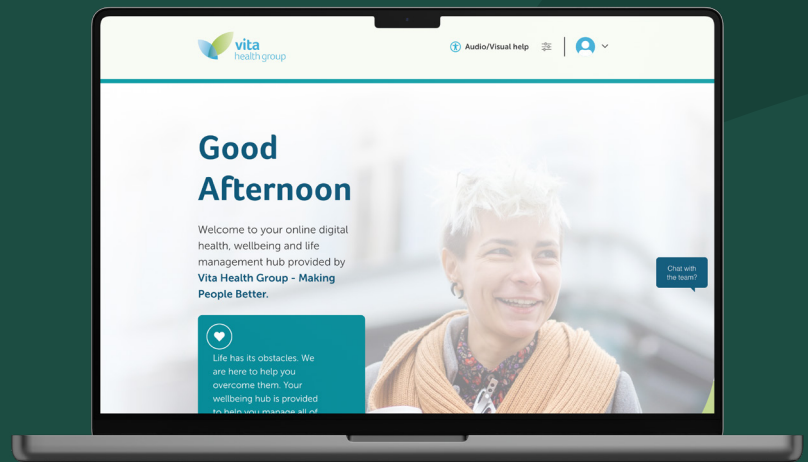


Visit our Wellbeing Hub by scanning the QR code above:

A new way to a healthier mind

1 in 4 of us struggle with mental health challenges, like feeling low or anxious.

SilverCloud programmes provide the tools and skills to feel better and stay better, helping you to improve and maintain your wellbeing by addressing underlying issues that can have a negative impact on how you would like to live your life.



What programmes are available?

Wellbeing

Programmes that give you the skills to deal with everyday issues that affect your emotional health.

Mental Health

Programmes to help alleviate the symptoms of common mental health conditions.

Chronic Health

Programmes that focus on the mental health aspects of living with a long term condition.

New programmes

- Space from Anxiety
- Bipolar toolkit

Based on years of clinical research, the programmes are interactive and delivered via a user-friendly platform. Programme modules are easy to use. Work through the activities, videos and content anytime on your computer, tablet, or phone.

Visit your Wellbeing Hub

Digital Wellbeing Programmes, free and in confidence, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Use your organisational code to access the site.

www.my-eap.com/access

Contact us

 wellness@vhg.co.uk

 vitahealthgroup.co.uk