

CherWellBeing

Stories of Change and Understanding



10 Period Life Hacks All Girls Need To Know - Marissa Rachel

Periods and the menopause are still often taboo subjects. In this month's issue are handy tips, stories and experiences about women's hormonal lives. On average periods come around once a week roughly every month and women can experience cramps, headaches and a mood change. There is often a stigma about women on periods - sayings such as 'Oh she's probably on her period that's why she's acting like that'. Meanwhile, bloating, hot flushes, low mood and foggy brain are just some of the joys of the menopause. The average age for a natural menopause is 51, and like periods are often carried out in silence and shame. No more though, as you'll see from our strong, feisty writers who own their hormonality.

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Year 11 student Davina Lawal has been raising money for Street Cramps, an organisation that provides sanitary products for homeless women www.streetcramps.org

Find out more about Dawina's campaign on the school's [Wellbeing page](#) ([scroll to the bottom](#))

Whether in Year 7 or about to retire, we all have stories of how we have dealt with life's challenges.

CherWellBeing is a space for us to share them. Here you will find interviews and articles written by staff, students and parents. Stories can be anonymous to allow us to write freely.

So when we feel as though no-one understands us or we can't deal with an illness or difficult situation, we'll see stories of people who may have dealt with similar experiences, as well as tools and links to help us.

If you would like to contribute or link us to online content that you found helpful, please contact cherwellbeing@cherwell.oxon.sch.uk

That Time of the Month

I was 14 when I got my first period, I know I was in year 9 as I made a diary entry to record the event as my mum can't remember much about hers. I wanted to make sure I did so I could possibly be some help to my kids in the future (no offence mum.) Anyway, the first day I got my period I remember going to the toilet and seeing brown spots in my underwear (sorry if that's TMI, but any truthful article is much more helpful than one that only covers the surface of what a period is like). I wasn't sure if this was the start, but I made sure to put a pad on just in case, Putting on my first pad was certainly a weird experience as I'd read/been told about it so many times. I then made sure I told my mum who of course was like "ohhh, you're becoming a woman, all grown up", So annoying!

Anyways, later I checked again and as I had thought, the period had struck. I then proceeded to spend my entire evening watching YouTube videos about it, which to my surprise there were quite a few on the subject, almost all by a YouTuber by the name Marissa Rachel, if any of you have heard of her. She has every possible video on what you need to know about them, whether you know what questions you want answered or not. She currently has a period playlist with over 70 videos, which I highly recommend watching for further information.

Moving on to my first day of school with my period, compared to today, I was so paranoid that I would leak or that my pad was visible through my trousers. According to my diary entry, although I actually do remember this, it felt like there was constantly a pool of blood that would overflow any second, yet every time I went to check, there was barely anything there. I made a chart to show how often I checked and changed my pad which was so more frequent compared to now. I can definitely tell you, that although it feels super weird at first, you'll get used to it pretty quickly. If you're worried for the same reasons that I was, that you've leaked or something, don't be. I know it can be embarrassing, but if anyone ever makes fun of you, simply think: Half the population of the world goes through this once a month, its not something that's weird, its completely natural, so tell them to get over it and move on to something that really matters!

Pads or Tampons? I personally have always used pads, I don't have a problem with tampons, I've never actually tried using one, so I wouldn't be much use there. I'm too scared of getting toxic shock syndrome (TSS) to use a tampon, which to any of you who are also scared, I get it, but those who are worried about it too, there's nothing to be worried about, many of my friends use tampons and it's perfectly safe, I'm sure if I had to use one, I could, but I haven't needed to yet, so I just prefer to stick with me old trusty pad.

Telling your mum: Telling my mum that I had my period came very naturally to me as we normally talk about most things. If you don't have as open a relationship, to be honest, I would still say that telling a close relative or someone you trust is a good idea, if you want some advice as pretty much every woman will be able to help you in some way.

Leaks: If you ever do come across this problem, which I have a few times, if you have a jumper, tie it around your waist or if there's nothing else perhaps ask a friend to always walk close behind you until you can fix the problem. Or just own it. I don't do it anymore, although would probably be helpful, but I used to bring spare underwear to school just in case of emergencies and this is definitely a good idea.

All your friends have it and you don't??? Don't worry about this. Everyone gets their periods at different times, whether you're in year 7 or year 13, it can start at any time during your teens, and to be honest if you do get your period later than everyone else I would consider that lucky as it's a lot easier to not have a period every month. Also, I'm not sure if this is true, but often friends get their periods at the same time, I think there is a scientific reason, but I can't remember, maybe search it up? It's pretty cool, at least I think it is anyway, having your period at the same time as your friends once you get it makes it much less stressful.

General worries: Periods are something that should be celebrated, not hidden in the shadows. Talk about it with your friends, have a period party, and number one thing, don't feel too embarrassed! This last line sounds pretty cringy, but who cares!!?!?!?

Menopausal Musings

My first inkling that menopausal low-mood symptoms might be an actual thing was after a rant at the young man in Waterstones Oxford. How can they offer dozens of books on gluten-free diets, and yet two on the menopause? How could there be more books on grieving a pet than on the change of life. “But lots of people are gluten intolerant” he argued. But half the population will go through menopause I tried to reason. The ensuing look of fear on the poor young man’s face reminded me to rein it in, smile, go home and go online.

That was over two years ago and it’s funny how the outrage dissipates. I’m still outraged, on a daily basis, by, well, everything, and though it may be funny to share Grumpy Old Ladies stories with like-minded (and aged) women, it’s also important at some stage to think about either channeling that rage into something positive. Or to find ways to deal with it and look at symptoms and relief.

Low mood is one of the vaguest symptoms of menopause. While some women struggle with the physical symptoms such as night sweats and hot flashes (or FLASHES as our American friends call them, which I love), for many of us the hormonal changes impact the way we feel and think. But it’s hard to pin it down to menopause. It coincides with other big life changes – ageing parents, teenagers leaving home or under their own life stresses (“menopause is just puberty’s evil older sister”), and a general sense of middle-aged ‘Is This It?’ angst. Many of these are, sometimes, shared with a partner. But menopause is flying solo. Which makes self-care even more important. It you don’t tame this creature, who will?

Even as I write this, with my new HRT patch glued to my lower torso, I’m reminded that some days the ability to drag oneself out of bed and function is a massive win.

The good, even fantastic days are more likely to happen now when I’ve gone through my self-care checklist. I’d like to say there are great revelations here, but there’s nothing new here. Except much of it is new to me. It’s like waking up one day and realising that new year’s resolutions actually have a purpose.

Food. Find your own ‘superfoods’. Forget about dieting and choose your food for life. You’re a grown-up, you know what’s good for you. Choose good where you can. A friend said a few years ago “well, it doesn’t really matter anymore” (in that

specific case, about trying to lose weight). It matters now, more than it ever mattered before.

Drink. Goodbye wine, at least for now. Hello G & T, and even then not very often. The booze is not our friend. I didn’t believe this four years ago when older friends told me of the physical and mental effects of even light to moderate use. I couldn’t get over how depressing it would be to have to give up alcohol. Maybe it won’t affect you but for many of us, the drink don’t work, it just makes it worse. Weekends only might be a compromise.

Exercise. For mental well-being if nothing else. I’ve learned this lesson rather late in life. Exercise that strengthens joints during the immediate year or two of post-periods seems important to me, as I seem to suffer from general “aches and pains”. Weights, balance and Pilates make more sense these days. I’ve gone into exercise classes wanting to cry with low feelings. Sometimes I cry in the class. I never feel like that afterwards. This kind of talk annoyed the hell out of me a year ago.

Mind. Stress and self-criticism have been a constant in my life and I have never appreciated the (husbandly) advice to take up yoga or meditation. I’ve never been able to shut off the critical voice (or, frankly, to sit up straight). Now mindfulness and guided meditations are my friends. The adult colouring books lie abandoned, of course, but the time to stop and breathe and feel now mean something. Often workplaces will offer mindfulness taster sessions and courses, and it might get you out of another staff meeting where you might harm someone. There are countless apps out there – Headspace, Buddhify, Calm are useful. But practice is essential.

People. Friends, friends, friends. Talks, walks, meals together, book groups all help to keep the mood wolves and black dogs from the back door. I’m in a closed Facebook group for friends to share information on menopause, the funny stuff as well as the remarkably rare medical story. As our children scarp off, we need to strengthen our own relationships. I’ve never been a clubs and societies person. It’s still excruciating. But if it helps me participate in an activity that I’m passionate about, I just about manage to control that rage and stop myself thumping the know-it-all next to me.

<https://www.menopausematters.co.uk> and <http://menopausehealthmatters.com> are two excellent websites to get advice

Dealing With The Downsides

I first started my periods when I was 11 and they started heavy and regular, right from day dot. Because they also lasted 5 days this meant I felt very self conscious particularly around being asked to go swimming. Swapping from using sanitary towels to using tampons helped a lot with this, but it took a lot for me to persuade my mum that this was ok.

I had children very young and after my first child, I was having very heavy periods to the extent that it warranted investigation and I was also getting hormonal migraines. They wanted me to come off the pill, so my husband did some research and discovered I could reduce the migraines by tricycling the pill, so taking the pill continuously for 9 weeks, which meant I had a period every nine weeks instead of every three weeks. It was still very heavy, but reduced the headache side of the pain, although only if I managed to reduce stress during that time as well. I was still getting the cramping pain. At the time, I had a job outside teaching and had to have time off work with migraines but getting into the tricycling helped.

Then I went into teaching and that's when it became more difficult to manage. Essentially I was having cramping pain very much like early stages of labour. It was heavy for two or three days of that and I was still prone to migraine if there were other stressors around. This didn't go very well with teaching. I started to time my breaks with the holidays so that I could cope with work and have my period in my free time. This was particularly during the first few years when I felt that I needed to be in lessons and functioning. This was to do with professional pride rather than any expectations from the school.

As my teaching career has gone on, I've realised it's not a nice way to spend your life, so I then started to be a bit more sensible. For example I might plan to have my period two weeks before the end of term, at a time when I wouldn't have a parents evening or exams. Or I would plan it so that the worst day was on a Friday and I would have the weekend.... This meant I was striking a better work life balance and I also felt better because I could control it.

Latterly I've developed high blood pressure, so they've had to take me away from a combined contraceptive pill and I am no longer able to tricycle. I've opted for the Mirena coil, which

uses low doses of progesterone that essentially stops periods. The change to this new method has highlighted that I'm potentially suffering from endometriosis and have done through all these years. Apparently, the best treatment for endometriosis is regulating your hormones, so I feel I've been self-managing symptoms all these years through my contraceptive choices.

Since switching to the Mirena coil, every two to three months I have intense cramps with no bleeding, and I've had to be off work with that, bed-ridden. So now I'm on a minimal dose of citalopram, which is perhaps known best for anti-anxiety/depression but is also good for coping with ongoing chronic pain. I've only been on this medication for a couple of months and they're reviewing it, but I haven't had the chronic pain since, so it might be working, we will have to see.

I'm one of those stoic persons who believe you should always get on with it. When I'm suffering from it at school, because the pain is like labour pain, I sometimes do breathing exercises and you just do it, stand at the whiteboard and ignore the pain. I don't think the students pick up on it particularly, as far as I'm aware.

Because I've just got on with it, it's just always been there, but I haven't dwelt on it or let it take over my life. And I know that if it gets too bad I will take the time off. I know if I can't stand in front of a class then I can't go in and people will be understanding. I'm looking forward to the menopause because the cramping pain that sends me to bed for two days (which has hit me at unreasonable times) will go.

My husband has been fantastic. Any time they were offering a new treatment, he would research it and find out the best options of taking it, eg finding out about the tricycling. As everything is shared in our relationship, we always take over when the other is under the weather, and that also includes suffering from

Coming soon: Davina Lawal will be working with our school to provide Pink Boxes on both sites from next school year, where girls can access sanitary products if they need them.