



University  
of Exeter



GWL





The inaugural 4M conference will be held in Exeter on the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> of June 2024.

The conference aims to bring together international and interdisciplinary researchers interested in menstruation, menopause, menarche and mental health. As well as academics across career stages, the conference will welcome attendees from charity groups, campaigners and industry working in the area of menstruation, menopause and mental health.

However, as well as these experts, it is essential to ensure that the perspectives of people who are most affected by the interactions between mental and menstrual health are represented – especially from people who may not usually attend an academic conference (and face numerous barriers which exclude them from doing so).

This zine includes contributions from a range of people. The brief was broad, with contributors being asked to share their experiences of menstruation, menopause, menarche and mental health, sharing what they want conference attendees to know. Other than that, contributors could share whatever was important to them, in whatever way they preferred to express that.

The zine includes poetry, writing, illustrations, collage and more.

This zine was funded by the University of Exeter Public Engagement in Research Springboard fund, the GW4 Alliance and the South West Doctoral Training Partnership (SWDTP).

The zine was coordinated by Hat Porter with input from Luana De Giorgio and Dr Gemma Sharp of the 4M consortium.

(Cover art by Daisy Porter)





## Big Black Stain

I have a dissociative identity (“split personality”) from childhood/teenage neglect/abuse. My poem is about my different personality parts with different ages (they are “stuck in time”), and their relationship with menstruation. Depicted are some of my parts.

I inform about trauma, dissociative identity, and other forms of oppression.

Blog: <https://femveghealing.wixsite.com/blog>

Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/@femveghealing>

Instagram: @femveghealing

## Big Black Stain



We are two years old. Don't understand what it is.

Are we sick?

My tummy hurts.

We are fifteen years old.

Don't like what it is.

It's disgusting.

I'm ashamed.

Why do we get this -

and abuse -

but no first kiss?

I'm still just twenty years old.

Can't help what it is.

Are we taking care of ourselves?

My head aches.

Thirty-seven,

my passport says.

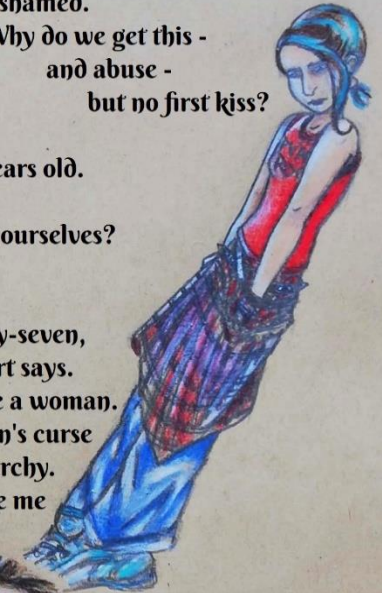
Still, I don't feel like a woman.

Woman's curse

is the patriarchy.

Bleeding doesn't make me

whole.





I don't have periods.)

Nosey cis women used to ask me why, and I'd say 'because I'm trans'.

Doctors ask me why - and somehow it's not acceptable to say 'because I don't want them'.

I am 32, and since the age of 19 I've had around 5 periods - and maybe 10 breakthrough bleeds.

So, why? Well - they suck, but I don't think mine are particularly bad. I'm autistic and I have chronic pain - so cramps are awful, the bleeding is sensory hell and it's exhausting, but equally I don't have PCOS or Endo.

Going to work, buying groceries, socialising - honestly, that's enough energy. Life is exhausting. I can't handle life and also 7 days a month of cramp, weeping and anaemia.

What I wish for is better medical knowledge & education.

I've been on the depo injection, the implant and now the mini pill. Oestrogen makes me feel awful, progesterone feels fine.

There's a ~~rumor~~ rumor that I'll be taken off all birth control at 35. Is that true? Who do I ask? Am I at risk of clotting due to blood pressure conditions that I can't get diagnosed?

Women in pubs shout at me about how my body needs to bleed. I've even had trans women say I don't deserve my body because they wish they had periods. I'm gender fluid, but none of my gender identities have any relation to the bleeding.

I fear the menopause so much that I can barely think about it. Medical care is so inaccessible now.

How does the harbour work?

Will this organ ever get better?

By Peg



## **‘Crazy, Queer and Covered in Blood’ – Nikita Adams**

My body is mutinous,  
Hijacking my happiness,  
With no concern for the hell it unleashes.  
It's irregularly violent,  
Friends with my fears,  
**Dripping gore** down my thighs,  
Stripping me of my sanity,  
And dignity.  
My body ignites itself,  
Like a beacon of suffering.  
I... Survive it.  
I can't seem to stop it.  
The pill makes me insane(r).  
Like, the DSM is my bingo card,  
And I'm on the edge of a full house,  
But I'm on the edge of a house,  
The voices telling me to jump...  
That's the thing, isn't it?  
I'm aware of my predicament.  
My flesh encasing the chaos of an asylum,  
Scratching just below the surface,  
Waiting for an unbalance of hormones to green light,  
**The red.**  
I'm not myself when I'm 'a women'.

When I'm explaining the doom from my womb,  
To doctors who are disinterested,  
Because this is what half the population deal with.  
Is it?  
Are you all seeing that?  
Hearing what I'm hearing?  
Have you got a monthly time bomb with a broken clock stealing the stability  
from under your  
feet?  
While you're expected to etch a smile on your face,  
Undoing hardwork and stitching in your psychosis to the core of you?  
Inescapable, even with a cocktail of medication rattling inside the same body I  
can't ever quite  
control.  
Not that I ever had much control over my body.  
I'm a baby factory that's broken,  
In a world that thinks employees happiness and health is optional.  
My they/them becoming a she/was,  
As I sit in the flow of it all,  
It makes sense there is so much **bleeding**,  
When I'm shards of myself,  
Arranged into pleasant coping,  
For your viewing comfort.  
  
**Crazy,**  
**Queer,**  
**Covered in blood.**

## Bridging the Silos: notes on art work

Rose Matthews (they / them): Autistic researcher, advocate, and activist. Neuroqueer, gender-fluid, non-binary. Post menopause. Privileged by being white and having had positive experiences of education. Disadvantaged by stigma surrounding autism and ageing.

This mixed media art work provides a snapshot of 'Bridging the Silos' a 3-phase international co-produced research study exploring Autistic people's experiences of menopause through focus groups and interviews, creative submissions, and an international survey. I am one of two Autistic community researchers on this study, part of a neurodiverse research team based in Canada and the UK, led by Miranda Brady at Carleton University.

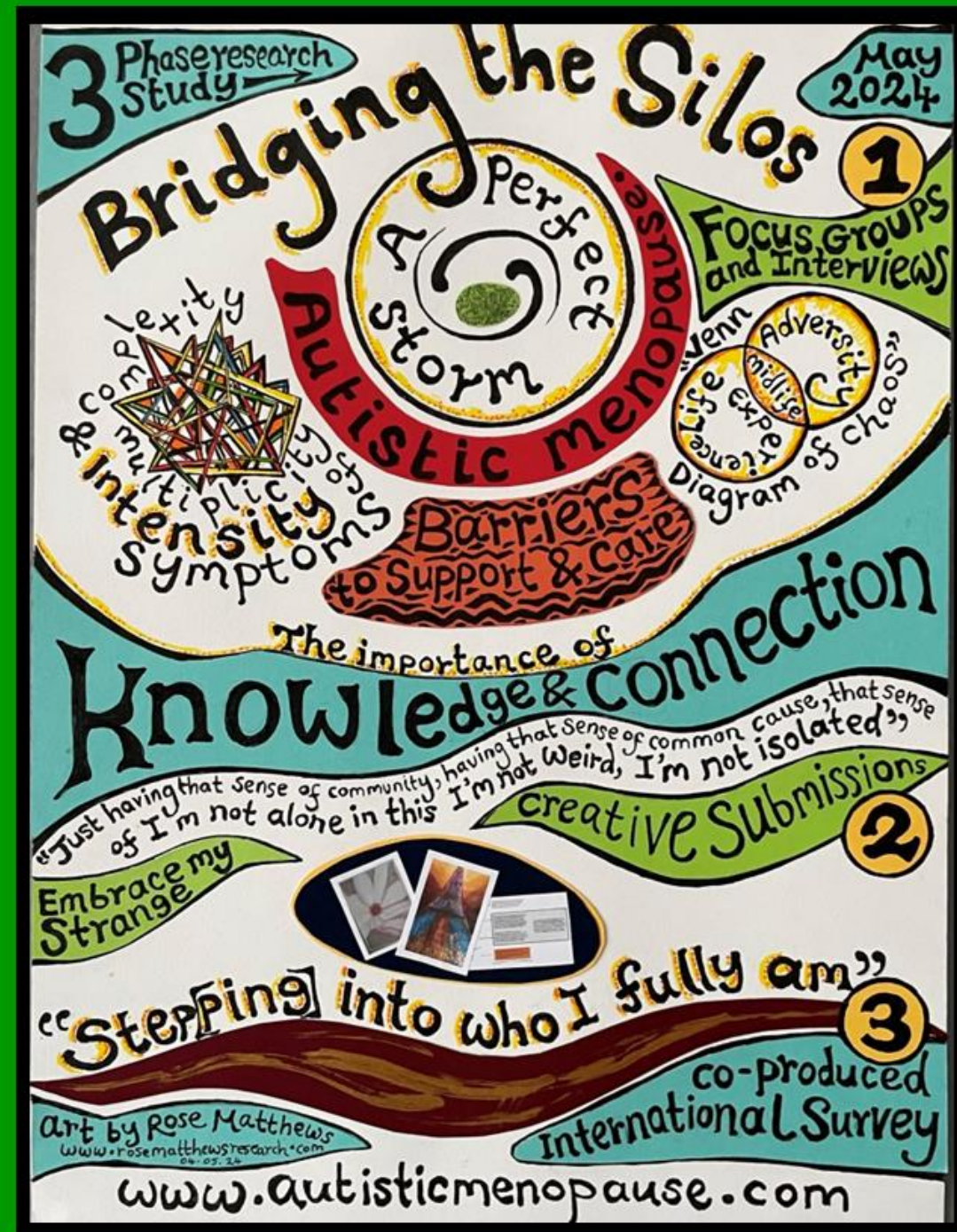
Quotations from participants and themes generated by researchers in phase one of the research are included in this illustration. Spiky intersecting pieces represent the complexity, multiplicity and intensity of symptoms, suggesting the personal pain of going through perimenopause and the sharp edges that can affect our relationships with those close to us and the wider world. 'Life experience' and 'adversity' converging at midlife can create what one participant described as a "Venn diagram of chaos". This research has powerful personal significance. The fingerprint encircled by 'A perfect storm' represents my arrest and detention by the police after a catastrophic meltdown, two years before my very late autism diagnosis aged 58. I wrote about 'the night I lost my freedom' for Autism in Adulthood; a free to access preprint is available here: <https://osf.io/qdsjb/>.

We invited creative submissions in phase two of the study because we recognised the limitations of standard academic approaches. Allowing participants to express themselves freely and creatively elicited thoughts and feelings that would not have been captured otherwise. Creative submissions highlighted both isolation and connectedness, the process of learning to "embrace my strange" ("neuroqueering"), and "step[ping] into who I fully am" (self-actualization and identity transformation). In my reflective journal I responded to the creative submissions through pen and ink drawings and poetry as well as prose. An article about this phase of the research is currently under review.

The blood-coloured slash towards the bottom of the image is streaked with gold, reflecting the benefits and opportunities Autistic menopause can bring, along with losses and challenges. The importance of knowledge and connection for wellbeing and survival emerged from all three phases of this study and this phrase runs through the centre like a banner. Autistic menopause can be so devastating it threatens our survival, but it can also be a catalyst for renaissance and transformation. We hope that findings from phase three of the Bridging the Silos research study, will be published later this year or early in 2025.

Bridging the Silos: Autistic Menopause Study [www.AutisticMenopause.com](http://www.AutisticMenopause.com)

Rose Matthews Research [www.RoseMatthewsResearch.com](http://www.RoseMatthewsResearch.com)







By Hannah Hill

@hanecdote

[hanecdote.co.uk](http://hanecdote.co.uk)



By Jas Osborne

@batmoons

My name is Esther Bene- Stanton, a Black Caribbean neuro-diverse woman. I am a freelance creative practitioner, peer supporter, community organiser amongst other things, living and working in county Durham.

I recently took part in a NSUN's consultation about collectively drafting guidelines to respect menstruation needs in inpatient mental health settings. As a former patient who got harmed, I have lived experience. And soon after the consultation period ended, I co-facilitated a creative workshop with ethnically diverse women and non-binary creative minds in Gateshead, processing our lived experiences. A half-day of holding conversations working together led piece in form of spoken word which is collectively performed.

This poem processes this material and taps into my lived experiences, taking on the theme 'Joy as Resistance'. When I happen to meet Black women and non-binary who experienced imprisonment and developed mental health issues, they are keen to talk about their frustrations AND joys. Those fortunate enough to create bonds on the basis of peer support and solidarity they often gain a new purpose and confidence but still they had thoughts on what could make things better. I also personally feel a lot of connection to experiences of being stuck and struggle to overcome internal barriers. Like waiting for a jump. Writing this poem visually in an hourglass shape to reflects the time passing in prisons/ inpatient mental health settings but also the space (community?) getting tighter, then opening up again.

we took our blankets outside to the trampoline and laid there secretly watching the stars  
sure we could get up to jump at any time into that endless sky and land in another world  
but what was the rush, really? this little town of ours was an entire universe of its own  
every single door on my street was an unlocked portal where they still knew my name  
it was so very strange how the clock started ticking and my world started shrinking  
friends moved and we stopped playing and we sat around in our rooms asking  
‘what should we do?’ and ‘where should we go?’ and ‘why is it so quiet?’  
suddenly everyone who knew our names also knew our failures  
and when we looked into the stars, they seemed just like eyes  
shining, watching, telling us who we were supposed to be  
telling us to grow up faster and not grow at all  
but we needed someone who could show us  
could show us that space in between  
who we used to be and  
who we could  
one day  
be  
someday  
how could we  
keep our universe large  
and grow like nobody was watching  
in a room that had enough room for us  
and get to fall in love and to fall back out again  
and get to make mistakes and make them right again  
and have the space to feel time and the time to be in our space  
staring at our own star lights exploring what could make them shine  
and maybe we would like to be like children running through the streets  
and other times we would like to be grown up enough to get to own that street





### Scrap the Little Women

I became scared of my body  
When I moved from girl  
To Woman, Little Women woman.  
My body became a stranger  
Like I was host in a shell;  
It was foreign to me.

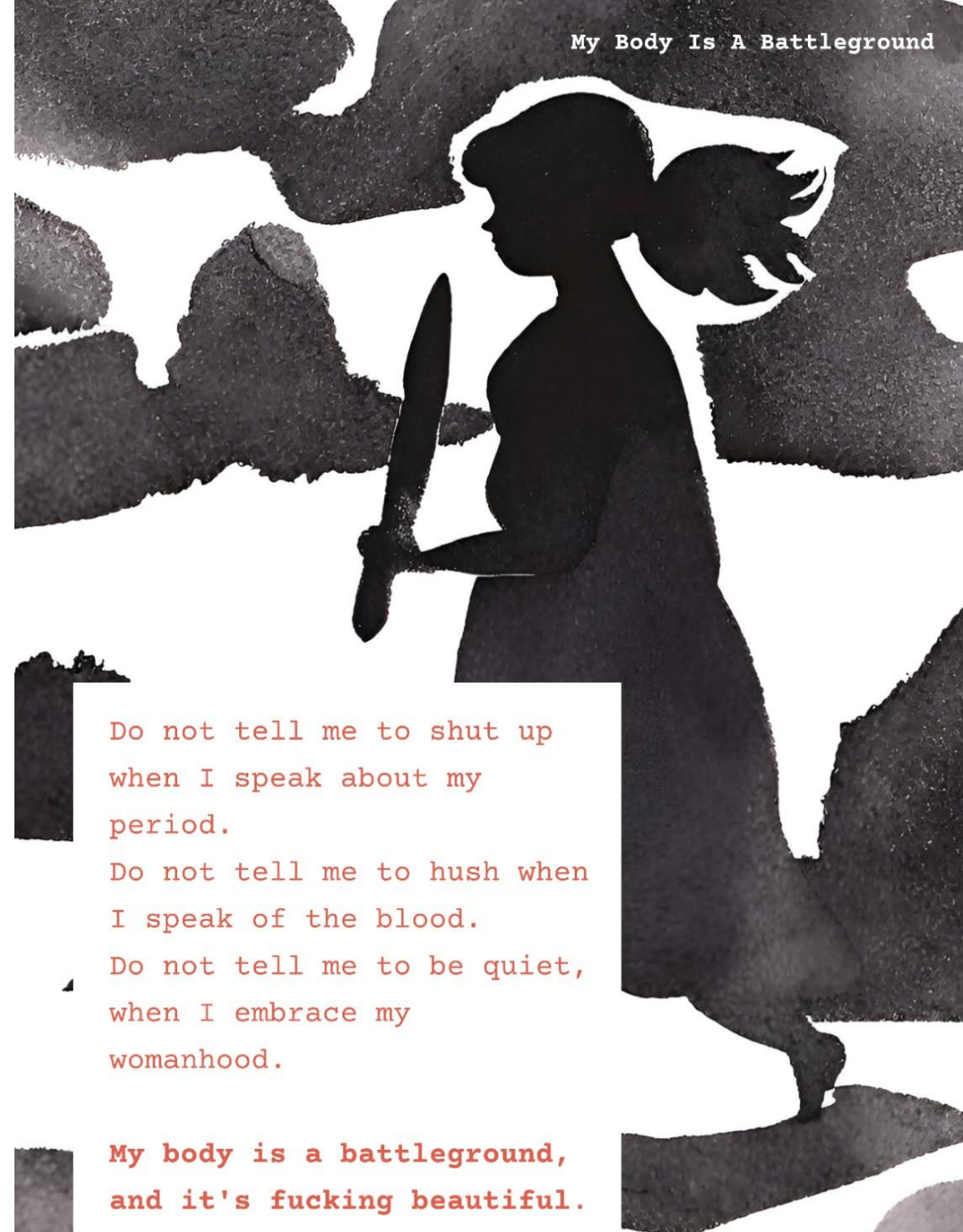
I become scared of my body  
When every lunar cycle  
It transforms. Attacks.  
My body wages war on me  
Like a battle without opposition;  
It does not make sense.

I used to hide from my body  
When every thirty days  
Or so, it transforms - renews.  
My body sheds a skin  
To prepare for the battles  
And the bloodshed I might face.

I am no longer scared of my body  
When my period arrives  
I am prepared. Ready.  
My body is strong and beautiful;  
To feel shame is to shame myself  
And the Women around me.

I am not ashamed.  
I am Woman. Powerful Woman, **Woman.**

### My Body Is A Battleground



Do not tell me to shut up  
when I speak about my  
period.

Do not tell me to hush when  
I speak of the blood.

Do not tell me to be quiet,  
when I embrace my  
womanhood.

**My body is a battleground,  
and it's fucking beautiful.**

By Saffron Mae Baldoza

## **Mental health professionals need to be more aware of how hormones can impact someone's mental health**

I've struggled with my mental health since I was young. I was always anxious and shy, but things got worse when I hit my teens. I became really self-conscious, especially about my body. Looking back, I realize my problems started when I got my period at 11. By the time I was 16, I was dealing with an eating disorder, depression, and self-harm, and it seemed to get worse when I had my period.

Now, I've been using mental health services for over 25 years. Surprisingly, in all that time, only once was I asked about how my period affects my mood. I always thought my hormones played a big role in my depression, but it seemed like nobody took that seriously. Instead, they just kept prescribing more antidepressants.

Then, I came across an article about something called PMDD (Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder). It described how a lot of people with PMDD, like me, have struggled with mental health for years without getting the right diagnosis. It's like really bad PMS, but way worse. Some people even have suicidal thoughts. The article talked about menstrual cycle coaching and how tracking your cycle can help understand how hormones affect your mood. Not only did some people have an imbalance of hormones but many were sensitive to the rise and fall of different hormones throughout their cycle.

I was curious, so I started learning more. Even though I'm in my thirties, I realised I didn't know much about my menstrual cycle and how it really affects me. I always thought feeling awful before my period was normal. But talking to a menstrual cycle coach made me realize it's not. Before my

period, I'd feel really down, bloated, tired, and low on energy. My mood would be at its worst, and sometimes I'd even feel suicidal or have the urge to self-harm. It wasn't until I started tracking my period that I realised how much of my depression was cyclical.

After six months of working with a coach, things changed, and I now feel like a completely different person. I learned to anticipate when I might feel worse, and I finally got diagnosed with PMDD. It was a relief after years of feeling misunderstood and struggling with my mental health. Learning more about the hormones and how they impacted me was empowering. For the first time in my life, I felt empowered around my body and in particular my period.

For the past 25 years, I have been stuck in the cycle of mental health services with so many unanswered questions. There is a huge lack of knowledge and awareness about the impact of female hormones on mental health and I believe that my life would have been very different if I had been more aware of my menstrual cycle and the part it plays in my mental health and wellbeing. It has been so empowering to learn more about my body and the way my menstrual cycle impacts both my physical and mental self. I have gone from someone who has spent months at a time in psychiatric wards fighting suicidal thoughts and self-harm urges to someone who now feels much more in control of my mental health and how to manage it.

Now, I'm much more aware of how my body works and how my menstrual cycle affects my mental health. I wish more women had access to this kind of support. It's made a huge difference for me, and I wish I'd known about it sooner.

By Marie Duffy



This quilt tracks my menstrual cycle over the period of one year. The red squares indicate the days where I was menstruating with the lighter pink squares indicating that I was menstruating for half the day or with very light spotting. The dark blue squares are added between each month.

Crafting this quilt, which is entirely hand-stitched, was an interesting, embodied process. It was beautiful to see the patterns created by the rhythms of my body and reflect on these experiences during the slow process of hand-stitching.

I never intended for this quilt to explore both menstruation *and* mental health. But incidentally though the process of making this I went through an anorexia relapse. It's subtle, probably hardly perceptible to others, but I am unable to miss how the last three months at the bottom of the quilt depict my periods becoming shorter, lighter and less frequent as I became more unwell.

My favourite thing – and what I find the most soothing – about hand quilting is how, as the blanket grows, I have to wrap myself up in it while I stitch. It feels safe and comforting.

I don't always find periods easy, but I am learning to celebrate the rhythms and patterns of my body and how clearly my menstrual cycle illustrates my health as an eating disorder survivor.

Hat Porter (they/them)



Sometime every month, I start to think I'm losing it. My mental health slips through my fingers like sand. I lose my grip on myself. The thoughts that I'm able to keep at bay and under control come spilling loose, free from their fragile chains. I start to worry about how ill I am, if I might need to consider some more serious help. I think about killing myself and believe that my life is worthless and will never get better.

Several days later, I wipe blood and remember that this happens like clockwork.

I say this to people in my life every month, but I *always* forget that it's coming even though my birth control means that I know to the day when to expect my period. Maybe because I know that I *could* just get worse out of nowhere, that this is something that has happened before. These days I try and remember to ask myself: am I expecting my period soon? Is Mercury in retrograde? Is there something I'm forgetting as I sit in my bedroom wondering if this time that's it and it's all over for me?

When I have finally pinpointed the decline of my mental state to my period, I feel the need to make fun of it. Partly this is to avoid people worrying about me, but the other part is to try and make it feel less serious to myself. *PMSing again lol sorry*. I put it alongside the parts of my period like hot water bottles and macaroni cheese cravings because I don't want to face it head on. It's scary. I feel out of control, I feel like I'm drowning, and I'm scared of saying that because people know that in a week I'll be fine again. For them and for myself, I try to make it funny. Personally I find that the experience of mental illness can border comedy sometimes – oops, here I go crying because I ate my lunch late!

I don't know if it's good or bad that I do this. On the one hand, it takes the fear out of this experience and it reminds me that the worsening of my symptoms will end. It will be manageable again soon. If I am drowning, then it's in a pool, and soon I'm going to reach the side and rest my elbows on the edge and float again. But it also speaks to the way that periods aren't taken seriously. Just because they happen for a week doesn't mean that week isn't real and that what you feel in that week doesn't matter. There's still water in my lungs when I return to safety.

Jasna Deas Mason (they/them)

## About 4M

The Menarche, Menstruation, Menopause and Mental Health (4M) consortium was established in 2021, led by Dr Gemma Sharp, with funding from the GW4 Alliance. We are a network to facilitate collaborative interdisciplinary research into how menstruation and menopause interact with mental health.

There are currently over 130 members, mostly based in UK, but with representation all around the world.

## Our vision and mission

The overarching vision of 4M is a world in which menstrual experiences, including events around menarche and menopause, do not adversely affect mental health and social wellbeing. We believe that decisions and practices about individuals' menstrual and mental health should be informed by scientific understanding and listening to the needs and experiences of those individuals. Therefore, our mission is to facilitate interdisciplinary, stakeholder-informed, impact-focused, inclusive research at the intersection of menstrual and mental health. The research we facilitate aims to develop a better understanding of:

- The biological, psychological, social, and environmental mechanisms that link menstrual and mental health;
- How interventions can effectively target these mechanisms to improve the relationship between menstrual and mental health;
- How these mechanisms and interventions affect menstrual and mental health differently in different contexts and at different stages of the life course, from menarche to menopause.

## Our approach

We facilitate research by introducing and connecting academic researchers from and across multiple disciplines. This includes early career researchers, who we try to support to develop and sustain their careers in this burgeoning interdisciplinary field. We also build collaborations with non-academic stakeholders (for example, patients, healthcare providers, charities, and policy makers), who can provide a unique insight into research need, facilitate co-production and Patient and Public Involvement and Engagement (PPIE) informed research, and aid pathways to impact.



