

# **MENOPAUSE, ME AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY**

**Exploring the impact  
of menopause on physical  
activity behaviour**



## ABOUT THE RESEARCH

- ▶ In our **Silver Linings** research we looked at the barriers to being active that women face in later life and found menopause is a time that poses a number of challenges for women.
- ▶ Existing research on menopause and physical activity is scarce and Women in Sport wanted to know more.
- ▶ We spoke to active and inactive women (aged 45-60) about their relationship with sport and physical activity during menopause. We wanted to understand:
  - The barriers they face to being active
  - How sport providers can support them to maintain sport and physical activity habits through this time
- ▶ We used an online survey (427 women) and focus groups (28 women).
- ▶ The research was carried out in November 2017.





## KEY MENOPAUSE FACTS

- ▶ Menopause is a natural process all women experience when their periods stop and their ovaries lose their reproductive function.
- ▶ It typically occurs between the ages of 45-55, the average age being 51 in the UK. **It begins in mid-life rather than in 'old' age.**
- ▶ Around **8 in 10 women experience menopause symptoms** and these can vary in length and severity and last an average of 4 years. Symptoms can have a significant impact on women's lives.
- ▶ **Women have an increased risk of diseases** such as osteoporosis and cardiovascular disease following the onset of menopause, which may be prevented through regular physical activity.





# WOMEN'S PHYSICAL ACTIVITY PARTICIPATION

The Chief Medical Officer (CMO) recommends adults aged 19-64 should participate in at least 150 minutes of moderate intensity activity per week.<sup>1</sup> These adults are described as **active**. Those that complete less than 30 minutes per week are **inactive**.

**Research suggests women may be dropping off from physical activity during the menopausal years.**

**38%** of women aged 45-54 do not achieve CMO guidelines<sup>2</sup>

**23%** of women aged 45-54 are inactive<sup>2</sup>

**30%** of women we surveyed said they were 'less active' during menopause



Sources: <sup>1</sup> Department of Health (2011) Start Active Stay Active: A Report on Physical Activity for Health from the Four Home Countries' Chief Medical Officers,

<sup>2</sup> Sport England (2017) Active Lives [Query Criteria: women; age 45-54, inactive, fairly active, active]



# WOMEN'S CORE VALUES DURING MENOPAUSE

Our **Understanding Women's Lives** research identified six core values which show how women want to spend their time and energy.

Within our research, **feeling good** and **looking good** were the most dominant values of women during menopause, followed by nurturing friends and family.



### FEELING GOOD

Top priority. To be healthy, live a good quality of life and have more 'me-time'.

### NURTURING FRIENDS AND FAMILY

Important for those with younger children. For others, this conflicted with their desire to focus on their own physical and emotional wellbeing.

### LOOKING GOOD

Menopause can result in physical changes. Women want to maintain their appearance for as long as possible.

# THE MEANING OF MENOPAUSE

We found that women's perceptions of menopause and what it represents can influence how they engage with physical activity.

The physical and emotional changes experienced during menopause can create **feelings of loss**:

- ▶ a lack of control over their lives
- ▶ lose their sense of self

This was more apparent for inactive women.



*It's the loss of everything I used to be and there's nothing to replace the person I used to be except this new person that doesn't sleep and is consequently a bit unhinged... it's so horrible.*

*I think it's maybe the attitude of some mothers and maybe our grandmothers that was... "This, this is the end of your years... this this is the end of your life".*

*For that to be taken away from me, that option to have another child was... upsetting.*

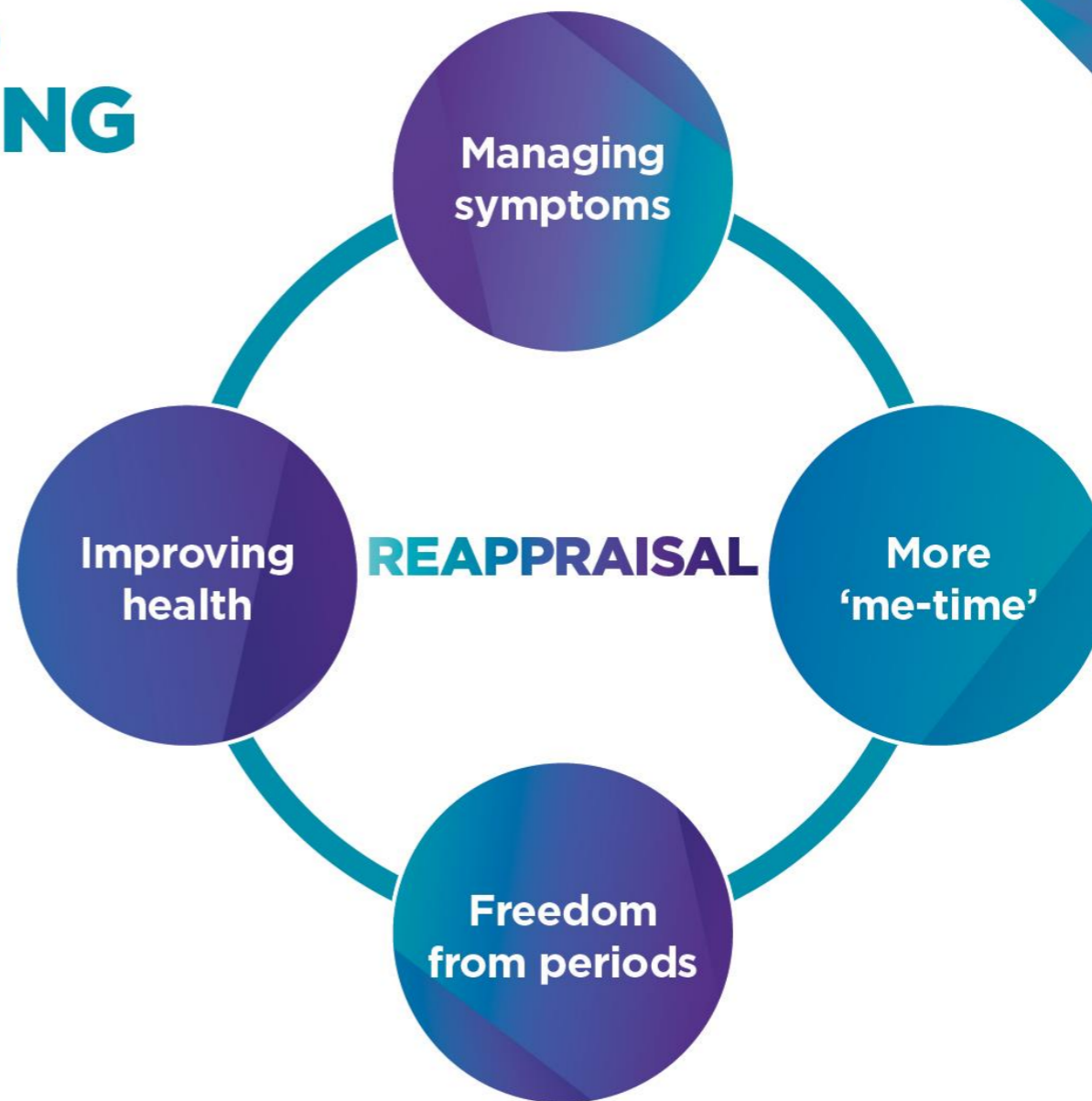


# BUT... WITH EVERY END COMES A NEW BEGINNING

Menopause is also a time of reappraising one's life and can be a powerful prompt for women to change their physical activity behaviour.

Active women felt empowered to take back control of their life, managing their symptoms and health through exercise.

There was a strong desire to focus more on oneself and being active provides the opportunity to do so.



*[Menopause] encouraged me to start going back to the gym.... because when you're not doing anything and menopause happens and you're putting on weight... I think, I've got to do something about this.*

*I think you start looking at things differently. It's like you become a bit wise and I think in a way you do.*

*A time to re-evaluate, a new beginning... it's less about other people and more about yourself.*

# BARRIERS TO BEING ACTIVE

The inactive women in our research identified several barriers to being active:

## CAPABILITY BARRIERS

- ▶ Menopausal symptoms
- ▶ Low exercise self-efficacy and lack of knowledge

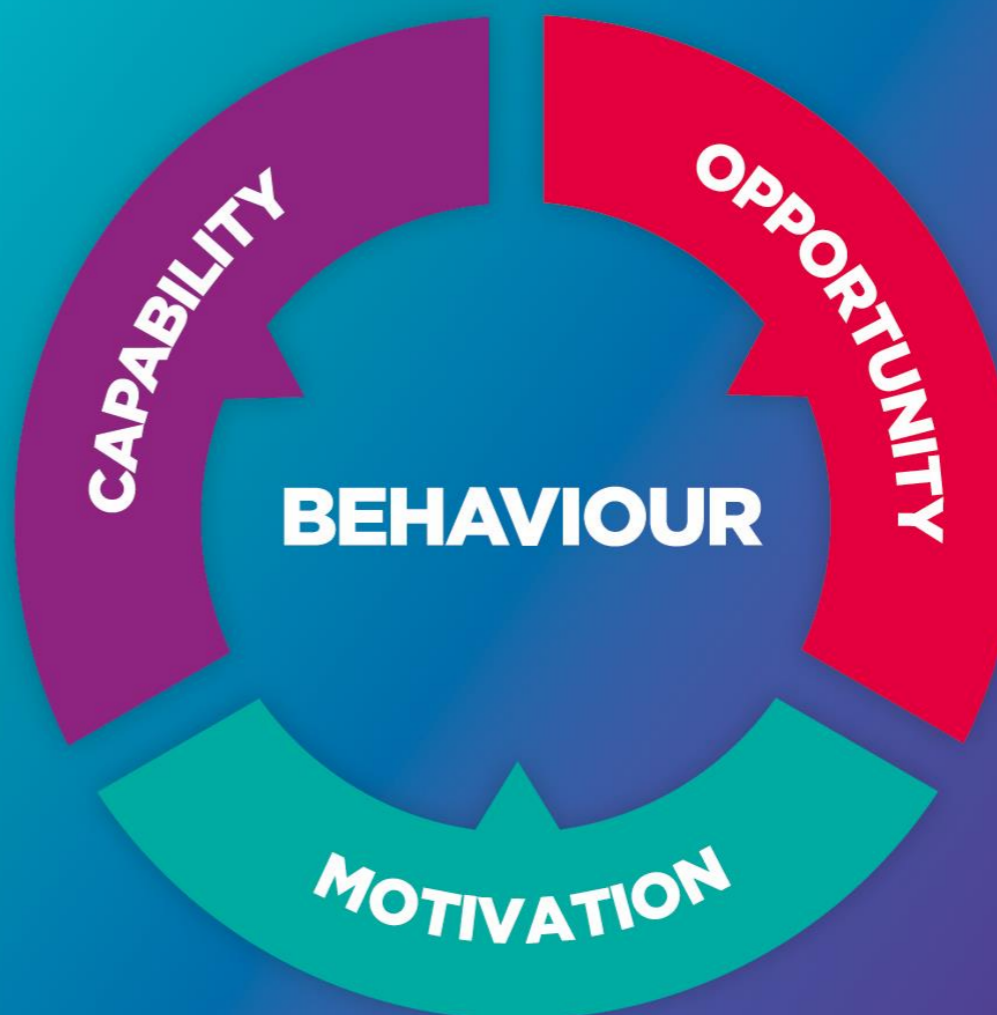
## OPPORTUNITY BARRIERS

- ▶ Stigma of menopause
- ▶ Lack of social support

## MOTIVATION BARRIERS

- ▶ Low motivation to be active

## The COM-B Model of Behaviour Change



For women to change their behaviour and become more active, they must have the capability, opportunity and motivation to do so.

Source: Michie, S., M van Stralen, M. and West, R. (2011) 'The Behaviour Change Wheel: A new method for characterising and designing behaviour change interventions', Implementation Science, vol. 6, no. 42, 1-12



## THE HIGH IMPACT OF SYMPTOMS

Menopause symptoms were a **significant barrier preventing inactive women from taking part in physical activity.**

Symptoms included: fatigue, weight gain, hot flushes, sore muscles/joints, anxiety, low mood and a general dissatisfaction with life. These can last for an average of 4 years.

These can lead to **low capability and motivation to participate in sport and physical activity** for a significant period of time.

***The hormones affect everything you do. Your hair, your eyesight, your memory, your libido, your skin, your muscle, your joints. I mean, everything is affected by it so it's a massive change.***

In our survey...

**82%**

experienced menopause symptoms

**70%**

felt their symptoms had a moderate-severe impact on quality of life

**55%**

had symptoms for 2 years or more (27% for 5+ years)

**Active women were more resilient in coping with these, using physical activity to manage them.**



## SELF-EFFICACY AND LACK OF KNOWLEDGE AFFECT CONFIDENCE

The physical changes of menopause and fear of deteriorating health leads to **low confidence in womens' ability to exercise**. They see themselves as less capable, weak, fragile and prone to injury.

*I realise I can do it [exercise] but I don't have the energy now, or the physical ability. I'm just wrecked all the time.*

*Do you work through it and, you know, build up your joints by doing your exercise, or are you wearing them out and you're actually damaging them?*

### RECOMMENDATION:

Give women clear guidance on what physical activities they *can* and *should* be doing during menopause.

Provide information on safe activities to increase confidence and empower them to take action.

Women in our research preferred non-contact, less intense activities such as walking, pilates/ yoga, cycling and swimming.



## **STIGMA AND THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL SUPPORT**

**Menopause is a taboo subject.** Women fear being labelled ‘incapable’, ‘out of control’ or ‘past it’. This can lead to social withdrawal.

Inactive women felt intimidated by physical activity environments for fear of judgement.

Inactive women tended to have less active circles of friends and family and have far **less opportunity and prompts to motivate them to be active.**

Friends provide emotional support during menopause and opportunities and encouragement to be active with one another.

***I think other people think that you're not capable of actually maybe even doing your job... and I think socially you're written off.***

***The only thing that makes me go is that I've made a commitment to a friend to meet, and if I don't go I'm letting her down... But if it was me on my own, probably four out of five times I wouldn't want to go.***

### **RECOMMENDATION:**

Provide opportunities for or incentivise friends to get active together.





## INACTIVE WOMEN HAD LITTLE MOTIVATION TO BE ACTIVE

Rest and inactivity brings relief and comfort from menopause.

Although women were aware of the benefits of physical activity, this was not always enough to motivate them to be active. **Changing their inactive habits is ‘too difficult’ and has physical and emotional risks.**

“

*I could either fall complacent and think this is the way it's going to be, I'm just going to get weaker, I'm going to just come home and be a couch potato, or I can think right, well what will make me ultimately feel better, give me more energy.*”

“

*It's terrible, I am actually lazy, I've decided. I can't be bothered. And I know it's wrong to say that, and I've put weight on... I just would rather sit indoors and watch a film.*”

### RECOMMENDATION:

Remind inactive women that exercise helps them to manage their symptoms, feel good and improve their health. These benefits are strong motivators to be active.



# MENOPAUSE AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

Menopause can have a negative impact on women's physical activity.

Just under a third **of women were less active during menopause**. We need to **prevent** these women from dropping off from physical activity.

Women who do not achieve the CMO's recommended amount of physical activity also reported more symptoms and a lower quality of life during menopause.

## **BUT...**

The **desire to be more active was high** and even higher if physical activity is recommended by a health professional.

There is an opportunity to **re-engage inactive women** in physical activity during menopause.

In our survey...

**30%** of women said they were LESS active since menopause

**84%** of women who do not meet physical activity guidelines would like to be MORE active

**90%** would consider physical activity if recommended by a GP or health professional



## MEET JANE

Age: 56

Family: Married with two children, aged 16 and 23

Work: Full-time

Length of Menopause: 4 years

Activity level: INACTIVE

Image for illustration purposes only.



Before entering menopause Jane exercised regularly, doing Pilates and swimming 3 times a week, as well as walking each day. Shortly after her menopause began Jane stopped exercising and has not participated in any since.

She feels tired and lacks energy, has joint aches and pains and has gained weight steadily. She feels dissatisfied with life and has little interest in exercise like she used to. She feels lonely and unsupported and has become increasingly withdrawn from her family, who she feels don't understand. Jane wants to be more active and has an expensive gym membership that she never uses but does not want to cancel 'just in case'.

She wants to exercise more but believes that if she does, it will worsen her symptoms. She has a lack of confidence in her ability to be active and is unsure of what to do and how to get started again.

**We need to RE-ENGAGE inactive women like Jane in physical activity.**

***“The tiredness, the fatigue, the lack of sleep. I can't exercise. I want to, but you know, I just haven't got the energy to do it... if I was to do that [exercise], I'd be in constant pain with my joints.”***

This case study has been anonymised.



## MEET AMANDA

Age: 50

Family: Married with two children, aged 10 and 13

Work: Full-time

Length of Menopause: 3 years

Activity level: ACTIVE

Image for illustration purposes only.



Before entering menopause Amanda was fairly active, walking her dog and swimming regularly. Having children, she didn't feel she had the time to do more exercise as they were still fairly young.

Hot flushes and night sweats affected her sleep and she felt sluggish. Amanda experienced a lull in her exercise levels as she tried to cope with her menopause.

She did not like the way she was feeling and wanted to do something positive for herself so enlisted the help of a personal trainer to become more active. She did not know what activities she could do and felt she needed the guidance and motivation of an instructor.

Amanda valued the 'me-time' exercise gave her away from her responsibilities. Within a month of exercising again, she had more energy, was sleeping better and felt the 'old me' was coming back.

**We need to PREVENT women like Amanda dropping off from physical activity.**

*“ Instead of coming home and thinking, right sorting out tea, sorting out children's homework, baths, this, that and the other, and then me slouching in front of the TV, I'm doing something positive for me... it's not about what I weigh, it's about how I feel myself. ”*

This case study has been anonymised.



# SUMMARY

**Supporting women to be active during menopause**





# MENOPAUSE: AN OPPORTUNITY TO RE-INTRODUCE AND SUPPORT PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

## 1. AN OPPORTUNITY TO RE-ENGAGE IN EXERCISE:

Menopause can be very challenging for women BUT... it is also a **time of re-evaluation and an opportunity** to encourage positive physical activity behaviours. This can be harnessed by sport providers.

## 2. TAP INTO THE STRONG DESIRE TO DO MORE:

Menopause presents significant barriers for women to be active YET... the **desire to be more active is HIGH**. We need to bridge this gap.

## 3. EXERCISE AS A THERAPY:

Physical activity can help manage menopausal symptoms and improve long-term health; **this is a significant selling point to inactive women** who may be struggling to cope.

## 4. A NATURAL POINT OF REAPPRAISAL:

Women are **primed for sport and physical activity** during menopause, seeking ways to take back control of their life and redefine themselves. This is a time when they are actively seeking knowledge and understanding so provides channels through which to target and communicate with them about physical activity.





# ENGAGE AND EMPOWER

**For women to change their behaviour and become more active, they must have the capability, opportunity and motivation to do so.**

## 1. Leverage the opportunities of menopause through your communications

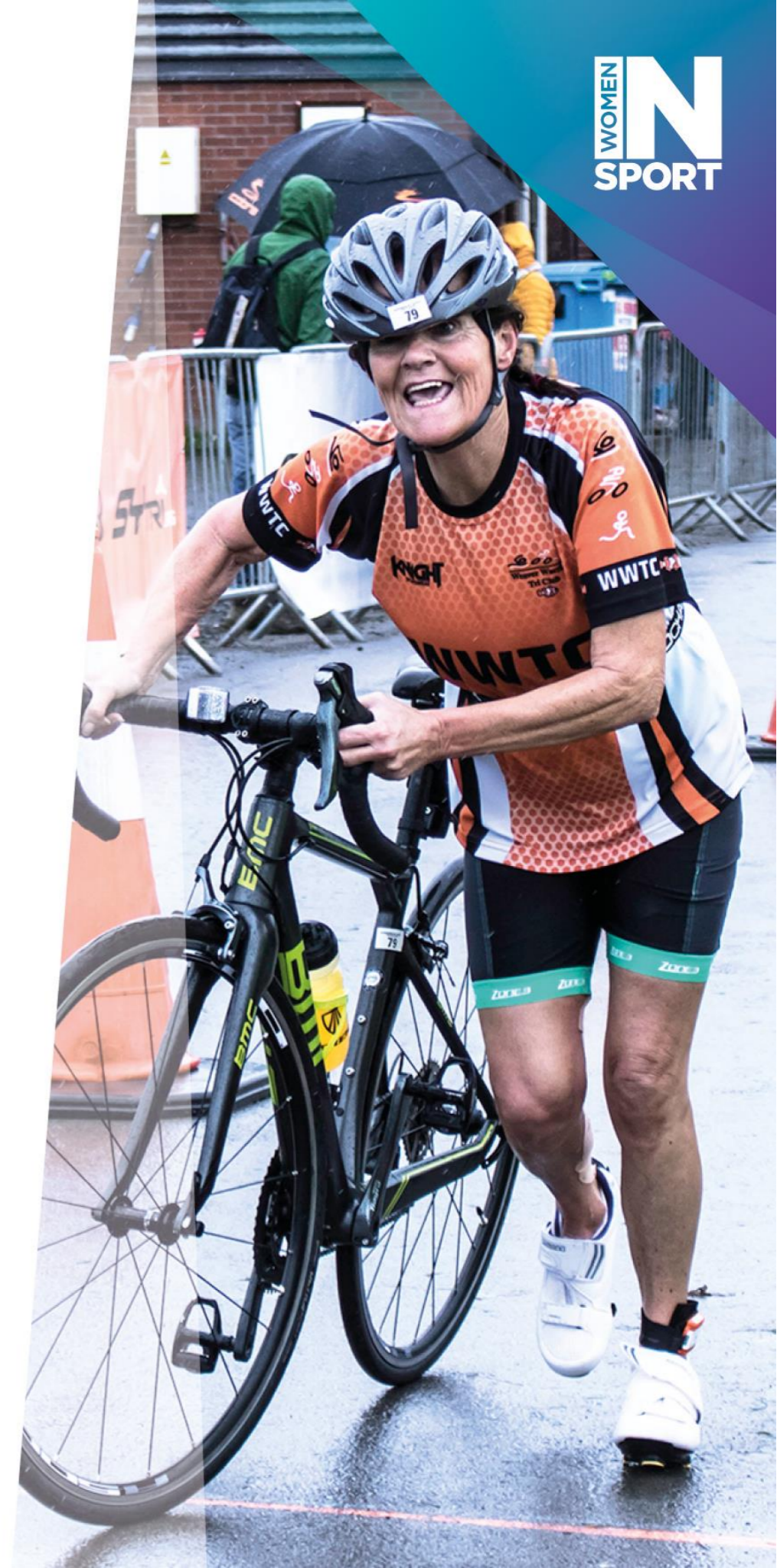
Link physical activity to taking control of your life. Empower women to feel that change is good and being active can be a 'new beginning'. Remind women that exercise can help alleviate the symptoms of menopause.

## 2. Use real stories

Use real women's stories to inspire women and help them feel confident that sport and exercise is beneficial and suitable for women in their stage of life.

## 3. Engage women's values

Align sport and physical activity offers to women's core values of 'feeling good' and 'looking good'.





# INFORM AND SUPPORT

## 4. Provide offers that are flexible, low commitment and menopause friendly

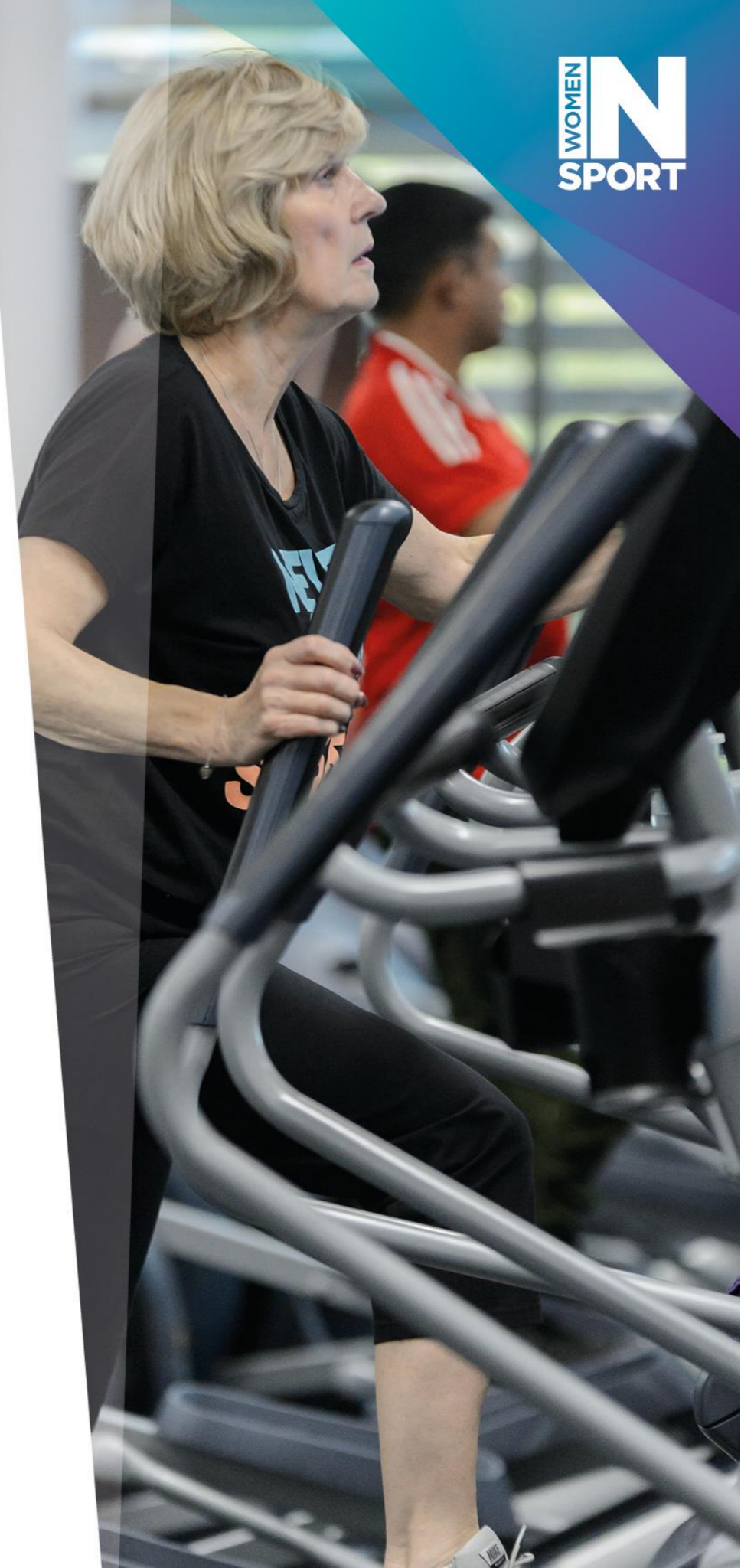
Menopause is unpredictable and women want the flexibility of being able to skip a session if they're having a tough day. Small changes such as air conditioned venues and private rooms located near to changing rooms can make a big difference to women in menopause.

## 5. Give guidance and reassurance on 'safe' physical activity

It is important that women know exactly what to expect from an activity before attending. Once there, they need guidance and reassurance on how to exercise; help women build confidence in their physical abilities.

## 6. Encourage social support

Make social support a core element of your offer. Encourage women to 'bring a friend' and have fun. Make time for socialising before, during and after sessions and perhaps align sessions with menopause support groups. Supportive instructors who show empathy and understanding of women's needs are important.





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