# Creative pause: A collaborative, autoethnographic research project exploring how storytelling menopause experiences might support wellbeing

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**Abstract**
This article reports on Creative Pause: a pilot research project, funded by Research England that explored creative responses to lived experiences of menopause and measured the effects on wellbeing. Menopause is a major part of the life course, yet its wellbeing implications remain poorly understood and this leads to negative impacts on lives. Despite recent media attention, there is a lack of understanding of lived experience and a lack of visible stories about menopause in literary texts and the arts. With creative workshops in poetry, dance, drawing and other embodied writing techniques, the project identified that workshops can support the wellbeing of people navigating this obscured stage in the life course. This collaborative, autoethnographic article co-produced by workshop participants (equally valued as researchers) and the research team uses dialogue, creative and reflective writing to explore the lived experience of menopause. It will show how creativity, specifically storytelling through writing, image, speaking and listening, or movement, can help not only navigate this transitional life stage but also raise awareness and consequently understanding. We argue that supporting people to tell and share stories that draw on lived experiences of the menopause can support them to navigate this liminal space.

**Keywords:** menopause, creative workshops, storytelling, collaborative autoethnography, conversation

# Introduction

Menopause currently affects the lives of millions of women globally and will be an issue of increasing concern as the population ages during the next few decades. Menopause is a complex time in a woman's life, leading to both physical and emotional challenges (de Salis et al 2018) yet its wellbeing implications remain poorly understood and this leads to negative impacts on how people experience menopause. There is a limited understanding of lived experience and a lack of visible stories about menopause in literary texts and the arts (Dillaway and Wershler 2021; Manguso 2019; King 2013). Consequently, menopause as a stage in the life course remains obscured and this can be alienating to those experiencing its various stages. This article reports on a qualitative research project, Creative Pause, that identified storytelling, specifically collaborative autoethnography (Chang 2013) can create a moment of pause and have beneficial impacts on health and wellbeing. We argue that supporting women to tell and share stories that draw on lived experiences of the menopause can support them navigate this liminal space and transitional time of uncertainty.

Dillaway (2020: 253), says that while there is "existing clinical and attitudinal research on reproductive aging, we often forget to focus on the phenomenological experience of perimenopause and menopause—that is, *the lived, embodied, day-to-day experience of this reproductive and life course transition*." Menopause is a normal life transition which is associated with symptoms which may vary in severity from minor to more troublesome and be experienced over long or short time periods. Menopause is defined as not having had a period for at least 12 months and according to NICE medical guidelines, perimenopause can be defined if the patient has any "new onset vasomotor symptoms and any changes in their menstrual cycle" (NICE 2015: 8). Symptoms are many and varied and can include mood changes, memory problems, fatigue, hot flushes, vaginal dryness, weight gain, hair growth,

changes in libido, insomnia. Menopause is a milestone which only makes sense in retrospect and as this transition lasts for years and sometimes decades, symptoms change over time and can be filled with uncertainty. Dillaway (2020: 253) goes on to say that in fact "acknowledging and owning this uncertainty could be a new and different way of approaching and thriving during this reproductive transition." The language surrounding this time in life also differs in the medical world from the everyday experience, which is often hidden or shrouded in silence. Workshops such as the ones developed for the Creative Pause pilot project use storytelling in its many forms to give voice, language and embodied understanding to the many different menopausal experiences and so support wellbeing, helping to navigate an uncertain time.

## Research Context

The starting point for the Creative Pause Project came from an awareness that cultural constructions of the menopause raise and shape debates about what it means to be embodied, the aging process and how we conceptualise the limits of human subjectivity (Komesaroff et al 1997). It remains important to continue to destabilise the 'deficiency disease' model of the menopause in order to develop inclusive and broader health and social support, for those who require it and to develop empowering, life affirming, materially and context sensitive representations and narratives. There are tensions however, mainly not to reproduce the polarised discourses / representations that already characterise women's ageing: namely those that reduce women to frail, unproductive, burdensome and readily—invisiblised bodies on one hand—on the other, the "relentless buoyancy" (Segal 2013: 179) of privileged bodies, imagined as freed from the material realities of the ageing body; those whom Stephen Katz (2005: 188) defines as those who grow old without ageing.

This is important for several reasons: The first is that there is already a strong suggestion that current medical models may be preventing women from seeking help or guidance should they require it: the British Menopause Society's Ipsos MORI survey in 2016 found that only half of women experiencing symptoms, or had experienced them, consulted a healthcare professional. This may well suggest that women did not regard that their experiences necessitated help. Indeed, the title of the report's press report 'are women suffering in silence?' foreclosures women's approach to the 'change' as a natural aspect of life: there are then, different possible reading to the report's claim that 'among those who have not consulted a healthcare professional for their menopause symptoms, more than a third (35%) believe it is something they should have to put up with'. However, the survey indicated 42% of the sample found their experiences 'worse or much worse than expected' with half of women surveyed saying their menopause symptoms have affected their home life, their social life (36%), and work life (36%) (The British Menopause Society 2016). It is important then, not to marginalise women's material realities of the menopause.

It is important too, not to simply 'pitch' the multiple perspectives derived from women's experiences against a medical knowledge that is perceived to be, or represented as monolithic. Murtagh and Hepworth are amongst those who remind us that medicine is not a "static field in its construction of the menopause" (2005) not least because of a concern to deal with women's critiques and bring women into the decision-making process. Although the deficiency model is hegemonic without and outside of medicine, there is still considerable uncertainty and hesitation in how healthcare practitioners apply and negotiate 'deficiency' understanding to women, particularly around advice on HRT take up (Niland and Lyons 2003) which is due to be updated in 2024. Nor should we think of menopause multiplicities as mutually exclusive: Ballard et al (2001: 397) research is clear that their participants

regarded the menopause as a ‘medical event’ which they understood as happening within the context of their lives. Similarly, Lyons and Griffin’s (2003) comparison of menopause self-help texts found that ‘traditional medical’ texts and those that were ‘more ‘woman-centred’, shared areas of similarity in the ways the menopause was represented as subject to women’s ‘management’. At the heart of this project was (and still is) a desire to respond to the lack of existing stories and narratives about lived experiences with menopause and for this response to be diverse and inclusive, identifying existing gaps in the literature in terms of stories not yet visible in research on menopausal life and to work to identify ways to ethically and sensitively address those gaps.

## Research Methods

## Storytelling

Storytelling can help us make sense of the chaotic and confusing and has always been vital to qualitative research (Gilbert 2002). Bringing elements of experience, thought, and feeling together on one page or text, can help researchers identify a central theme or themes (Polkinghorne 1995) that can give clarity to the previously unclear or obscured, and this has obvious benefits for both readers and writers of such texts. Working in this way, storytelling can connect people via shared experiences whilst also maintaining respect and valuing individual stories and experiences that might not have previously been identified in research. In the Creative Pause project, we offered a range of methods of storytelling (autobiography, poetry, prose, dance), hoping that people would identify a mode of telling their story that felt accessible to them without privileging text which can often alienate participants, especially if they are being asked to write in a language which is not their first. A focus of the project was to include and value a diverse range of styles and stories that would make the workshops accessible and appealing to as many people as possible.

Plummer (1994) argues that people tell stories, which are not only personal, but which also form part of larger cultural, and historical narratives. Narrative puts the personal and the social in the same space; in an overlapping, intricate relationship (Speedy 2007). This is highly relevant here as there are fewer stories about older women (Sharratt 2021) – especially autobiographical accounts but the Creative Pause project aimed to use storytelling to address gaps in research in relation to experiences with menopause which typically – but by no means only – affects women over 50.

Stories have the ability to provide insights into contextual circumstances most people may not have experienced first-hand (Mattingly and Garro 2001) and research exploring human stories is often considered as the 'flip-side' of established discourses (Bamberg 2004), able to challenge dominant societal narratives and 'carry rhetorical weight' (Mattingly and Garro 2001: 5) making it highly appropriate for feminist qualitative research seeking to challenge patriarchy and raise awareness about women's experiences.

In Laugh of the Medusa, Cixous suggests that: "Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing...Woman must put herself into the text - as into the world and into history - by her own movement." (Cixous 1976: 875). The writings that were developed in the workshops were to enable the participants to rethink and reimagine their own stories, to help them gain perspective and discover meaning (Kvale 1996). Rather than coding and explaining these stories that are shared, the project seeks instead to bring the conversations to value the stories and mix of writing styles and to acknowledge the individual voices within the research instead of simply trying to code and/or report what happened (Dundar Jnr and Rodriguez 2003).

Tedlock (2000) argues that "women's ethnographic and autobiographical intentions are often powered by the motive to convince readers of the author's self-worth, to clarify and authenticate their self-images" (Tedlock 2000: 468) and identifies this as a feminist issue. The authors suggest that storying oneself can offer the necessary detachment that is needed when seeking a viewpoint from which to examine one's lived experiences (Moriarty 2017). This distance can provide a space for reflection that can trigger meaning-making and offer powerful insight into one's own identity. This process can offer people a method for authenticating self-image and recovering feelings of self-worth, allowing for a more expansive and liberated self that is able to critique and also resist oppressive cultures that are synonymous with traditional academic work (Moriarty 2019).

## Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a qualitative research methodology that values personal storytelling and autobiographical insights gathered through "research, writing, story and method that connect autoethnography as a methodology often seeks to value creative and evocative storytelling in academic research including stories about problematic life events and trauma" (Moriarty 2013). As Carolyn Ellis says in her methodological novel, *The Ethnographic I*, autoethnography is "research, writing, story [graphy], and method that connect the autobiographical [auto] and personal to the cultural, social and political [ethno]" (Ellis 2004: xix). The forms used in autoethnography can include emotion, introspection, dialogue, story, scenes and borrow techniques from literary writing. In this way, autoethnography disrupts traditional academic writing traditions.

In the *Handbook of Autoethnography*, Holman Jones, Adams and Ellis (2013: 32) identify five purposes for autoethnographic work:

1. disrupting norms or research practice and representation
2. working from insider knowledge
3. manoeuvring through pain, confusion, anger and uncertainty
4. breaking silence/(re)claiming voice
5. making work accessible.

The process of telling and sharing stories can be transformational and empowering, allowing for a more expansive and liberated self (Marr and Moriarty 2021). Autoethnography can and must provide spaces for flourishing rather than trapping people in potentially reductive narratives and embrace the multi-faceted identities we all have rather than repressing people in just one. And once others read these stories, they have time to think, reflect, act. In this way, the "weaving of the visual, poetic, and prose narratives is a creative, intuitive, and imaginative process that evolved through the autoethnographic act….Allowing the body to speak in her own terms and moving beyond the abyss." (Metta 2010: 499)

Collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al 2013: 25) allows for:

1. Collective exploration of researcher subjectivity
2. Power-sharing among research-participants
3. Efficiency and enrichment in the research process
4. Deeper learning about self and other
5. Community building.

And these are the principles that guided the Creative Pause Project, reassuring the research team that collaborative autoethnography was a suitable approach, able to resist critique of autoethnography that it is inward facing and narcisstic (Delamont 2007). Instead, this approach seeks to encourage a diverse range of voices and personal stories and value them as equal to conventional academic research (Moriarty 2019).

# About the Creative Pause Project

## The Creative Workshops

All workshops were hosted at the Phoenix Art Space in Brighton. The gallery has a history of community engagement and a reputation as a champion of diversity and it was identified as an appropriate venue for events bringing community partners and researchers together. The combined expertise of the workshop facilitators, who were recruited for their experience of running workshops with vulnerable groups and their own practice exploring menopause, and the experience of the project leader meant that the project built on existing expertise. This increased the viability of the project and feedback (via feedback forms issued at the end of each of the four workshops) was unanimously positive. The workshop programme consisted of:

1. Book of spells—life writing and spells to reclaim narratives around ageing.
2. Poetry—found poetry using medical menopause texts.
3. Writing as activism and rest.
4. Drawing and movement.

Because of the funding, the workshops were free to all.

## Safety in the workshops

At the start of the project, it was agreed that certain ways of working were essential to make the participants and facilitators feel safe in the workshops. These were based on earlier work in the field (Moriarty and Parks, 2022b) and included:

1. No costs attached to any of the workshops, free to join and all materials resourced by the project.
2. No-one obliged to share their stories in the workshops or after for project dissemination, just taking part was absolutely fine.
3. Workshops booked via the project research assistant and consent had to be given before people could join the workshops.
4. Safety brief at the start of every session.
5. The project leader attended every workshop to check-in with workshop facilitators, discuss any issues, share concerns and offer support.
6. No-one could watch or listen into the workshops unless actively taking part.

Despite the collaborative discussions and clear commitment to ethical practice from all of the writers and artists, the workshops failed to recruit many people and this was a potential barrier that has informed our future thinking and plans. In a future funding bid to the Arts and Humanities Research Council, we have decided not to host public workshops but to instead identify an international collective of artists, academics, community partners and activists who will be paid for their time on the project, including devising stories about experiences with menopause that will be used to create a digital archive of critical and creative work about this obscured stage of the life course.

## Wellbeing assessment

A total of seven participants attended at least one workshop of the four offered. They completed the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) (Tennant et al 2007) before participating in the first workshop, reflecting on their wellbeing during the preceding two weeks. They then completed the scale again after the last workshop, reflecting their wellbeing during the preceding two weeks which included the workshops themselves. This allowed for an assessment of the impact of the workshops on their wellbeing.

| Participant | Wellbeing score before first workshop | Wellbeing score after last workshop | No. of workshops attended |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 39 | 47 | 4 |
| 2 | 37 | 41 | 2 |
| 3 | 45 | 52 | 4 |
| 4 | 27 | 28 | 4 |
| 5 | 40 | 55 | 3 |
| 6 | 58 | 57 | 3 |
| 7 | 45 | 48 | 1 |

A paired-samples t-test was conducted to compare the wellbeing of participants before they participated in the first workshop and following the last workshop. There was a significant difference between wellbeing before the first workshop ($\bar{x}$ = 41.74, SD = 9.45) and wellbeing after the final workshop ($\bar{x}$ =46.86, SD = 9,89), $t(6) = -2.632$, $p < 0.05$. Despite the low sample size, these results suggest that participating in the workshops had a beneficial impact on wellbeing as measured by the WEMWBS.

## Conversation and Creative Work

The next part of this article presents dialogue about and creative work from the initial project at Phoenix Art Space. We have not attempted to code or deconstruct what emerged as working in this way, we have been able to include the words and writings of two of the

workshop participants. Instead of researching about others in our research, we are researching with them and argue that this offers a way of being more inclusive in academic research.

## The Conversation as Collaborative Autoethnography

Following the creative workshops, we invited participants (as co-researchers) to share their creative work and to take part in a recorded reflective conversation about menopause and the Creative Pause project. This, it was explained, would then become part of an article for publication. The workshop participants then became co-researchers and consequently co-authors as they were consulted at every stage in the writing up process. The workshops were free to take part in, and then any further optional research time was paid for. This way of working aligns with the three dimensions that Wenger identifies as being synonymous with a community of practice:

- What it is about—its joint enterprise as understood and continually renegotiated by its members
- How it functions—the relationships of mutual engagement that bind members together into a social entity
- What capability it has produced—the shared repertoire of communal resources (routines, sensibilities, artifacts, vocabulary, styles, etc.) that members have developed over time. (Wenger 1998: 2).

We suggest that Creative Pause:

- Is about menopause, a condition that we were all experiencing or had experienced;
- Functions by valuing each of the people taking part as researchers whose stories make a valuable contribution to our understanding of menopause and identifying stories of lived experience as research;

- Can help us to create resources – this article and a future funding bid – that centres storytelling about lived experience of menopause as intrinsic to research into this complex time.

We devised and shared the questions below before the recorded online conversation, while acknowledging the need for and allowing space for the dialogue to unfold naturally. We also applied to the University of Brighton's ethics committee to ensure that informed consent was gained and that this way of working met the university's criteria for ethical research.

The questions we began with were:

1. Do you think experiences of menopause are currently represented in our culture? If so, how and what do you think about these representations?
2. Which stories are currently missing or underrepresented in research about menopause? Do you feel that your experience is seen/heard?
3. What was your expectation for the workshop? Why did you sign up?
4. What happened in the workshops – what inspired, what was hard? What would you like to have seen/seen more of?
5. What did you produce and how do you feel about it?
6. Would you be happy for your work to be part of our dissemination and if so, how? (we are using collaborative autoethnography and happy to say more!)
7. How might this project be used to raise awareness and understanding about menopause as a stage in the life course that is currently still obscured?
8. What else would you like to add?

The conversation was written up in a way that makes sense to a reader but also stays close to the live conversation. In this way, our experience of this project has provided us with a living archive (Kitch 2018) that we will now share as a dialogue, situating ourselves and our experiences of the project in order to disseminate our methods.

J: Hi, I'm Jess. This work grew out of conversations and an exchange of stories. As I went into perimenopause, I felt as if there was an absence of stories and experiences. Thank you both for taking part in the pilot project. The contributions were generous, creative, personal and important. Let's introduce ourselves.

M: I'm Mel and I'm a writer, researcher and I facilitate creative writing workshops. I've been working with Jess on storytelling research projects with topics such as motherhood, gender-based violence and now menopause.

F: I was drawn to this project because I am interested in creative expression, rather than the need to talk about menopause. But it's been interesting to notice the topics that have turned up in conversations I've had with friends subsequently.

T: I am a lecturer in midwifery and I selfishly saw it as a time for me to think about some of the things that were going on for me, but that nobody else I know is interested in. It was about carving a bit of time and space in an otherwise overloaded life to think about myself.

J: Let's crack on with the first question: Do you think experiences of menopause are currently represented in our culture? If so, how and what do you think of these representations?

F: The short answer is no. For example, in soap operas everything has been dealt with: incest, dementia, mental health, gender identity, but nobody mentions menopause. Nobody mentions it in the workplace either.

T: There have been more recent mentions, but the discussion is reductionist and centred around this idea that menopause is bad and that everyone should be on HRT to continue being capitalist good little worker bees. It's not seen as a positive rite of passage, but as a negative biomedical, physical problem that we deal with by taking medication. My experiences have been much more emotional and psychological than physical and I don't think that's explored.

M: I've been finding that there is another narrative in the alternative health world, that menopause is an empowering time but this negates the psychological and societal difficulties that people go through.

T: And it's not really for me to say, being a middle class, white woman, but the language feels as if it has been co-opted by us again. You don't feel as if there are a multiplicity of voices and experiences, whether it's class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or faith.

F: I look at my daughters and notice that their conversations about periods are better than the conversations I had in my generation, so I'm hoping that this will carry forward for them. Culturally, menopause in women has always been something to tease.

M: The next question is: Which stories are currently missing or underrepresented in research about menopause? And do you feel your experience is seen and heard?

T: I am married to a woman and I think this aspect is missing because I often hear about what men should know, but there are other relationships and ways of doing things. I feel as if menopause ends up being a social catchall for an awful lot of things that are happening to women. I'm dealing with becoming a grandparent, elderly parents, bereavement as well as employment issues and health issues that may not be related specifically to menopause. There's an awful lot going on at this time in life that may not be all to do with menopause but it all gets lumped together. You know – *she's menopausal*.

J: I often hear of women, who happen to be going through menopause, being problematised, particularly in the workplace.

T: I like returning to the idea of 'the change' because it's that moment or several years when you take stock. We talked about this in the workshops. It's not just a question of thinking about what we've lost in terms of youth and beauty but in terms of how we can change and grow and maybe what we want our lives to look like for the next 30 or 40 years. So yeah, I completely agree. I had a bit of a breakdown, went off work for six months, reduced my hours and came back with a different role and I still feel really guilty about that because I'm somehow, you know, not pulling my weight. Why can't people accept that I want to do different things with my life?

F: I moved out of my family home at precisely that time in my life and I'm wondering how much of it was empty nest syndrome. I feel a lot calmer now but I also really love living on my own. I don't regret it but it is fascinating to look at the impact menopause has on relationships.

J: Let's move on to the workshops. What were your expectations for the workshops and why did you sign up?

T: I signed up immediately because menopause has been on my mind. I've been battling with it for several years now. As I mentioned, in the middle of it was a busy time at work. I thought I didn't have time because it would be time out of work. Then I thought, you know what? I'm doing it anyway. That's why I came to all the workshops. I valued the concept of having some time to be with other people and to explore something that was important to me and had an impact on every single moment of my life, but that nobody ever talked about. I love writing but it's usually academic, so I looked forward to being surprised and challenged.

M: What happened in the workshops? What inspired you? What did you find hard and what would you have liked more of?

F: I loved the poetry. I feel I created a lot which I was pleased with and there was a lot of variety. The last workshop with the dancing and drawing was a very special, energetic room to have been in. There was a moment when this wonderful female energy burst out that we could actually do something and I became teary.

J: So what did you actually produce? Can you describe particular things and how you felt about it?

T: I found the process of re-engagement interesting. To kind of come back to it and think, oh I didn't know I wrote that. I loved the spell. That really, in a way I didn't expect, spoke to me

and I hadn't enjoyed poetry before. I loved the art and I've been thinking about where to go with it next. I've decided I'm going to knit a jumper with menopause across the chest to make it completely visible.

F: Around the time of hitting my fifties, I bought a sketchbook and did some sewing. To give myself the time and permission to play was so important when I'd been busy bringing up children.

J: It was permission to be vulnerable as well. I'm used to writing workshops but drawing and dancing was something I'm much less comfortable with. Going forward, we do need to think about how we don't privilege texts and make space for other ways of telling stories.

T: When I was off with anxiety and depression, I taught myself to crochet. I was determined to give myself the time, you know, hour after hour. There is such negativity around what is seen as women's crafts as well but there are people working on it to reclaim it as a radical space.

J: Just wondering, how might this project be used to develop understanding about menopause as a stage in the life course? And how might we meaningfully work with people in the workshop space too?

F: I struggle a bit with this question because I was thinking that the reason we got on so well and were all so relaxed during the last session is because everyone in the room is naturally drawn to creative opportunities. So I was struggling with – who are you going to pull into this? Who is it going to be useful for? How do you make it accessible to people who don't

realise how wonderful it is to have that opportunity? You know, how to get it into GP surgeries where people are experiencing loneliness or who haven't got the self-confidence or finance to seek out a course.

J: One of the big problems we had with workshops was that we didn't get a huge response and I think for a lot of people, it's the idea of luxury time. There was a stigma associated with the menopause too and how to get round this is something we are problematising in future research. Is there anything else you wanted to raise or mention that you think might help the project going forward?
T: How we manage inclusivity and represent a broad range of voices. And your definition of what creative is and broadening that to a wider variety of creative endeavours.

F: I am wondering about the word 'menopause' as well because it's a continuum, isn't it? It needs destigmatising. I didn't read anything about the menopause because I didn't want to. What drew me in was the chance to be creative.

J: That's why we want to do it because I had no idea. In Kenya, menopause is seen as a positive time in life, when women share their wisdom with younger women and experience rituals. We are looking to learn from other cultures, communities and individuals about how they navigate menopause to try and create something that might be useful for other people.

## Creative responses written during the workshops

Here are extracts of work written during the Creative Pause Project workshops, followed by reflections on the process by each author. We invited all the participants to submit work for publication in this article and these were the pieces two participants chose to submit. These

pieces were written by Tania Staras (Spell for finding peace; I will put in the pot; Vegetable)

and Fiona Stevenson (Blood red; Found poem).

## Spell for finding peace, for breath and pause

Date: the equinox

Time: the rising of the full moon

Place: outside on a windswept hill, moon rising over the sea, hawthorns bent in the prevailing wind. Something of a blasted heath but not bleak. A sense of ages. The air smells fresh but there is something behind it.

Clothes: a long cloak whipping in the wind. The body enveloped. Nobody would know who it was underneath that fabric. Soft wool. Embracing. Hiding secrets.

Tools & ingredients: a scrap of cloth. Herbs and grasses. A glass of white wine. A cup of darkness, a sliver of sunlight. My own blood, a grey hair and a child's hair. A wooden bowl – the one I keep my working yarn in. No spoon – just fingers and hands. My measurements are in handfuls. Ingredients running though my fingers. Feeling everything.

Phrase: 'Let's get to a straight edge'. Tidying up, being neat. But let's not. Make it curvy, wavy, wiggly.

It tastes sharp and creamy, feels rough to make me alive, soft to comfort me. The colours are a penumbra – orange sky and shadowed earth. What the world looks like when you have to imagine it.

### Vegetable

I am a potato
Lumpy and shapeless
Tucked away in the dark
Doing my thing
Dug up by other hands
Sliced and diced
Versatile, quotidian, useful
Not admired or put on a pedestal
Taken for granted
I am the everyday
The background to a thousand meals
A million conversations
I support dreams too many to count

### Reflection

*I enjoyed it.  I was exhausted when I got home – new people, new places. Thinking about myself – why is that more tiring than thinking about others? I really appreciated the space and time to be selfish, to turn inward and to be irresponsible. I don't mean irresponsible – I think I mean just not to be the responsible one. The grown-up leading the activities, managing the situation, sorting things out. I don't have enough time in my life to be irresponsible. I'm always the grown-up. My pot-poem spoke to the child and the less responsible – days at the cricket, handstands and sunsets and sports cars, eating rubbish food and reading all day. Maybe I need to find time for that in my life. More time.*
*And my relationship with my body, with activity and action and contemplation. All jumbled up. I think I am quiet sat in a library but I never am. I buzz about – I sit when everyone else is done. And then I'm done in. But I don't judge my body like I used to. I don't need to be thin or groomed. The cloak of menopause envelops me and I love that.*

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## Blood red

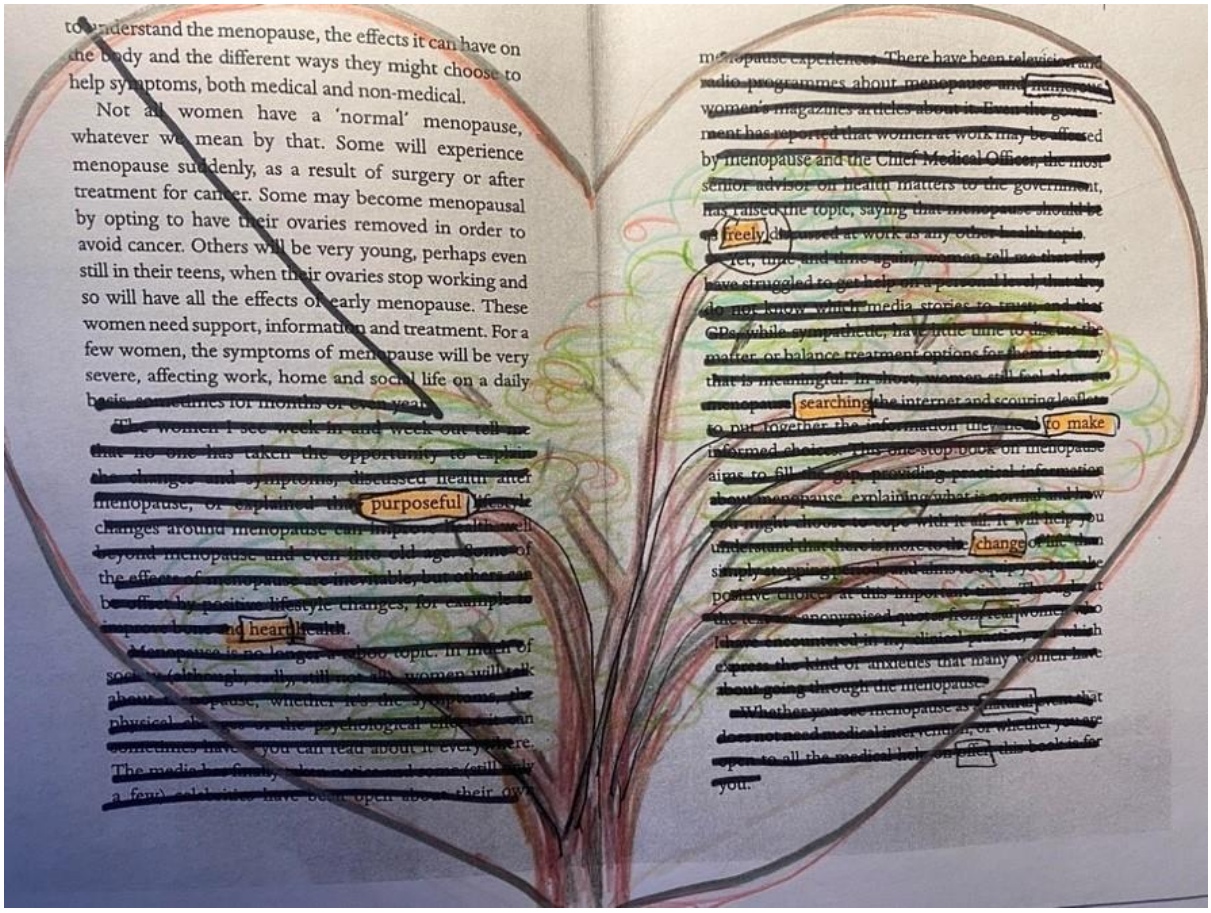
Blood red, seeing red
Angry, angry, angry
Won't let the music stop.

Glorious roller-coaster
Hormone cocktail high
Keep-up, keep-up.

Energy cauldron
Overflow, unclog, lighten-up
Shed, soar, fly.

## Found poem

(text from Menopause: The One-Stop Guide)
Highlighted words: purposeful heart freely searching to make change




## Reflection

*I enjoyed writing the poem and it was good to get it done as at that time, I'd given myself the challenge of writing a poem a day for a month, so that was it for the day, done instead of leaving it til five to midnight, as is often the case. But I couldn't get to grips with the blackout poem or found poem because I wasn't coming up with what I wanted, but then after the workshop, I repeated the process. And I got it. I was thrilled with the words I found in the text: purposeful heart freely searching to make change. I loved the density and succinctness and the message in the words. It wouldn't have been a technique I would have thought to try without the workshop, so I was delighted to try something new.*

# Conclusion

Collaborative autoethnography (Chang et al 2013) is a research methodology that seeks to draw people into the research instead of writing about them (Parks and Moriarty 2022). Ellis and Bochner call this approach to research "a search for a better conversation in the face of all the barriers and boundaries" (Ellis and Bochner 2000: 748). The method of disseminating the Creative Pause project that we have identified here, seeks to value conversation as a method of research, offering insights into expertise and experience without reducing these dialogues as merely data and instead placing an emphasis on the voices in this research and

their lived experiences. Wenger (1998) suggests that: “Communities of practice develop around things that matter to people. As a result, their practices reflect the members' own understanding of what is important.” (Wenger 1998: 2) and we discovered that by sharing stories of our menopause, we were able to value unique and shared experiences that deepened our connection to each other, but also offered more knowledge and understanding of this complex time. It has also allowed us to create new knowledge and resources—including this article and a funding bid to the Arts and Humanities Research Council—which Wenger states is a key component of any community of practice (1998).

This project built on established best practice in creative workshops (Parks, Moriarty and Vincent 2022) and identified stories and creative practice as having the potential to raise awareness, develop empathy and inform policies and practices related to menopause. Having used autoethnography as a methodology in the past to bring in and connect colleagues, we thought it would be possible to adapt it to level the playing field in traditional academic research where the academic often researches about the participants in research, rather than valuing them as co-creators. This approach has implications for issues of power and control within the field of co-production (Bell and Pahl: 2018), and instead, this article advocates a way of conducting and disseminating research that we have developed and written together. It is a method of disseminating research that we identify as collaborative, holistic, feminist. Working in this way, we hope that this project and our approach can contribute to meaningful societal change around menopause.

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