

Let's Talk: Exercise and Self Care

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Why a conversation about physical activity and selfcare?

We know that an active lifestyle is important to prevent illness and improve our physical and mental wellbeing, helping us to feel our best.

We all hear the advice to just 'go for a walk or run. Step outside. Cycle. Play a game. Garden. Dance. Exercising makes you feel good'. We wanted to hear what helped, and what hindered, the women in our conversation group when it came to prioritising exercise and selfcare.

National research from Sport England shows that:

- There are 313,600 fewer women than men who are regularly active
- More men do sport and physical activity than women at almost every age group
- When asked, 13 million women said they'd like to do more sport and physical activity
- 4 in 10 women are not active enough to ensure they get the full health benefits.
- stubborn inequalities still remain, such as women from lower socio-economic groups and Black and South Asian communities being less likely to be active.

The conversation was led by Portia Simond from All People Active, an organisation who provide free and affordable sport and physical activity for all. Their goal is to help all people see physical activity, sport, wellbeing and happiness as core life enhancers rather than added extras or something that 'sporty people' do.

Need inspiration?

See the last page for some groups we talked about. Or ask your friends where they go for top tips on friendly and safe places to exercise, check out the Milton Keynes Council leisure, sport and community activity webpage, or ask at your local parish or town council – there is usually something local for you to try!

What we talked about

We met at the Mead Centre in Newport Pagnell in November 2022. We had eight women involved in the conversation, all with different approaches and thoughts about exercise and wellbeing. Although the experiences related were varied, there was a consensus among the group that their exercise and selfcare time was the first 'task' to be deprioritised when lives got busy.

Portia started the conversation by sharing her own experience of being diagnosed with Post Natal Depression after the birth of her second daughter. She told the groups how tough it was to deal with, how this was not something anyone expected to feel or to go through. She knew she needed something else and decided to give running a go. She talked about how she started running from lamp post to lamp post and started to enjoy the focus it gave her, the change of surroundings, and the challenge of longer and longer runs. The whole group were captivated by her story – especially when she then told us how she had progressed to marathons and even ultramarathons.

Portia talked about the importance of being kind to ourselves and developing the relationship between our bodies and our minds.

Barriers and enablers

Fear vs Confidence:

One of the barriers we talked about was the fear we each experienced. Some of that was around being scared to try something new – 'Can I do it?' Almost everyone in the group agreed that they had felt some anxiety at trying something new, some of the mothers in the group said they noticed that anxiety in their children as well. There was a conversation about how harshly we judged ourselves, and how we felt others were judging us. Sadly, there was also the fear of being a woman exercising, especially running or walking, alone.

There was a very supportive conversation had to overcome some of these fears. We talked about the benefits of joining a running or walking group to feel safer, especially when it gets dark so early in the day. For those who didn't feel that a group was necessarily 'their thing', we talked about finding a friend to exercise with, and the added benefit of having someone to keep you going.

We talked about being kind to ourselves and others, and that we needed to remember that it was OK to try new things, and that everyone was a beginner at everything at some stage.

There was a fair bit of good humoured chat about how, as we get older, we care less about how other people see us.

Prioritising

Every person in the room mentioned how easy it was to let other people's needs take priority. All of the women in the room talked about how they made sure their children or their partners were able to participate in their chosen sport or activity. Whether that was by staying home to look after the children so that partners could run or go to the gym or team training or taking on the responsibility of making sure the children attended their clubs, sports or playdates.

We each shared the ways we had each ensured that we had set aside time for ourselves or thought about ways in which we could. It was acknowledged that a lot of the barriers to prioritisation of our own health were self-imposed, but that for many they were also societal expectations.

One woman told of how, because she had joined a class held on a set day and time, she had been more able to make this time 'sacred' from the start. It was also suggested that having a routine or someone you could go with made it easier to stay consistent. Getting around the self-imposed restrictions were also easier if we felt that we would be letting someone else down if we didn't go. Portia reminded us that we needed to value ourselves and our health (mental and physical) as being as important as everyone else's. That we were responsible for ourselves.

Finances

The cost of memberships, classes, or equipment was also seen as a barrier. Portia was able to tell the group about the activities that All People Active are able to provide. There was a lot of information shared about voluntary and community groups in Milton Keynes who ran a number of different types of sports or activities for free, or at very low cost. One person talked about the dance class she was involved in, and how different everyone dressed for it.

Consistency

There was a lot of talk about what type of exercise each of us loved or hated, what we would try and what we wouldn't. One of our group said she had taken up swimming and talked about enjoying it so much that it made it easier to prioritise. Over the years she had tried many sports, but it had taken her a long time to find her 'thing'.

Portia shared how she had started by finding just 5 minutes a day to even just sit by herself and how difficult it had been to do this, but how it got easier as it became more of a habit and when she realised how much she needed this time out.

The women present all agreed, it was easier to make time for physical activity when it was something they enjoyed doing, or when they thought about how much better they felt afterwards. Finding 'your thing' was a big part of successfully making physical activity and selfcare an integral part of daily life.

What is available?

All People Active:

Provide free and very low-cost access to team sports, running groups, walking groups and more all across Milton Keynes:

<http://www.allpeopleactive.org>

MK Springers:

Provide Gymnastic sessions for all ages and all abilities, from fun and flexibility through to squad level. A registered charity whose members are able to can pay for their weekly classes and our Holiday club using Childcare Vouchers or they may be able to claim for up to 70% of these costs through Working Tax Credits. They may offer reduced fees to those families who are suffering financial hardship

<https://mkspringers.com/gymnastic-sessions/>

Lakeside Runners:

Lakeside Runners normally encourage runners to come and try a few sessions before officially joining, as they want to be sure you're happy with the sessions and enjoy it before committing. Sessions are at 18:15 on Tuesday and Thursday from Willen Lake (near Hotel entrance). They have a £20 per year social membership as well as an England Athletic Club membership.

<https://mklr.club/join-us/>

Redway Runners:

A community running club welcoming runners of all abilities in a fun, social environment. Redway Runners offer a wide variety of activities offering something for all abilities take place during the day and in the evenings. Membership is only £5 to the 31 March, joining between January and March gives you up to 15 months Membership, and entitles you to discounts in local running shops.

Parkrun:

A free, fun, and friendly weekly 5k community event. Walk, jog, run, volunteer or spectate. Milton Keynes parkrun takes place every Saturday at 9:00am.

<https://www.parkrun.org.uk/miltonkeynes/>

Swimming:

Prices for swimming vary between areas and leisure centres, look for what suits you here:

<https://www.milton-keynes.gov.uk/leisure-sport-and-community-activity/leisure-facilities>

About The Women's Monthly

Healthwatch Milton Keynes (HWMK) identified an emerging theme around gaps in knowledge, services, and support in the feedback being provided by women living and working in Milton Keynes.

One of the key issues women were raising with us was the need for information and understanding around menopause. HWMK held an event at a local café where women could come and share their experiences of menopause, the care and treatment that was available, and the care and treatment they would like to see available.

We invited a local Menopause Coach to the event and the women who attended found this very helpful. They also reported that having the opportunity to talk to other women who were experiencing similar symptoms was reassuring and enlightening.

This group of women said that they would like to see these types of discussion groups become a regular occurrence and this has led to the creation of the 'Women's Monthlies'. These have evolved over the year to include other areas of women's health including sexual health and general conversations around hormones and their effect on women's lives.

These events have become a regular monthly fixture in the HWMK calendar with conversations about menopause alternating with topics such as physical health and activity and spiritual health and wellbeing. HWMK invite mentors, coaches, and people with expertise to these events so that the women who attend are able to get guidance on, or answers to, questions they have on the topic of the evening.

General notes are taken by HWMK staff at these conversations and drawn into short briefing reports to provide insight to the organisations and professionals who will find them useful when thinking about the information and services they provide.



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