



Let's talk about **women's health**

How to approach conversations about
women's health in the workplace

Rightsteps

Introduction

As workplace mental health specialists, we recognise the power that starting a conversation can have when it comes to tackling stigma and breaking down barriers for accessing mental health and wellbeing support.

However, for many, initiating conversations safely about potentially taboo topics in the workplace can feel daunting, and we may find ourselves avoiding discussions surrounding important topics in case we say the “wrong thing”.

At Rightsteps, we believe that open communication is key to fostering supportive, understanding and inclusive workplace environments. That’s why each month we’ll be addressing topics which often go unspoken, exploring how to initiate and navigate conversations, be mindful in our language, and keep the discussion going amongst our teams and colleagues.



Talking about women's health in the workplace

Almost half of the UK workforce are women, yet there is a culture of silence surrounding the true impact of women's health-related challenges in the workplace. This silence heightens stigma and creates barriers when it comes to accessing essential support.

What do we mean by 'Women's Health'?

Women's health is a broad umbrella term often used when discussing topics which feel a bit taboo or "too personal" to speak frankly about.

When we think of what women's health encompasses, we may think of periods, pregnancy or anything gynaecological, but in reality, it covers so much more than that.

It can include, but is certainly not limited to menstruation, ovulation, UTIs, smear tests, endometriosis, PCOS, menopause, cancer, breast health, physical and mental health, nutrition, sleep, contraception, sexual health and much, much more.

Ultimately, 'Women's Health' is so general, universal and all-encompassing, that it's almost unbelievable that it can be summed up in one term. So, it's no wonder we might feel a bit lost when it comes to what language to use when discussing women's health, especially at work.



£11 bn

Inadequate support for conditions like menopause, endometriosis, and severe period pain costs the UK economy nearly **£11 billion annually** due to absenteeism and reduced productivity.

[NHS Confederation, 2024](#)

Why talking about women's health in the workplace matters

Many women consistently face health issues that impact their work, yet stigma and a lack of understanding often prevents them from seeking support.

Proactively creating a culture where women's health is openly discussed is essential, not just for individual wellbeing, but also organisational performance by promoting empathy and understanding amongst colleagues, strengthening team cohesion, enhancing productivity and job satisfaction, and reducing absenteeism.



Understanding **the impact**

Women's health, and the impact it has in work environments, is unique to each individual and will differ from person to person. As a result, a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to supporting women's health in workplace is not the answer.

However, by educating ourselves on the common challenges which many women face, we can begin to better understand the impact and take steps to offer meaningful support.

How women's health can impact work



81%

of women feel their employer wouldn't make reasonable adjustments, if they spoke up about a women's health issue.

[Womens Health, 2022](#)

Menstrual Health

The physical and emotional symptoms of menstrual cycles can have a profound impact on mental health, and ability to work. More than two-thirds of working women experience a negative impact at work due to menstruation symptoms.

57% of people suffering from period-related health problems have lied to their manager about their reason for taking sick leave.



40%

of women (2 in 5) believe their professional career development has been negatively impacted by a lack of support for women's health issues in the workplace.

[Gender Health Gap, 2023](#)

Menopause

Menopause, and peri-menopause, symptoms such as hot flushes, mood swings and fatigue can hinder concentration and performance at work, with 72% of women experiencing menopause reporting that it has impacted their ability to work.

Fertility

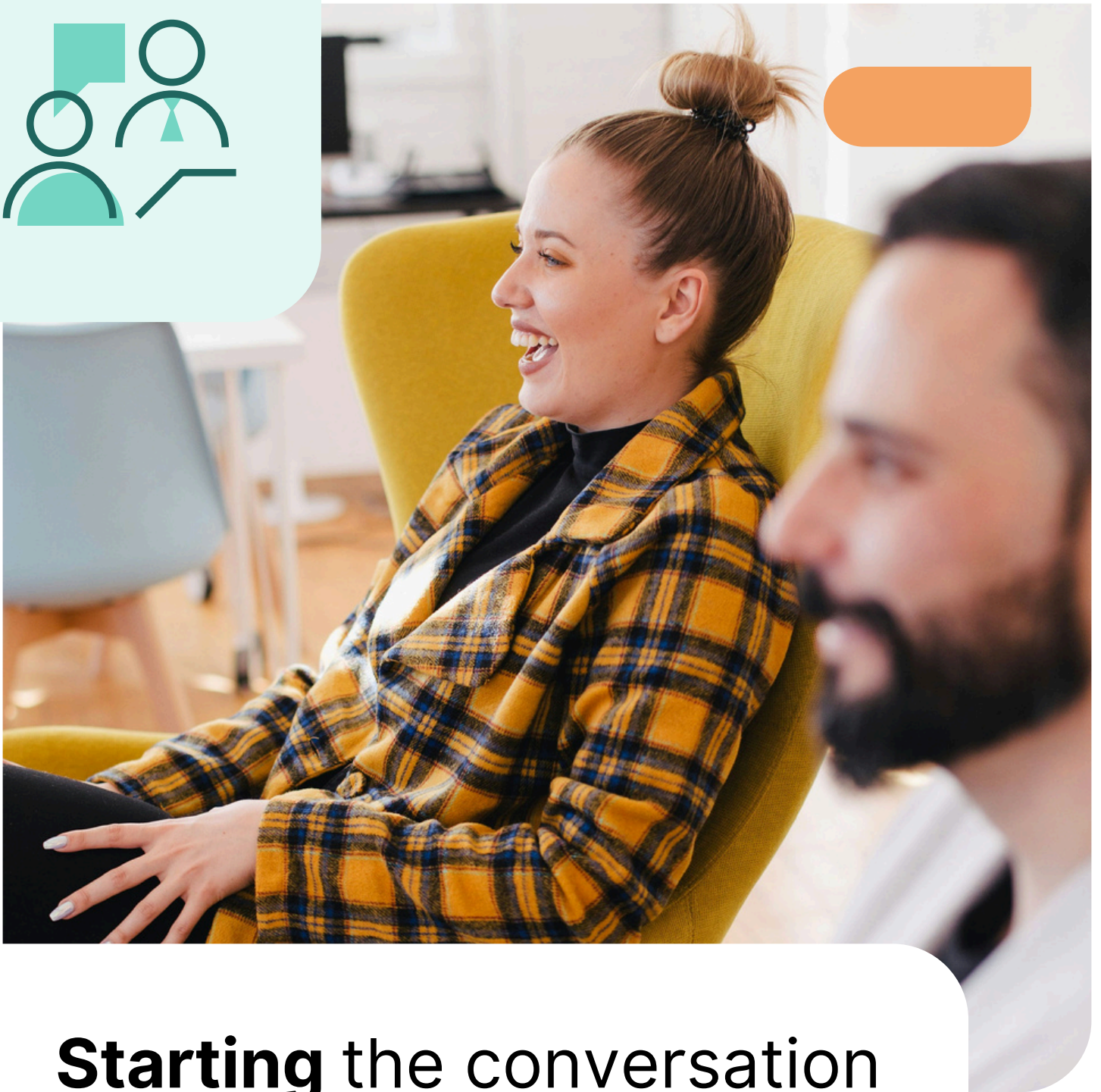
Fertility challenges, and undergoing treatments such as IVF, can be emotionally taxing and physically demanding, with side effects from medications and procedures affecting mood and energy levels.

As well as the emotional impact, fertility treatments can impact work in practical ways, such as medical appointments.

Research showed that 47% didn't tell their manager or HR they were experiencing fertility challenges, and almost one in five (19%) employees had considered leaving their job because of their experience at work in relation to fertility challenges, investigation or treatment.

Chronic Conditions

Women with chronic conditions such as Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS), estimated to affect 1 in 8 women, and Endometriosis, estimated to affect 1 in 10 women, can have debilitating symptoms which in turn impact ability to work, such as chronic pain and fatigue.



Starting the conversation

42% of women said they had heard derogatory comments regarding a female employee's health, generally regarding them taking time off, being difficult to work with or being unable to perform their duties.

A lack of understanding and empathy, and the use of derogatory language in relation to women's health (whether intentional or not), perpetuates stigma and makes speaking up much more difficult due to fear of judgement. The language that we use matters. Ensuring it is mindful, respectful and inclusive is crucial for fostering supportive workplace environments.

Neutral and respectful

Try to use neutral and respectful terminology rather than slang, colloquial terms or euphemisms which trivialise women's health experiences. For example rather than "that time of the month", "lady problems", "the change", "losing it", or calling someone "hormonal", opt for appropriate language which avoids judgement and is considerate of an individual's experiences.

Avoiding assumptions and respect privacy

We often don't know the full extent of an individual's experiences, so it's important not to make assumptions or judgements based off stereotypes, snippets of information, or someone else's experiences. For example, don't assume someone's plans for having or not having children, or whether they've experienced menopause. Regularly check in with those around you to see how they are, and if they want to open up about their health, let them lead that conversation.

Humanise language

Recognise that health experiences are personal and different for everyone, but our health doesn't define us. When discussing women's health, focus on the individual by prioritising their feelings and experiences rather than reducing them to a health condition or stereotype. For example, avoid saying things such as "she's menopausal", and instead consider the impact of their experiences.

Inclusive and sensitive

Try to take context into consideration during conversations and always speak with sensitivity to avoid making presumptions about someone's health. Even if you're unaware of somebody's experiences, it's best to use terms that aren't likely to exclude or make people feel alienated. For example, you could opt for inclusive terms such as 'reproductive health' or 'sexual health' and avoid making jokes about serious topics, regardless of the people you are with.



Challenging

Mindful language is about more than avoiding offence, it's about building workplaces where people feel safe and free from judgement. If you notice repeated negative language or behaviour from peers, consider approaching the topic with them so that they can be more thoughtful and understanding of others going forward.

It's okay to get it wrong

No one gets it right all the time, and our understanding of mindful language is constantly evolving. If you slip up, and say something which didn't come across the way you intended, simply acknowledge it, learn from it and move on.

Approaching concerns with your manager

Discussing your health in the workplace, advocating for yourself, and asking for support when you need it can feel daunting, but approaching these conversations are essential for your wellbeing.

1. Understanding your rights

Many organisations will have internal policies surrounding reasonable adjustments to work and what they can do to support you. Familiarise yourself with these policies, as well as the relevant laws that employers are required to follow.

2. Consider your needs

Clearly outline how your health needs are impacting your work and consider some practical adjustments that could help.

3. Schedule a meeting

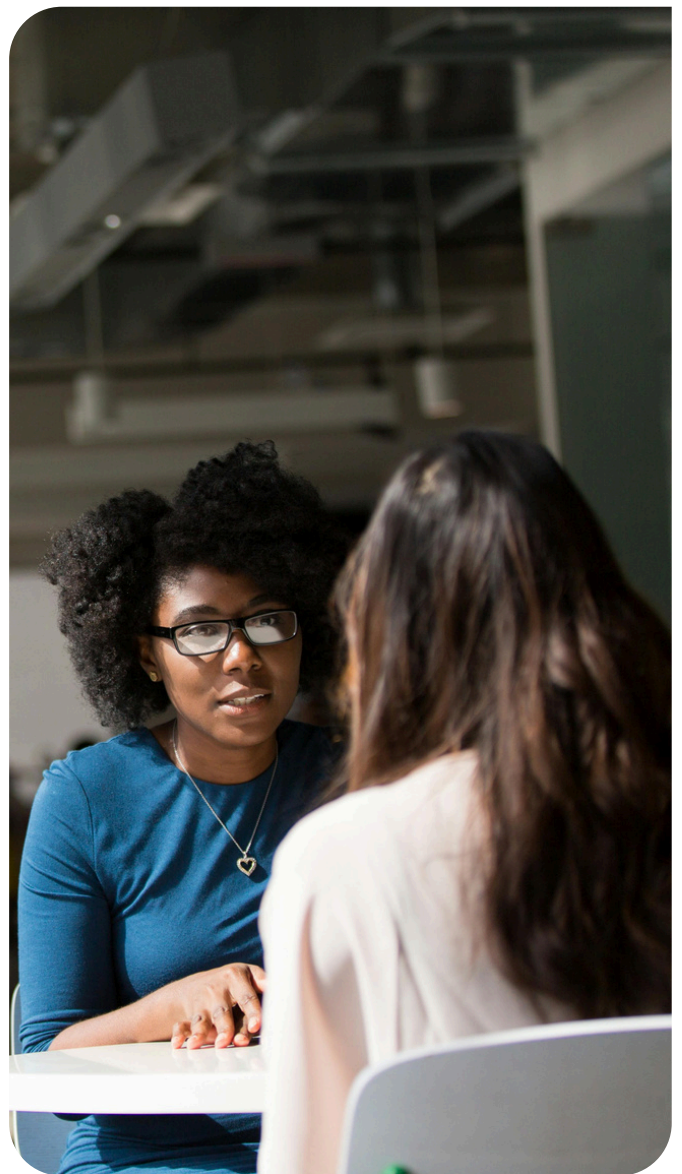
Request a meeting with your manager to discuss your situation privately.

4. Be honest and direct

Avoid downplaying your feelings and experiences. Be clear and honest about any challenges.

5. Document and review

Keep a record of your conversation and any agreements made. Agree some time to review any changes to ensure they are working. If you do not feel your concerns were taken seriously, consider escalating the matter further with HR.



Steps to support Women's Health at work

As a manager or employer, taking proactive steps to create supportive environments for women's health in the workplace is essential for fostering a productive and inclusive culture.



1. **Promote open communication**

Create a safe space where employees feel comfortable discussing their health and wellbeing without fear of judgement. This can be achieved through regular check-ins and fostering a culture of empathy and understanding.

2. **Be open to flexible arrangements**

Listen to concerns employees have and what they would benefit from, and where possible, enable reasonable adjustments. This could include making changes to make environments more comfortable or adapting working hours.

3. **Signpost to health resources and support**

It's okay to not have all the answers and solutions when it comes to offering help and support, but being able to signpost to resources is essential in being supportive.

4. **Lead by example**

When leaders demonstrate a commitment to both mental and physical health, it sets a positive tone and encourages employees to do the same.

5. **Review policies and practices**

Regularly review workplace policies and practices to ensure they are inclusive and supportive of women's health.

Get in touch

If you'd like to know more about Rightsteps and how we can support your organisation, get in touch now – call **0161 238 5264** or email **info@rightsteps.co.uk** to speak to our friendly team now.

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