



**MENTAL
HEALTH
MATTERS**

You're not in pain, you're putting it on! Mental and physical health at work

10 May 2021

This Mental Health Awareness Week, GMB National Equality Forum Women's Strand Lead Sarah James highlights the mental health impact of stigma about gendered health conditions at work

"You're not in pain, you're putting it on."

"There's nothing wrong with you."

"You just want time off work."

Just a few of the comments I received from colleagues at work when I was hurting everyday, doubled up in pain, feeling like I was having my insides ripped out.

Comments like these started to affect my mental health. Was I making it up? The pain must be real - or was it?

These thoughts left me unable to concentrate at work. I was miserable, constantly snapping at my family and friends, feeling irritable all the time and it even affected my sleeping habits.



I'd been visiting my GP regularly for years. I knew there was something wrong but I was told it was just heavy periods - a woman's problem that I had to live with.

However, my mum and other women in my family had suffered with gynaecological conditions and I begged my GP to refer me for investigations. The pain was affecting all aspects of my life and I needed answers.

Following ultrasound scans and finally keyhole surgery called a laparoscopy I was diagnosed with Endometriosis – a condition which affects 1 in 10 women in the UK.

Endometriosis means that deposits of endometrium (lining of the womb) exist outside of the womb cavity and they thicken and bleed with every cycle into different parts of your body, leaving scar tissue.

Little did I know at the time that it takes on average 7½ years to be diagnosed with this condition, as it cannot be diagnosed without surgery.

I was still in pain but at least I had answers. It wasn't all in my head, as some people made me feel, and I started to research the condition and talk to colleagues at work - which helped me and the people around me.

People I worked with in a call centre then understood that I often needed to run off to the toilet quickly – especially when I had severe pains.

The worry of not knowing when I was going to have a period left me unable to wear certain clothes, affected my confidence and stopped me from socialising.

At work I felt guilty – when I could see that call volumes were high and I needed to leave my station. Many were understanding but I still felt like I was being watched and judged for letting the team down - and at home I felt guilt that I couldn't do as much as I should with my children.

Visits to the park were in short supply and long trips were non-existent. I was always planning ahead wherever I went I had to know - where are the nearest toilets? Can I take a change of clothes with me? Have I got a supply of menstrual products with me?

And then came the day I had begged my GP for following the diagnosis. I was advised that I was suitable for a full hysterectomy due to the severity of the Endometriosis.

Although at the time I was only 33, I cried with relief when I was booked in – I would finally get my life back. But the comments started again, making me doubt that this was the best course of action.

You're too young. What if you want more children? You're being selfish – what about your partner?

I'd been lucky – I had 2 healthy, happy children. For many women who suffer from this

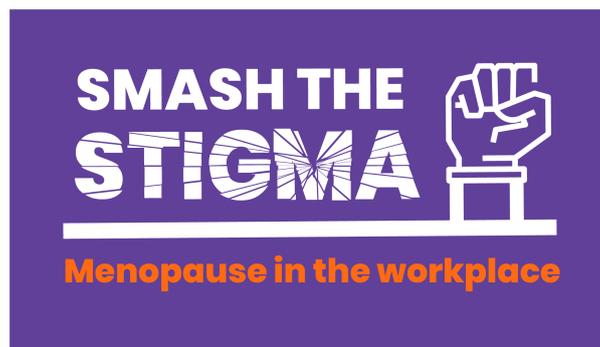


condition they are left unable to have children. But I was being judged for taking a decision about my own body – my own life.

After talking to family and friends I did go ahead with the surgery, but I was not prepared for what happened next. A hysterectomy is a major operation that not only has a huge impact on your body but also impacts your mental health. I was already struggling, through physical pain, criticism of my decisions - and no one can prepare you for the feeling of loss.

The loss of a part of your body. The loss of what society programmes you to believe makes you a woman.

Before the surgery I said I wouldn't have any more children. Now I had to say I couldn't have any more children. The emotional trauma of hysterectomy is something that in my experience was never discussed.



And then the menopause hit! Hot sweats, feeling tired, feeling foggy, unable to concentrate - to name a few. There are now many organisations that offer support and advice, but I had none.

I wasn't told by my GP or consultant that I would need HRT and at a young age didn't think I needed it, but after 6 months of struggling I went to my GP in tears – and that's when things changed.

I saw a new GP in my surgery, who listened, offered practical support - not only through medication but set up two-weekly calls to check in with me. Sometimes that's all it takes - to be listened to and believed and have practical support in place.

If you are unable to talk directly with your employer, GMB reps in your workplace not only do a wonderful job supporting members at work but will listen and help signpost you to organisations that can help if you are struggling with your mental health.

Luckily, my employer gave me the time to recover before returning to work, but not everyone has a sympathetic employer. That's why GMB have launched our menopause toolkit, which highlights that menopause can affect many people – women, trans men and non binary folk at different ages in the life course.

If you're struggling - speak to someone. You may be surprised at how many other people - your friends, colleagues even - are suffering in silence.

If you had a broken arm you would get support from those around you. Just because mental ill health relates to something that can't be seen doesn't mean it's not there.

We know ourselves best. GMB is raising awareness of these issues to highlight that they are real, and that we should be taken seriously - to educate those we work with and to encourage employers to have fully inclusive policies.

