

# unwrapping the bloody truth of menstrual isolation



## MENSTRUATION EXPERIENCES OF INDIVIDUALS AND LEADERS IN THE OUTDOORS



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### **Menstruation experiences in the outdoors**

In this article, I share my research that was completed in 2020 for my Master's dissertation for the Outdoor Environmental and Sustainability Education programme at the University of Edinburgh. This research focused on menstrual experiences in the outdoors from both general outdoor enthusiasts' and outdoor leaders' perspectives. Menstruation is still stigmatised and under-researched in health, social, and outdoor fields. It has been distorted by patriarchal society as an experience to be ashamed of, to hide, and to limit (Peranovic & Bentley, 2017). Thus, it also provides an excellent and much-needed research focus to understand various impacts on menstruating bodies, which often correlate with gender equality and social justice issues.

In the outdoors, especially, menstruation can alter overall experiences. If people do not talk about it or share their stories about how to successfully, comfortably, and confidently maintain participation, then others may not know it is possible. And if we do not talk about it, it is difficult to plan for or be aware of potential barriers. This silence can create an exclusive or uncomfortable environment for individuals. Further, menstrual products have an impact on the environment. While there is increased awareness and usage of reusable

menstruation products, many still do not know or choose to use disposable ones for various reasons. I wanted to discover how menstruation is experienced in the outdoors, if it impacts experiences, and how we can shape outdoor experiences to be more accessible for those who menstruate.

The questions that guided my research were:

- 1. What are the experiences of those who menstruate in the outdoors?**
- 2. What are the experiences of leaders who support people who menstruate in the outdoors?**

To understand this topic thoroughly, I needed to branch out from outdoor education journals, as there is insufficient research on menstruation experiences. Most of the outdoor education research articles focused on the physical impacts (Botta & Fitzgerald, 2020) or the environmental impact of menstruation (Lynch, 1996). I did not find any research articles focused on the social aspects of menstruation in the outdoors.

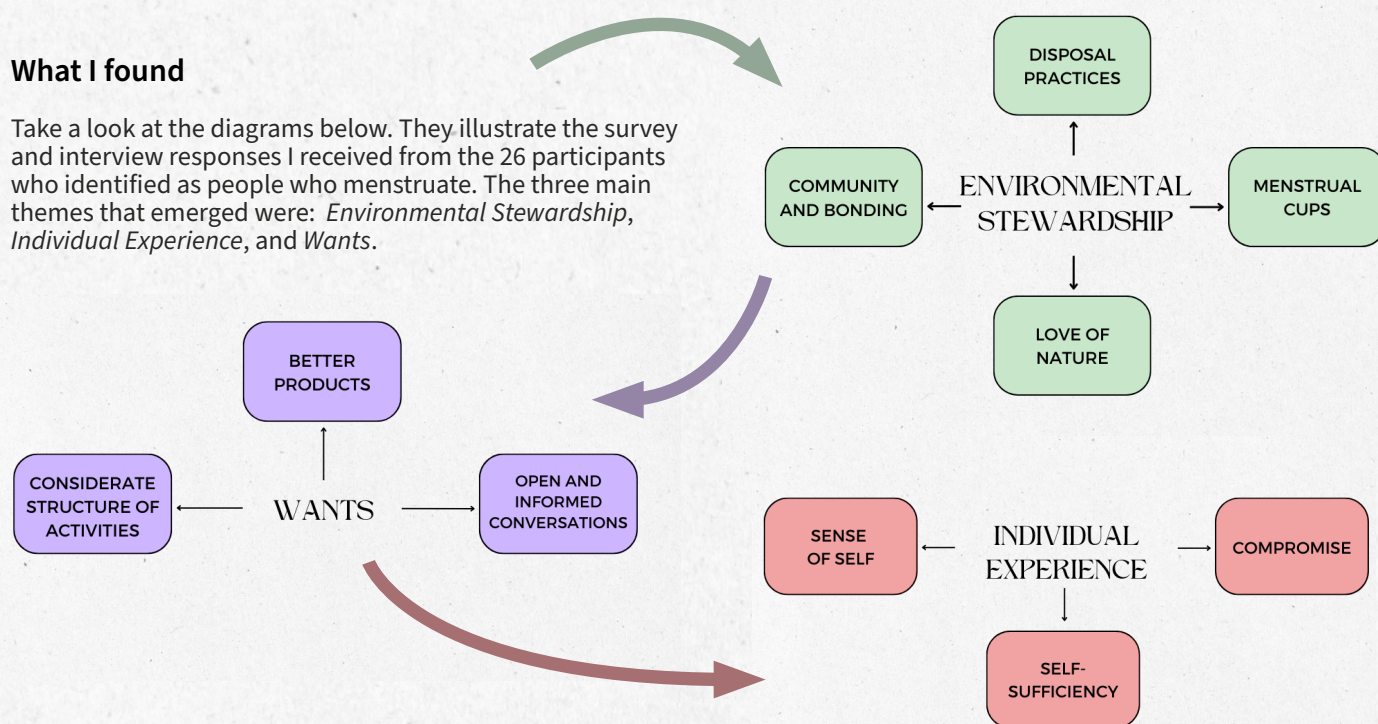
For the methodology, I used an embedded multiple-case study to collect personal stories and have data to compare across the two groups (participants and outdoor leaders). I used surveys for both groups with parallel questions so that I could compare and discover gaps in awareness of experience. I also interviewed four participants to explore their experiences in depth.

A total of 14 outdoor leaders and 26 people who menstruate completed the questionnaire. From the 26, participant ages ranged from 18-54 years, with outdoor experience ranging from 3 to 40 years. Locations of participants included Scotland, Ireland, UK, and Canada. They reported participating in various outdoor activities such as hiking, biking, sea kayaking, rock climbing, birding, and foraging. Although the survey was open to all gender/agender identities, all the participants identified as women.



## What I found

Take a look at the diagrams below. They illustrate the survey and interview responses I received from the 26 participants who identified as people who menstruate. The three main themes that emerged were: *Environmental Stewardship*, *Individual Experience*, and *Wants*.



To further illustrate my findings, I'd also like to share some of the quotes from the participants, as I believe there is great value in honouring individual voices within research. The participants have been assigned pseudonyms.

*"I had always found tampons quite uncomfortable and messy, and pads are sweaty and smelly in hot weather and bunch up and unstick if you're being too active, and felt that, despite 15+ years of periods, I had never fully got the hang of them."* (Paige)

*"[on using a menstrual cup] I can change it without a bathroom, without needing to carry around soiled items to the end of my walk, without polluting water sources or creating more plastic waste."* (Molly)

*"A few years ago...wild camping...I was on my period and using the moon cup. That felt empowering and wild and in touch with what's natural and beautiful about being a [woman]."* (Jen)

*"[I] Consider which type of activity would be least unpleasant with a period. Consider who I am going with and how difficult it will be to manage without sharing it with them or how comfortable I will be sharing it with them."* (Carissa)

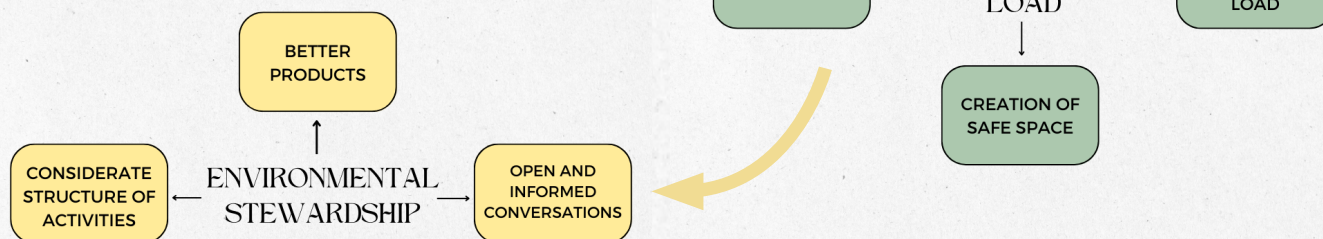
*"It's not something you would ever see discussed in an outdoor magazine. It's not even discussed in the handbook for mountain leaders - this is something I might try to change now I have thought about it."* (Amanda)

These quotes show how menstruation can feel like a burden and isolating while in a group outdoors, or how it can be part of an empowering and bonding experience. There is evidence that even experienced outdoors people have yet to discover a way to practically and comfortably maintain good menstrual health in the outdoors. The last quote highlights the silence around this subject, as well as a call to action to change menstrual experiences in the outdoors.





Take a look at the diagrams below. These diagrams illustrate the survey responses from the 14 outdoor leaders who participated in my research, focusing on their experiences of supporting people who menstruate in the outdoors.



I find the following two stories shared by outdoor leaders compelling evidence of the impact menstruation can have on an outdoor leader. These stories resonate with other research findings regarding the gap between how menstruation is discussed and supported in outdoor settings (Botta & Fitzgerald, 2020; Lynch, 1996).

An outdoor leader's experience that was impacted by their menstruation:

*"It was probably my worst menstrual migraine I've ever had. And I was sort of 'it'll wear off...I have to go to work, can't cry it off'. I was pretty determined not to let this thing beat me. I think if it had been a normal migraine, I might have...but because it was a menstrual migraine, I'm like...this is a fact in my life. I'm a woman. I have to deal with this. Let's just get on with it! So, we set off up the hill...and pretty quickly I was being very sick and I was working quite hard to be really discreet...about my sickness."* (Jean Louise)

An outdoor leader who had a participant impacted by menstruation shared:

*"I was guiding a backcountry canoe trip one time and one of my students was lagging behind. She wasn't super comfortable telling me what was going on, just said she didn't feel well, but then her peer told me that she has awful cramps and has her period. I told her about some bad experiences I've had, her peer said some of hers, and she started to feel a bit better. The three of us stuck together for the rest of the portage, swore at the pain and sang songs to keep distracted. She felt much more comfortable after our conversation and came to me once we were at camp to talk some more and thank me for helping her complete the portage."* (Misty)

Again, I found these responses to demonstrate the vulnerability of each participant and I was honoured to recognise the trust they had in me, as well as the importance they felt this research could have for the broader outdoor sector. These also show the difference it can make to feel comfortable sharing your experience, which can lead to being able to ask for and give support to others.

## Final thoughts

To conclude, I found that participants were eager to explore, discuss, and work to change their menstrual experiences in the outdoors. The participants shared that menstruation is

often an isolated and challenging experience for many people. However, we can change that by sharing stories and supporting each other to make menstruation a bonding and normalised experience in all contexts. Recommendations that came from my research were:

1. Improve menstruation education to girls and boys, men and women in various contexts.
2. Provide space for people to share their stories.
3. Provide outdoor centres and leaders with education and resources (products, disposal practices, information pamphlets etc.) to adequately provide for people who menstruate.

Personally, this research has inspired my PhD focus on the social, cultural, and political impacts on and of menstruation for people around the globe, with a view to better understanding how our context impacts our personal experience. Here are some final quotes from the participants that helped my motivation during this research and may inspire you to learn more about this topic.

*"This is such an important subject, and something which needs to become more of an open discussion in outdoor groups. I think it is important for this conversation to become normalised, particularly around men."* (Tayne)

*"This is perhaps the first time I've ever come across academic research studying experiences with menstruation. I didn't realise how much I thought about it or had to say about it until your initial survey was shared – which makes me realise how much more research like this we need!"* (Beth)

*"I'm so glad someone is investigating this; I think it is a major barrier for some women."* (Jen)

I invite you to share your stories, listen to others, ask questions, and create change.

## REFERENCES

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