

We can't sugarcoat it

DON'T MISS

Turn the page for guidance on what to do to reduce barriers to participation and get resources to help with conversations about periods.

THE FACTS ABOUT PERIODS

ActionAid research in 2017 found 1 in 4 UK women don't understand their own menstrual cycle (1).

Teaching about periods will be compulsory in English schools by 2020 (2).

A US survey found 58% of women had felt ashamed of their period at some point in their lives (3).

49% girls in the UK have missed a day of school because of their period (4).

41% of dads say they feel comfortable talking to their children about periods, and 1 in 3 have never purchased period products (5).

Almost half of women claim to have skipped sports classes at schools due to periods, with 39% doing so because of serious concerns about leaking (6).

Period poverty is rife: 40% of girls have not been able to afford proper period products (7).

Periods have largely been ignored within sport, outdoor adventure and learning. Yet it can present very real challenges and sometimes a significant barrier for women and girls participating in outdoor activities, whether they are learning or leading.

Why is it difficult to talk about?

We can't sugarcoat it. It remains for many people, in 2019, difficult or embarrassing to talk about a physiological function that affects the female population for much of their lives. This difficulty stems from inadequate education and information, a complex and hugely variant range of



It can still be difficult to talk about periods

experiences, and a culture of shame and stigma. While stigma will vary in intensity and impact between different cultures and countries, it is fairly universal; you only have to look at the evidence.

And if talking about periods is difficult in the mainstream, it has largely been absent from the sport and adventure environment. In our work with athletes, periods come up frequently as a topic. But until recently few women, including elite athletes and adventurers, told us they had discussed the issue with others including partners, coaches, teammates or other female athletes.

It is only in the last couple of years that a number of elite athletes and adventurers have begun to talk openly in the mainstream press about the impact of periods on their training and competition (8). This avoidance of the

conversation is compounded by academics and researchers in sport who have "shied away from doing research about females", because it's difficult (9).

The good news is that the conversation is changing. Research, informative content and women sharing their experiences on social media and in the mainstream press are all contributing. And importantly, men are getting involved in the conversation. Earlier in 2019 Michael Sheen became the face of the launch of the #Pads4Dads campaign with period product makers Heygirls! (10).

While bodily functions in general may cause many of us embarrassment, period conversations can present a uniquely difficult challenge.

In 2019 we started collaborating with the Women's Adventure Expo on their Managing Menstruation in Extreme Environments Project (MMiEEP). Our film with Anna-Marie Watson explored how periods affected her Everest Marathon. She told us it took quite a lot of courage, "even at 40", to talk about periods in our film.

"I broke down my own mental barriers to share my experience. Hopefully it will encourage others."

It's an opportune time for Outdoor Learning professionals to be part of the conversation and break down barriers that could prevent women and girls from fully enjoying or even taking part in outdoor activities.

We're sharing some of what we have learnt from the women and girls we have worked with, and some of the resources we have found, so you can think about how best to help everyone enjoy and participate in the outdoors, wherever their adventures take them!

Why should you talk about periods?

The majority of females will experience periods of between three and seven days long, between the ages of 12 and 50; that is roughly 3,500 days spent menstruating. It's highly likely that at some point girls or women participating in outdoor learning environments will be having a period, or experiencing pre-or-post period symptoms. It is probable that if you are working with teenage girls, at least some will experience their first period while participating in your outdoor activities.

Periods are different for everyone; for many women and often teenage girls,

periods can be erratic and unpredictable in nature and symptoms. Periods can be light or heavy and can be accompanied by symptoms including cramps, tiredness, bloating, headaches and hormonal fluctuations, or none of these at all. For some this will affect their well-being, performance and enjoyment of outdoors activity, on a spectrum from mild discomfort to debilitating pain.

In the outdoor environment there may be concerns about the availability of toilet and washing facilities and a lack of knowledge about how to change and dispose of period products when facilities are not available, or available only infrequently. These needs will vary widely depending on the type of period products women and girls use and the heaviness of their flow.

Women and girls frequently talk about the fear or experience of leakage. As well as causing discomfort, by being visible to others and staining or damaging clothing or equipment, this can also lead to embarrassment especially in the absence of toilets and washrooms.

As part of MMiEEP, Camilla Todd, a SUP Instructor, shared:

"My period caught me off guard during a SUP instructor training course. It was autumn, we were in the Portugal wilderness: no toilets, no supplies and with a mostly male group who I'd met the day before. Although not ideal, my wetsuit saved the day and my dignity. Now I use an app to track my cycle so I'm always prepared."

Many girls and women will experience anxiety and shame as a result, and unfortunately they may choose not to participate. To not talk about periods alongside other bodily functions in this context could start to seem irresponsible ■

5 THINGS YOU CAN DO...

1

DON'T: Make assumptions

Not all women and girls will experience periods in the same way, so there is no right answer or single way to address "the period conversation" in relation to your activity.

This is not an exhaustive list but don't assume that women and girls:

- Have periods, or don't have periods, or that they will have a period or not while they are taking part in the activity.
- Will experience the same impact on their well-being, health, mood or performance, or that it will impact on them at all.
- Use a certain type of period product, or could change the product they use easily.
- Know what is going on. Particularly if working with teenage girls they may not recognise the symptoms, or it may be their first time.
- Have had the conversation with someone else. Not all girls will talk to their parents and not all women will talk to other women, or know women who have had similar experiences in the outdoors.

REFERENCES

1. <https://www.actionaid.org.uk/blog/news/2017/05/24/1-in-4-uk-women-dont-understand-their-menstrual-cycle>
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-47350835>
3. <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/women-periods-ashamed-menstruation-half-survey-a8143416.html>
4. <https://plan-uk.org/act-for-girls/girls-rights-in-the-uk/break-the-barriers-our-menstrual-manifesto>
5. <https://www.heygirls.co.uk/pads-for-dads/>
6. <https://bettyforschools.co.uk/news/period-ta-boo-research>
7. <https://plan-uk.org/act-for-girls/girls-rights-in-the-uk/break-the-barriers-our-menstrual-manifesto>
8. <http://bit.ly/HuffingtonPost-Sportswomen-periods>
9. <https://www.eis2win.co.uk/resource/smarther-fe-male-athlete-health-at-the-eis/>
10. <https://www.heygirls.co.uk/pads-for-dads/>

IMAGES

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DO: Get informed

Knowing more about periods will make the topic feel less daunting and make it easier to feel and appear comfortable about having a matter-of-fact conversation. Most men we have spoken to have really welcomed the conversation once they know the information is available, and for women it can be helpful to understand the breadth of experiences that women and girls have that may differ from our own.

Try:

- Talking to people you know well and trust first. This will help you get comfortable before you have the conversation with someone you don't know so well.
- Looking through our list of resources
- Compiling a list of resources that you can easily share with participants and parents.

DO: Normalise periods

Reinforce that periods are a normal bodily function and are considered as another part of being in the outdoors in terms of health, well-being, comfort, hygiene and impact on the environment. Periods should be considered no more an inconvenience to any outdoor activity or trip than weeing or pooing.

Think about:

- How you include periods in written and verbal briefing information about health and well-being for participants and parents.
- The availability of toilet facilities throughout the activity and communicate this to participants.
- Making it clear that you are comfortable talking about periods, and offer a choice of people to speak to, or resources to look at.
- How you encourage girls and women to make appropriate arrangements for their needs, without putting anyone on the spot or directly asking them to talk to you about it.
- Maintaining a range of period products available for unexpected events; ideally make them easily accessible and think about suitable disposal bags.
- If you're travelling abroad do you need to consider the availability of products, cultural attitudes and different waste disposal arrangements?

FOUND THIS USEFUL?

See the journey to a women-only Outdoor Leadership course on page 24.

RESOURCES

Managing Menstruation in Extreme Environments Project, Women's Adventure Expo for research, blogs, vlogs & events. For more information go to: <http://bit.ly/MMiEEP-resources>

Our introductory film with Women's Adventure Expo, *What do you do with a tampon in Antarctica?* is designed as a good ice-breaker for the conversation. Visit: <https://vimeo.com/302265688>

There's a host of period positive campaigns with free resources available from:

- Period Positive: <https://periodpositive.wordpress.com/>
- Girlguiding: <https://www.girlguiding.org.uk/periodpoverty/>
- Plan UK: <http://bit.ly/Plan-uk-break-barriers>
- #Pads4Dads resources written by Fathers for Fathers: <https://www.heygirls.co.uk/pads-for-dads/>
- Betty for Schools are resources specifically for 8 to 12-year-olds: <https://bettyforschools.co.uk>

The English Institute of Sport's SmartHer campaign is optimising performance in elite sport in the build up to the Tokyo 2020 Olympics and Paralympics, including talking about periods: <https://www.eis2win.co.uk/resource/smarther-female-athlete-health-at-the-eis/> There is also a film about it: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hknq38CEhZE>

Roar, by Stacey Simms is a fitness and training book dedicated specifically to the female physiology with dedicated chapters on menstruation, pregnancy and menopause.

Blood, sweat and tears, is a hugely popular podcast from Oxygen Addict that explores periods and racing with a number of female athletes: <http://bit.ly/Oxygenaddict-blood-sweat-gears>

Our film with ultra-runner Anne-Marie talking about how her period affected her Everest Marathon can be found here: <http://bit.ly/MMiEEP-ultra-runner-film>

Make sure you are up-to-date with information about Toxic Shock Syndrome (TSS). This is a life-threatening condition which can be associated with tampon use. To learn about symptoms and treatment, visit: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/toxic-shock-syndrome/>

- Challenging jokey and potentially hurtful comments about the moods of women and girls when they are having periods.

- well-being in the outdoors?
- Take a steer from participants? Some of them may have really clear ideas about how they want to talk about periods.
- Encourage participants to develop their own resources or talks to share with peers and newer or younger participants?

DO: Promote opportunities for women and girls to share their experiences

Many of the athletes at elite and amateur level we speak to have valued the opening up of spaces where they can learn from others about periods and ask questions that they might think are stupid, including challenging some of those period myths.

Can you:

- Speak to female colleagues or adventurers to think about how they would like to have the conversation when they were younger or starting out?
- Invite in a female adventurer if you are arranging an expedition to talk about all aspects of managing female health and

DO: Be prepared for knock-backs

This may not be an easy conversation for you to start having, and it might take time to feel comfortable. Some people may be dismissive and not want to engage directly with you. Don't be put off at the first hurdle, stay calm and keep informed. Being informed, appearing comfortable and being able to listen may go further than you think in helping girls and women feel supported and in challenging the stigma of talking about periods.

AUTHORS

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Danielle Sellwood and Nicola Waterworth are co-founders of Find It Film. Find It Film aim to reach diverse audiences of women and girls, encourage more people to get involved in sports or plan their own adventure (no matter how big or small) and showcase brilliant female role models. Visit www.finditfilm.com for more information.

