



Menopause Messages



After each workshop the participants added their thoughts to the quilt.
We asked two questions.
Does creativity help menopause?
Does menopause change creativity?

Menopause Messages

The Menopause Messages project took place at the Whitworth Art Gallery during summer 2022. The project formed a research element to the broader 'Creative responses to the Menopause' Age Friendly programme at the gallery.

The sessions were facilitated by Helen Clare, a creative practitioner with extensive menopause knowledge. There was a series of five workshops which comprised, a creative writing workshop, fans, banners, bags and books. We used a range of creative techniques to explore the menopause journey, including painting, drawing, stencilling, applique, embroidery and a mixture of fabrics and trimmings – which including recycled material and remnants. Many of those fans, bags, banners and books feature in this zine.

The project brought together groups of women from all stages of the menopause transition, from diverse backgrounds, with a full range of levels of experience in different creative practices.

In order to create a safe space for the sessions we worked in a spirit of playfulness and exploration and while we worked we talked about menopause, about our experience of it, our attitudes towards it, our beliefs about it.

During the process we discussed two key questions. Does creativity help menopause? and does menopause change creativity?.

At the end of each session we wrote our thoughts on fabric, sometimes decorating the fabric and attached them either side of the quilts you'll see in the pictures.

In addition to the creative workshops we also invited a group of women creative practitioners with experience of menopause to join us in a discussion group. We created group poems – some of which are featured here – and had a profound and passionate discussion about our experiences of menopause and perimenopause and of our lives as women in our varying creative fields.

There are snippets of that discussion in the word collages also featured in this 'zine. The insights of all the women in this project were the inspiration for the article about menopause and creativity at the back of this 'zine.

Helen Clare – Menopause Messages Project facilitator

Claire Cowell – Whitworth Age Friendly Producer

Thank you to everyone who has taken part in this project, thank you for your time, your openness, your honesty, your humour, your inventiveness, your energy, your talent and your generosity of spirit.

Menopause Fans



Made by
Cathy Breen
Claire Cowll
Deborah Stephenson
Helen Clare
Huija Wang
Jennie Smith
Sarah-Jane Myatt



Make a Menopause Paddle Fan

You will need

Craft card

Wooden craft stick

Scissors

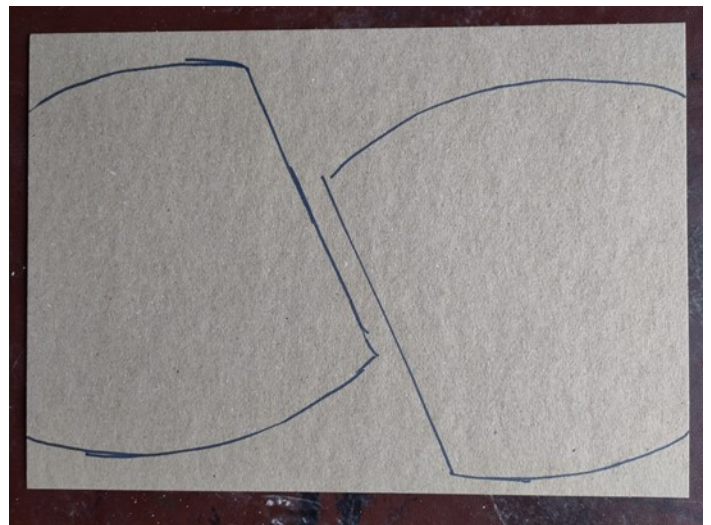
Glue (if it's fabric I find all-purpose glue the most useful but you can also use fabric glue or PVA)

Double sided tape

Fabric pens or marker pens

Oddments of fabric or paper

Trimmings or collage material



Making the Menopause Fan

- Cut out your shape twice in card. If you make it more than 15cm you may need tougher card.
- Cut it out in fabric or fancy paper to decorate it. If you're using fabric leave about 1cm round the edges.
- Stick the fabric onto the card. Tuck the fabric round and stick it to the back. You'll have some folds around the curves.
- Stick the two sides together with the stick in the middle. Don't worry if it doesn't match exactly you can use some of the trimmings to cover it up.
- Think of your slogan. There are lots of puns to do with heat of cold. Use fabric pen or marker pen to write on your slogan. Check the instructions on the fabric pen packaging.
- Decorate as you please. Use glue to fix all the different trimmings in place.
- Stick it under a heavy book or weights to let all the glue set
- Add a few stitches to keep things in place – or a bit of extra glue or tape, if it needs it.



Tips

You could use lolly sticks or other items as the handle.

If you like stitching you can do that too. Or use pieces of knitting or crochet or other crafts. Or add buttons!

If you do need to iron your fan to set the fabric pen, use paper or scrap fabric to protect your iron and to protect anything on your fan that might melt!

And try it! It wafts a lot of air for a small thing!



Menopause Bags

Made by
Becky Field



Made by Claire Cowell

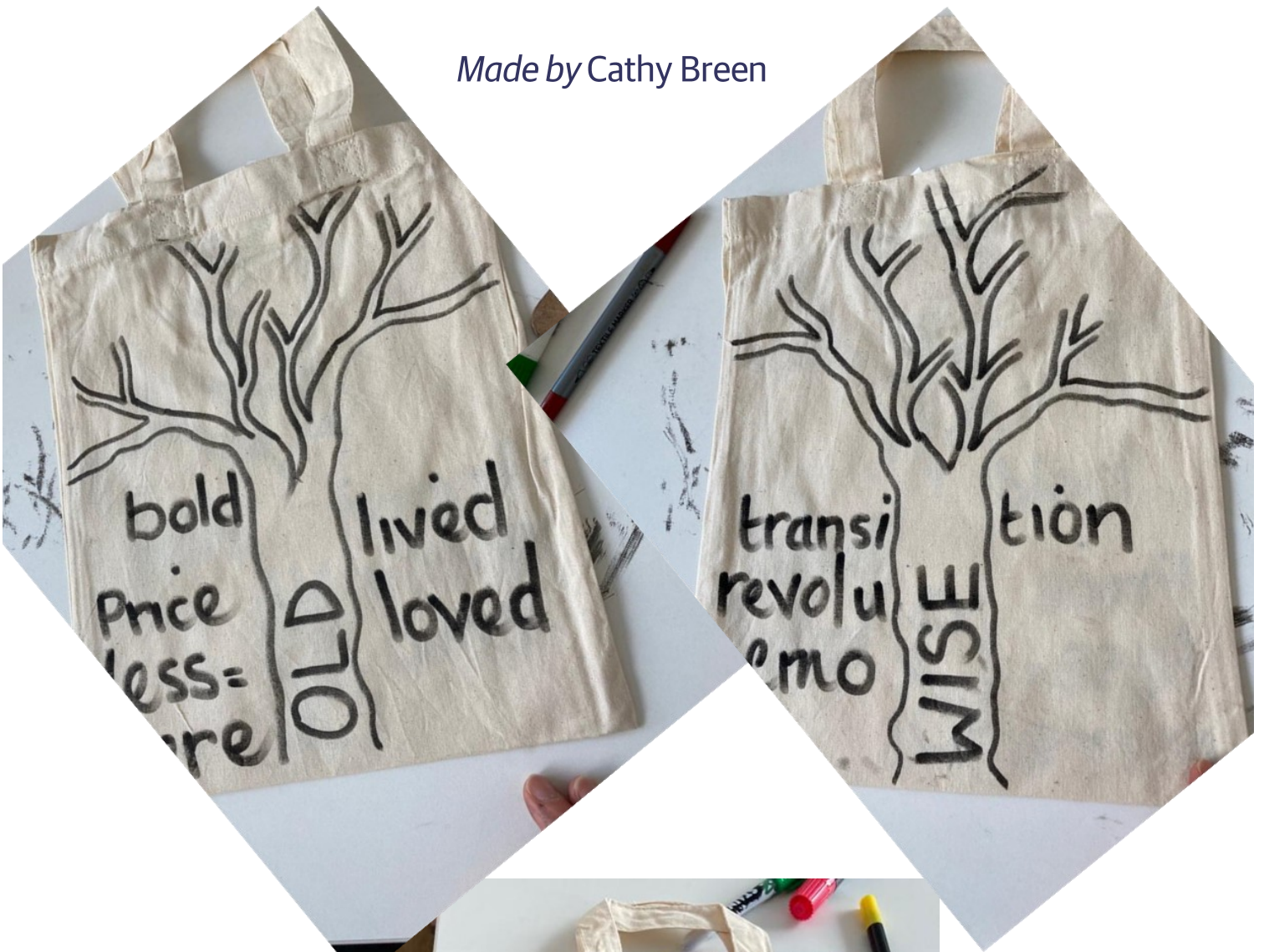


Made by
Sarah-Jane Myatt



Made by
Kate Williams

Made by Cathy Breen



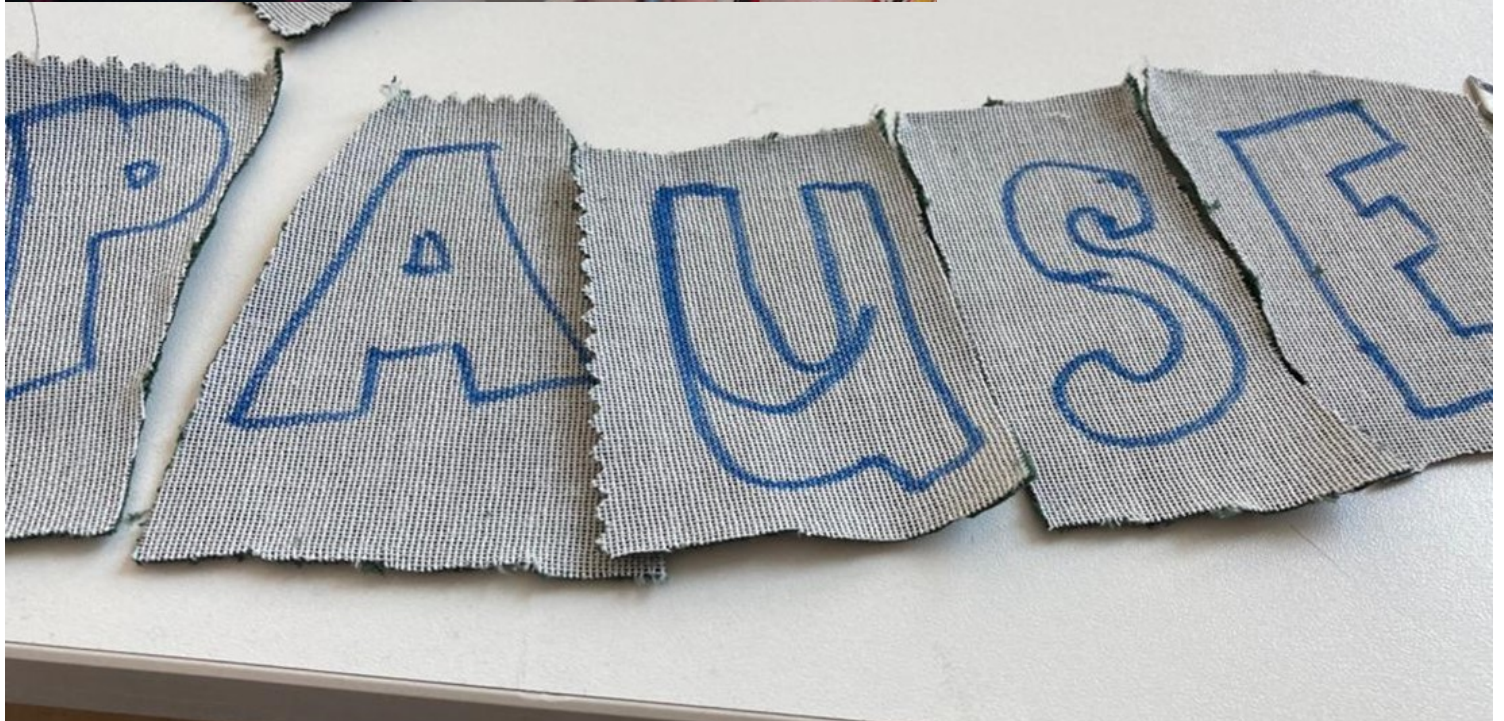
Made by
Helen Clare

Made by Sarah Jane Myatt



Menopause Banners

Made by Claire Cowell



Three years ago, as soon as my ovaries and womb were removed, I started my surgical menopause. Listed as one of the side effects of the surgery I needed to remove the cancers growing inside me, nobody gave it a thought, giving me time and controlling my cancer has always been my oncologists' focus and they refuse to see how the menopause is having an impact on the quality of life I have left.

Whilst taking part in the 'creative responses to menopause' sessions, the lack of conversation, support and choice for women like me became more apparent, hearing other women describe their experience of peri menopause preparing them for the day their menstrual cycle stopped, bombarded with the benefits of using HRT by 'menopause experts' insisting that we are all being failed by a medical profession that doesn't recognise the debilitating symptoms some of us are left with and yet still fail to see the women like me who because of gynaecological cancer can't have HRT.

It was this lack of choice and conversation that after 3 years of feeling like my body no longer belonged to me, while learning to live with cancer, that influenced the work I produced in the workshops. The loss of my womb, my ovaries, my fertility, and my chance to grow old the words "My body My choice" felt empowering, it made me question their "No" and made me seriously consider ignoring and refusing their medical advice to fight for a drug that could encourage my cancer to start growing again.

Sarah-Jane

They say this is
natural but it's nothing but dys-
functional. Where I was
beautiful
shiny and
touchable, I became
still,
simplified and
small.

Can you remain
elegant and
proud when you are no longer even
upright? The
silver lining doesn't exist.

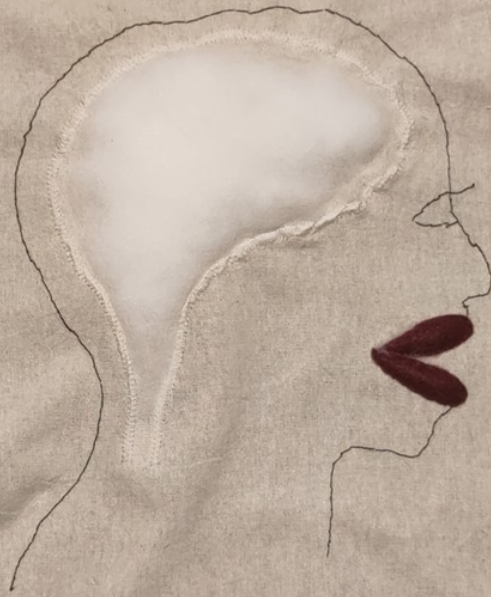
Claire Miller

Made by Cathy Breen



Made by Philippa Usher

Forgot
my
words



Know
what
matters



WE'RE
MEANT
TO
CHANGE

Menopause Books



[illegible]

the skeleton
will not
hold

"Oh, you're a bit hormonal"

a rebel in me that wants to rage
more sensitive weepy

my brain doesn't want to do what it used to do
I'll take stroppy

assertive isn't a compliment
I want to be peaceful peaceable

what I want pause is conflicted
my menopause when I want how I want

I'm losing the creative person I've been
like being hit by a bus

girls learn to mimic.
time of unmasking

women mask

brought up not talking about periods
women don't really talk about menopause

not hiding any more

a particular shape, size, a particular way of moving
expectation

a lifetime

celebrating menopause

celebrating womanhood

drivers not **responders**

come into ourselves

less competitive

cooperation

collaboration

beautiful

creative ideas come from within

riding the wave

liking ourselves better as people

menopause liberates you

telling me no is as easy as saying yes

creating from within yourself

it's a natural thing and we can cope

letting go of who I've been the girl who would

things I wanted to do when we were young

all gone out of the window

the little voice that wants to create its own

My Menopause

My menopause is a life changer.
Misdiagnosed.
I keep wishing I was on top of it again.
I was able to move freely.
Because time is a great healer
and the body will remember and move on.
So I do what I want and it can be as crazy
as I like and no-one is surprised.

Invisible
I feel lost most days.
My body has changed.
I'm hoping to come to a place of
enlightenment
Because I am too old to worry about
what people think.
So let's celebrate menopause and
welcome its ups and downs whilst
supporting those who need it.

My menopause is conflicting and means
Getting used to being confused and dazed.
Then I realised I needed to embrace it
Because of misunderstanding.
But being here might help me understand it
So tomorrow will be a better day I hope.

Undiagnosed
And I am stepping into my power.
Then cry, give up and go to bed for a nap.
I don't have to buy sanitary products anymore
So as the flower dries and dies, there will be
rebirth.

My menopause is doing my head in!
It seems that I am coming through
I bloody hope so!
I'm excited about the future
and feeling more confident about being my true self.
We are all totally powerful
and bring life to this world.

Fits and starts of physical and mental changes
It came unexpectedly without declaring its name.
Without warning.
I am glad it's over.
Then I can justify my angry ways.
So my body is truly my best friend at last.

A natural experience that women have dealt with for thousands of years
And loads of brain fog!
But I want to feel the empowered woman I am.
Become wiser and more confident
So I decided to build a community of powerful crone women.
Because I don't want to end up sad like my mother, poor soul.

My menopause is an opportunity to be curious.
But it has been a long hard journey
Isolating.
It is easier to sleep in the day than the night.
I am looking forward to more freedom and adventures.
Its confusing!

It's a massive part of my life
at the moment, and scary,
but I feel freer and more powerful
than when I was younger. The world
wasn't ready for my power and visibility.
I can make better choices for a stress free time
and prevent a worsening future.
Self-diagnosis and awareness

My menopause is a mama bear
Sometimes it is hard and sometimes it is exciting
But I'm using my own creative practice to help me get through it as best I can.
On I shall go, and make positive changes for me and others – for a change!
Because I can handle anything in the here and now, just for today.

Creative Practitioners Focus Group

Angeline Needham, Cathy Breen, Divya Tiwari, Jane Wayles, Judith Parkinson, Julie Collins, Julia Griffin, Julia Walker, Laila Rougaibi, Natalie Blamire, Phillipa Bailey, Robina Ullah, Rugia Uddin, Sultana Khanam Miah, Sarah-Jane Myatt

Menopause – A Creative Journey

From struggle to acceptance

Perimenopause is often tough. The hormonal chaos and its impact on our body and brain together with the slow realisation that our role in society and in our own lives is about to change, takes away the solid earth from beneath our feet.

It takes time, it takes patience, it takes support. At some point it requires us to stop fighting and work alongside our bodies. It may require us to change our lives. It almost always requires us to accept who we are in this moment rather than who we thought we were.

Creative activities are therapeutic. They allow us an escape from our worries and fears. They give us chance to be in the moment. They offer us the opportunity to take the turmoil from within and realise it into something solid, which is less terrifying, less mystifying. They allow us to express the inexpressible and the unbearable.

Losing yourself, finding yourself, being yourself

At some point in this transition many women talk about losing themselves. We are not who we were. Sometimes we're not good at the things we used to be good at, or don't want to do the things that we used want to do.

For many of us, including those of us with a creative practice, what we do is fundamental to our notion of who we are.

Finding ourselves can take time. It involves discovering new things that matter to us. It involves taking time for ourselves. It involves talking to other people. Sometimes it means digging down and examining half a lifetime's experience and our response to it. Creativity can be an important part in all that.

And once we find ourselves we need to be ourselves. A lot of women find that menopause helps them feel more able to be themselves. There's a lot been burned off in that transition. And creativity can give us a means to express that new authentic self.

Transformation

There is a transformation at work – sometimes a difficult one. We do not emerge from this process the same as we went into it. A little like a creative experience.

And why would we? Life is a process of transformation and learning and of discovery. Creativity provides people with a way through that process when they are stuck in the middle – when they feel like the goo in the chrysalis with no idea of the butterfly they might become.

From Expectation to Liberation

Society has expectations on all of us, and there is always pressure to conform. For women during their reproductive years those expectations can be stultifying. How we look, how we speak, how we behave.

There is another set of expectations on older women. But somehow they're easier to ignore. This is the 'no ****s left to give' version of ageing as a woman. Maybe it's easier not to conform because it becomes harder to conform.

There's a theory that our hormones made us more cooperative. Or maybe our responsibilities left us with no energy to buck the trend. Or maybe we're suddenly benefitting from that much-vaunted invisibility.

Either way this gifts us with a creative goldmine. We give ourselves permission to do things differently. To be seen differently. And sometimes this liberation itches for expression – creativity is just one outlet for that expression, but a joyful and beautiful one.

So it is becoming something we talk about. Some of us are more confident with those discussions than others. Some of us have personal or cultural reasons for finding those conversations hard, others of us have cultural reasons. Still more of us are struggling to find the right people to listen.

One of the loveliest things about this project has been the way those conversations have

emerged naturally and calmly as we've cut and stitched and glued and marked.

But we've also created things like bags and banners which are both a way of spreading the news about menopause and perimenopause and pushing back on any of our own feelings of shame.

Speaking out is also important because many of us are learning how to advocate for ourselves and for each other. We may find that the medical system is unsympathetic and unhelpful and that those around us may not have enough knowledge and understanding to support us in the way we need.

Getting started talking about menopause and about women's reproductive health in general can change lives, and in some cases save lives.

From hiding to being visible

One of the things that's often spoken of is the way women feel invisible as they get older. But the women in this project have talked about is about how they've spent large parts of their lives hiding or masking. They've had to work to fit in, or they've chosen to step back.

Perhaps we can turn round this idea of the visible younger woman and the invisible older woman and acknowledge that throughout our lives we've felt scrutinised and that's not always been comfortable.

So the kind of visibility we are talking about here is about being openly oneself. It is part of the transition from expectation to liberation. But making and sharing art is a way of making ourselves visible. It involves allowing the most vulnerable parts of ourselves to be seen.

As we get older some of us claim the permission to make the art we've always wanted to make, to allow ourselves to think the unthinkable and create the magical.

Stroppiness and peace

The word 'stroppiness' has its baggage — although it's a word that many Northern women are happy to own. It has also been pointed out that even 'assertiveness' is often not a compliment when applied to a woman.

But what do we really mean? I think it means that we will speak up when we need to, and fight when we have to, and not be afraid of our own anger or other people's response to that anger. Especially when that anger has cause. Through creativity, that rage can find an exact and satisfying expression and becomes a productive rather than destructive force.

But the other side of that rage is peace, which is often hard won. Both come from knowing who are and what matters to us.

They are both, ultimately expressions of love, for ourselves, for others and the world. Creating can be part of that journey too.

From responding to generating

Some kinds of creativity require us to be interpreters. They require us to make someone else's music, someone else's choreography, real. Or they ask us to solve someone else's problem — create a costume or a text that fits someone else's bill.

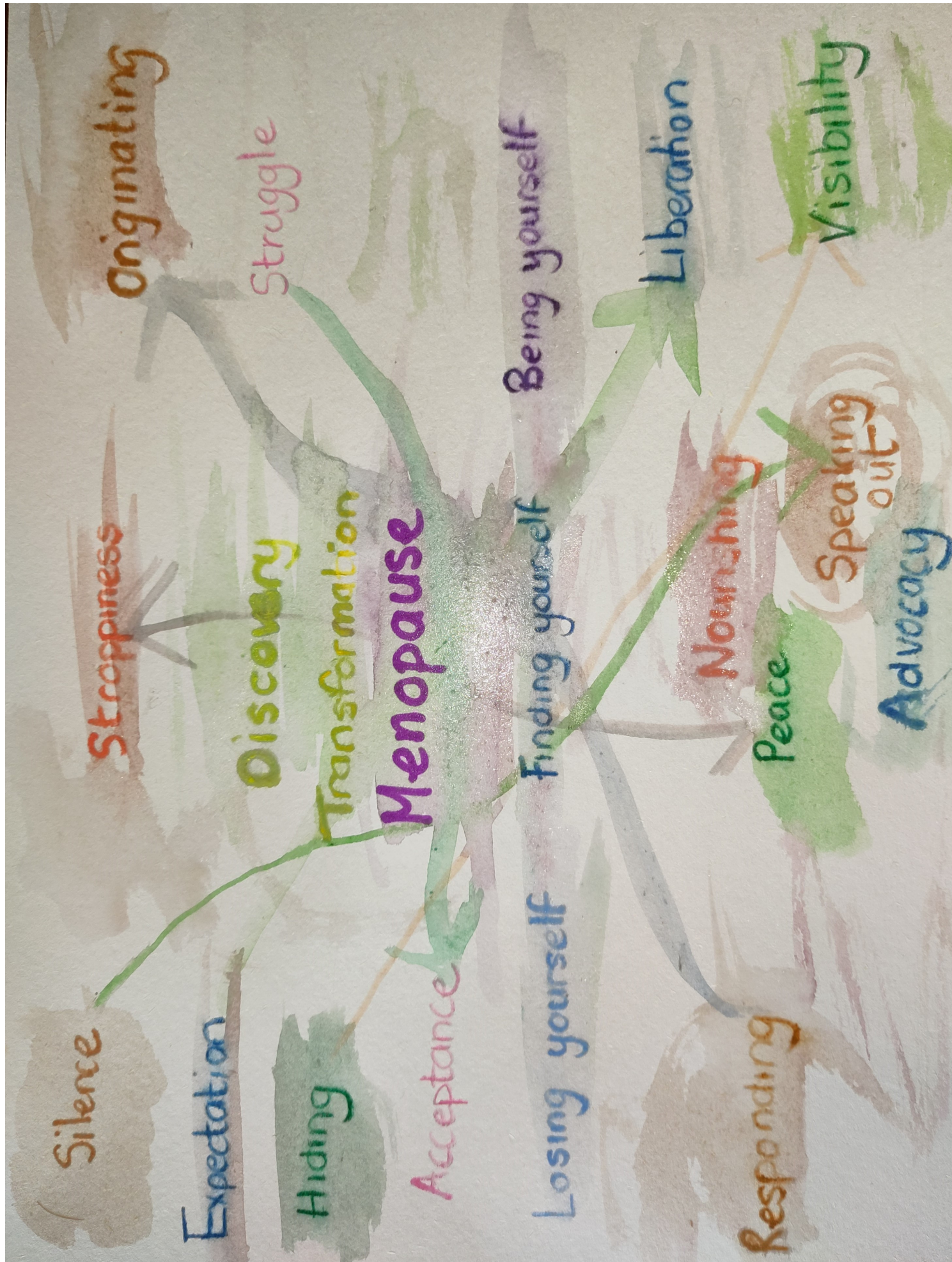
As women we've spent our lives sizing up situations, monitoring other people's behaviour, making things all right. We're good at responding, interpreting.

But for some, something interesting happens as we grow older. We become less interested in what others need of us. Our creativity becomes untethered. It becomes driven by what we feel, experience, and want to explore. We make the art we always wanted to make.

Perimenopause and menopause can challenge us to the core. It's a time when we require support, when we may need to find peace and new ways of expressing ourselves. It also leads us through to a different version of ourselves, able to look at the world differently and if we wish to be in it differently, using all the wisdoms of a life lived well, though rarely easily.

Helen Clare

A longer version of this article is available at <https://bit.ly/creativemeno>



Contributors

Angeline Needham
Becky Field
Cathy Breen
Divya Tiwari
Huija Wang
Jane Wayles
Jenny Smith
Judith Parkinson
Julia Griffin
Julia Walker
Julie Butterworth
Julie Collins
Kate Williams
Laila Rougaibi
Natalie Blamire
Mo Fox
Philippa Bailey
Philippa Usher
Penelope Fry
Robina Ullah
Ruquia Uddin
Sarah-Jane Myatt
Sultana Khanam Miah

Edited by Helen Clare
and Claire Cowell



the Whitworth