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#HerHeartMatters

Self-Care & Wellbeing Journal

Irish Heart Foundation
The National Stroke & Heart Charity

Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

Contents

	Page
About this journal	**1**
Part 1: Pause and reflect	**2**
Mindset	2
Self-care reflection tool	3
Understanding your habits	4
Part 2: Choosing the support that's right for you	**6**
Managing stress	6
Physical activity - moving through menopause	8
Nourishing your heart	10
Part 3: Setting achievable goals	**12**
Part 4: Starting the conversation	**13**

'Sometimes the biggest barrier is acknowledging that we need to come top of the tree.

I know that there's lots of people who want a piece of me today, but at some point, I need to take time for myself.

We need to know that self-care is not selfish, it's an essential part of our wellbeing.'

(Margaret, 46)

This resource was created primarily for women. By 'women', we mean all people who identify as a woman as well as those that do not identify as a woman but who share the same or similar biological realities and experiences, for example, trans, queer, agender, cisgender, genderfluid, intersex and gender non-conforming people.

About this journal

1 in 4 women dies from heart disease and stroke – the same as men. And yet heart disease and stroke in women are **under-researched**, **under-diagnosed** and **under-treated**.

Menopause is the time of change in the life of a woman and person designated female at birth that marks the end of fertility. It usually occurs between the age of 45-55 years. It can be a very challenging time, with **up to 40 symptoms**, from hot flushes, night sweats and low sex drive to anxiety and insomnia. Menopausal symptoms interfere with normal daily activities for **78%** of women. As a result, a woman's risk of heart disease and stroke increases significantly after menopause.

But did you know that some of the most important long-term effects of menopause often go unnoticed? A loss of the sex hormone oestrogen means less protection for heart and bone health.

1 in 4 women
dies from heart disease and stroke

The good news

80% of premature heart disease and stroke is preventable through changes to our lifestyle. Most women already know what makes a healthy lifestyle, but the many demands of modern life can get in the way.

We want to support you and all the women in your life to look after your heart.

This journal starts by inviting you to take some time to reflect on your lifestyle.

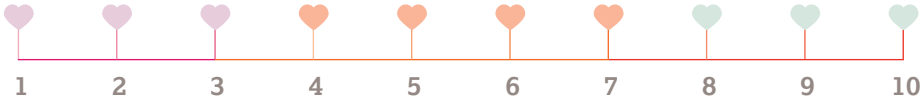
You can then choose any area you would like more support with, like managing stress, being more active or healthy eating.

You don't have to use this journal in any special order. Just use what works for you.

Part 1: Pause and reflect

Mindset

Getting into the right frame of mind is essential for change. You need to feel ready, and have clear, powerful reasons for making a change. Using the scale below, try answering the following questions to help understand your motivation.



How happy am I with my heart health right now?

If you answered...

1-3
It's good to admit when you're not happy. Take the time to think about how making changes could help.

4-7
It's great that you are reasonably happy. By using this journal you can learn more about the parts of your lifestyle you can benefit most from changing.

8-10
It's brilliant that you feel so positive. You can use this journal to find more areas in which you can improve your lifestyle.

How confident am I in my ability to make changes?

If you answered...

1-3
It's good to admit you're not confident. You may need time to reflect on what changes are important for you. Using this journal can help.

4-7
You are in a great position to make some changes to your lifestyle. Focus on the areas you feel easiest to make positive change in.

8-10
Time to act. Use this journal to assess what changes you could benefit from and plan some goals.

Now ask yourself why it is important to you to make a change to your lifestyle...

Self-care reflection tool

Use this tool to help you to identify what lifestyle changes you would like to make.

Tick the boxes that apply to you.		Usually	Sometimes	Rarely
Mental wellbeing	1. Do you get at least seven hours of good quality sleep most nights?			
	2. Do you feel you get enough 'me-time'? This can be time out in fresh air, meeting up with friends or unplugging from screens.			
	3. Do you find it easy to 'switch off' or calm your mind when you have racing thoughts?			
Physical activity	4. Do you get 30 minutes of physical activity at least five days per week, including activities that support your muscle and bone strength? Examples include weight training, body weight exercises, yoga or Pilates.			
	5. Do you break up your sitting time with regular movement breaks throughout the day?			
Nutrition	6. Do you have a regular meal pattern?			
	7. Do you eat at least five to seven portions of fruit or vegetables every day?			
	8. Do you eat high-fibre foods like fruit, vegetables, oats, wholegrain bread, beans, lentils, nuts and seeds every day?			
	9. If you eat fish, do you eat at least two portions of fish per week, one of which is oily, or eat plant-based omega-3 alternatives?			
	10. Do you try not to snack on foods and drinks that are high in fat, sugar or salt?			

Reflect on your answers.

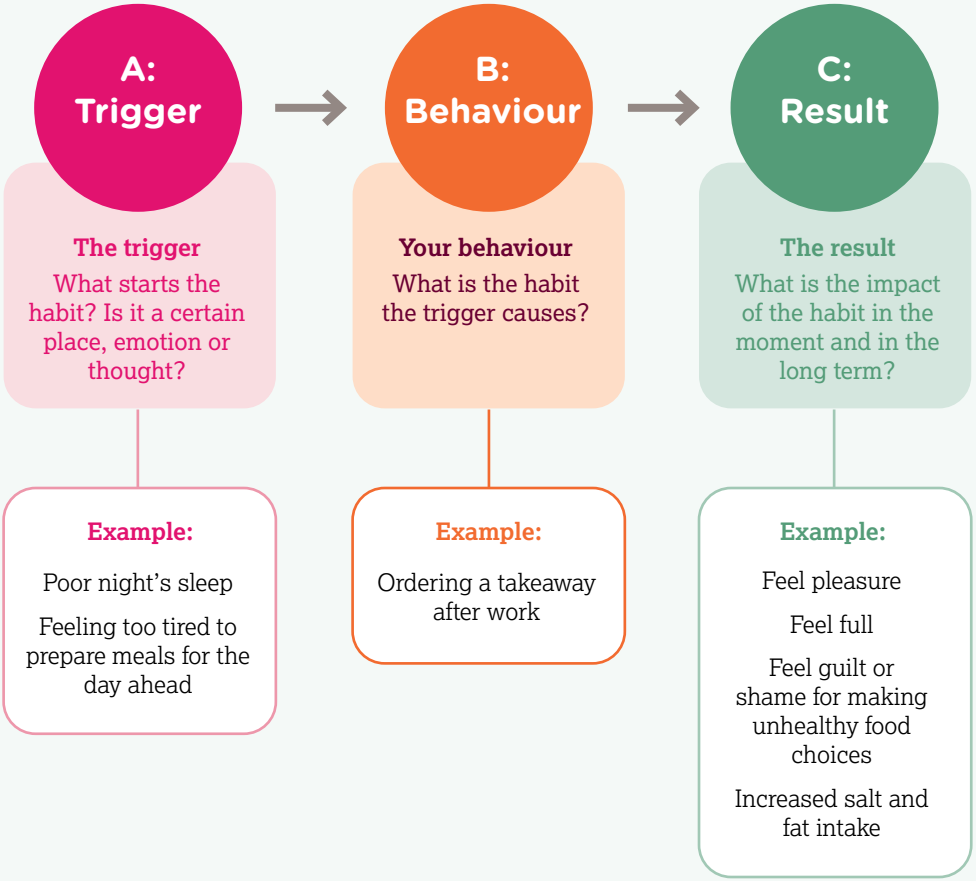
Congratulate yourself on what you are already doing to look after your health. Notice what area you answered 'Rarely' the most – was it mental wellbeing, physical activity or nutrition? This can help you to identify the habits that you may benefit most from changing.

Pick one or two of these areas and use our habit mapping tool on the next page to help understand and change your habits.

Understanding your habits

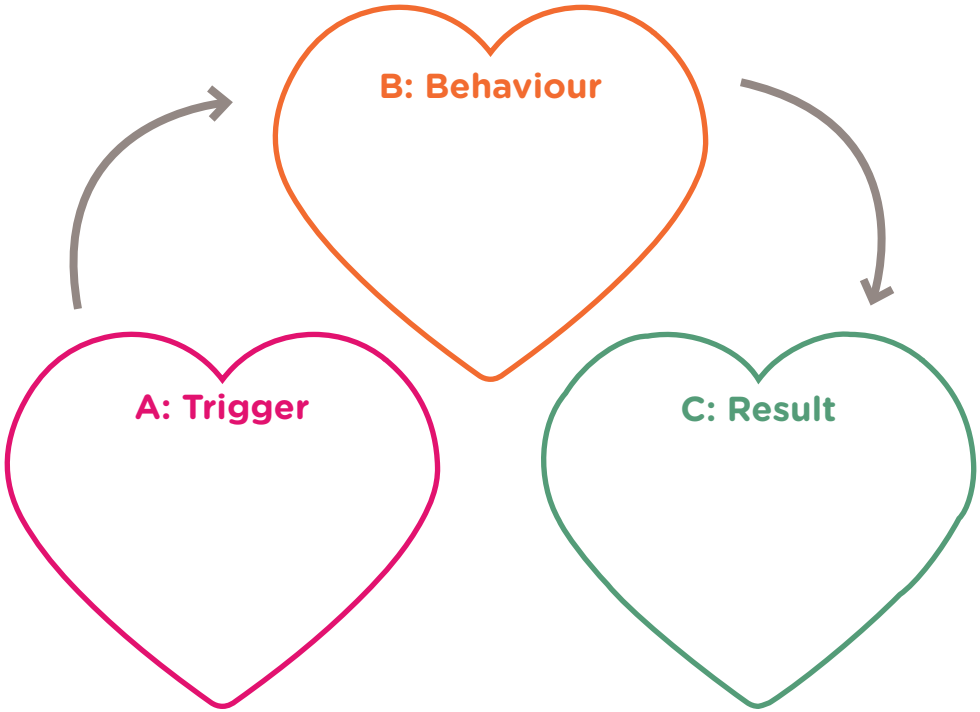
To **change** habits you need to know **how they work**.

Breaking old habits and making new ones can be hard. Understanding why you do what you do can really help. This is where you can use 'habit mapping'. By breaking down the habit into these three points you can learn how helpful or unhelpful your habit is to your short-term wellbeing or long-term health.



Step 1: Map a habit loop

Now map a current habit using the template below. You can map as many habits as you like in your own private journal or notebook.



Step 2: Reflect

Take a moment to reflect on your habit. This helps you to recognise how the habit starts, and how unrewarding or rewarding it is for you. This is 'new information' for your brain and is the most important step in breaking bad habits.

Step 3: Choose

Can you choose a new 'behaviour' that will address the 'trigger' in a more helpful way?

Part 2: Choosing the support that's right for you

Managing stress

Many women find the time around menopause stressful. This may be partially due to hormonal changes and resulting symptoms such as hot flushes and disrupted sleep. Managing stress during this time requires a balance between self-nurturing and other responsibilities such as work and caring for others.

> 'You are thinking I have lost my mind. How come I can't sleep at night? How come I have all these anxieties and all the palpitations you get? And you start to think it's just me, I am cracking up - when it's all oestrogen-driven.'
>
> (Agnieszka, age 49)

Stress is a normal part of life and can motivate us to get things done. However, it can be negative when it starts to impact your day-to-day functioning. When you experience stress for a long period of time, it can affect many aspects of your health and lifestyle.

If you are struggling with stress, know that you don't have to 'just get on with it'. Contact your GP and try some practical tips for managing stress.

Practical tips for managing stress

Exercise regularly, choosing activities you enjoy.

Get out in the fresh air. Spending time in nature boosts your mental health.

Keep regular sleep routines.

Maintain a healthy balanced diet.

Try breathing exercises or meditation.

Stay connected to friends, family, and colleagues.

Find ways to relax such as reading, drawing or listening to music.

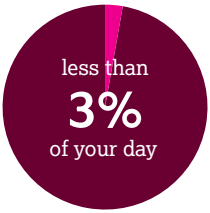
Try to reduce your screen time.

Use the habit mapping tool to identify triggers for your stress.

Visit **stresscontrol.ie** & **yourmentalhealth.ie** for further advice and support.

Take a moment to think about what ways you can reduce stress...

Physical activity - moving through menopause



Regular physical activity is one of our greatest tools for preventing heart disease and stroke as well as helping to reduce some of the changes in your body caused by menopause.

Getting at least 150 minutes a week of moderate intensity activity is the recommended amount for good health. That adds up to 30 minutes per day for five days, which is less than three per cent of your day.

Finding it tough to get 30 minutes per day to focus on you? Luckily, getting at least ten minutes at a time is as beneficial as doing all 30 minutes in one session. Try ten minutes of activity three times a day.

What is moderate intensity?

Our body has three key signs to let us know we are achieving the right intensity.

1. BREATHING

You can still talk, but your conversation slows down

2. TEMPERATURE

You feel a bit warmer but are not sweating heavily

3. HEART RATE

You can feel your heart beating a bit faster but it's not pounding

Tips to get and stay active

- Plan activities with friends and family
- Set reminders to move regularly throughout your day
- Take the stairs instead of the lift
- Look at opportunities to get active and meet like-minded people in your community like walking groups or parkruns
- Try an online class to begin with in the comfort of your own home

The talk test is a simple way to measure how intensely you are doing an activity. In general, if you're doing a moderate intensity activity, you can talk but not sing during the activity.

Muscle and bone strengthening exercises

After menopause, our bones may become weaker, we may lose muscle and gain more fat.

Muscle strengthening exercises can help slow these changes. These exercises should work your whole body and feel a little harder than your normal daily activities. Aim to get at least two ten minute sessions a week.

There are many ways to add strengthening exercises to your lifestyle:

Use weights, resistance bands, water bottles or any additional weights

Use your own body weight to strengthen your whole body and improve balance

Yoga and Pilates help strengthen your whole body and improve balance

Gardening uses all main muscle groups and can help build strength

Other ways to improve your heart health

If you drink alcohol, limit to no more than 11 standard drinks per week and keep some days alcohol-free.

Visit **AskAboutAlcohol.ie** for more information.

Pint of beer = 2 standard drinks

Glass of wine (250ml) = 2.5 standard drinks

Shot of spirit (35.5ml) = 1 standard drink

Bottle of wine (750ml) = 7 standard drinks

If you smoke, get the support you need to help you quit smoking for good. Freephone the National Smokers' Quitline **1800 201 203** or visit **QUIT.ie**

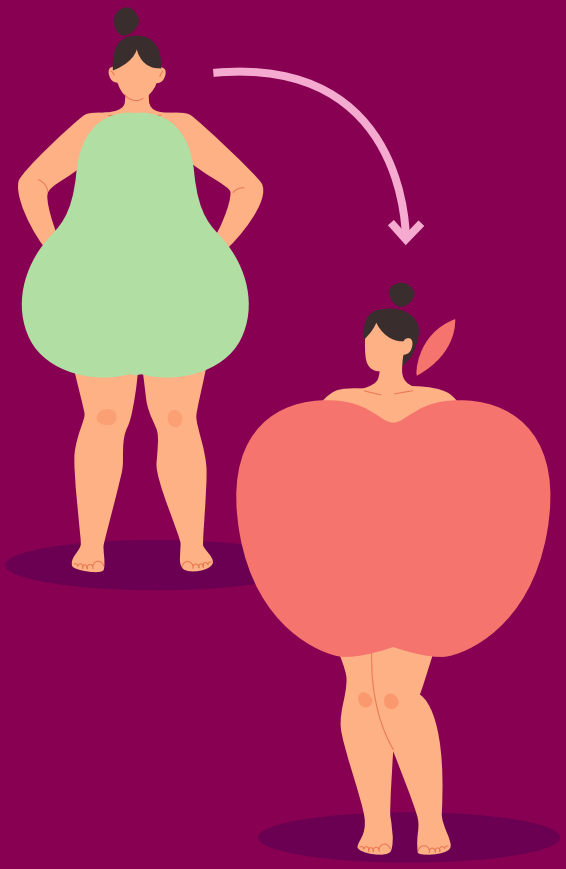
Nourishing your heart

There is no magic bullet that will make the symptoms of menopause disappear, so beware of fad diets, supplements and 'miracle foods'. However, research shows a **Mediterranean-style diet** may help to reduce your risk of heart disease and stroke and help you manage some of the menopause symptoms like hot flushes, night sweats and low mood.

Like the Irish Food Pyramid, a Mediterranean-style diet is based around fruit and vegetables, whole grains, beans and other pulses, nuts and seeds. It includes some olive oil, fish, seafood and poultry, and is low in sugar, salt, processed foods and red meat.

Body weight and shape changes

- From menopause onwards, women tend to store less fat on their thighs and hips (pear shape) and more around their waist and organs, including the heart (apple shape).
- Women may also lose muscle which can slow down metabolism and increase the rate of body fat gain, regardless of body size.
- Try not to let your body weight or shape become a source of stress and self-criticism.
- Weight is just one measure of health. Focus on what you can control, like building healthy habits.



Are there any changes you can make? Here are some ideas...

Make **healthier fat swaps** to improve your heart health and manage weight. Omega-3 fats in oily fish may help with night sweats.

Eat less...		Swap for...
Fatty and processed meats	→	Oily fish, lean meats
Butter	→	Low-fat spreads, nut butters, olive oil, avocado
Full-fat dairy	→	Low-fat dairy
Crisps and baked goods	→	Unsalted nuts, fruit

Have a **regular eating pattern** and **try not to skip meals**. This helps support your mood and maintain a healthy weight.

Have at least **five to seven portions of fruit and vegetables** a day. They support heart, bone and joint health.

Choose high-fibre foods like wholegrain bread, oats, wholewheat pasta and wholegrain rice. Fibre helps lower cholesterol, maintain a healthy weight, and supports good gut health and mood.

For good heart and bone health, eat **three portions of calcium-rich foods** every day from lower-fat milk, yogurt and cheese. You can also get calcium from calcium-fortified plant alternatives.

Vitamin D also helps prevent brittle bones. In Ireland, we do not get enough from sunshine so all women should consider taking a vitamin D supplement.

Drink plenty of water. Drinking two litres of sugar-free drinks every day helps to keep you hydrated, supports your skin and brain health, and helps prevent tiredness. It may also help manage hot flushes.

Sugary foods may make menopausal symptoms worse and cause weight gain. If you struggle with **snacking**, map out your habit (page 4) to address your triggers, and try nourishing snacks like sliced banana on oat cakes or a low-fat yogurt.

Soya and linseed contain weak plant oestrogen. Some research suggests that taking these foods regularly may help to reduce hot flushes, manage cholesterol levels and support bone health.

Part 3: Setting achievable goals

If you were to meet yourself in six months, what challenges would you like to have overcome? These should be specific, realistic and within your control. Take it at your own pace and just tackle one or two changes at a time.

It is important to think of things that could stop you making a change. Being prepared for barriers can really help stay on track when building new healthy habits.

Put these goals somewhere you can see, and every night ask yourself whether you moved towards or away from your goals.

	What do you want to do?	How and when will you make this happen?	What challenges could stop me?	How will I deal with them?
Example goal	*I want to be more active*	*Every evening after dinner I will walk for 30 minutes around my neighbourhood*	*Tiredness*	*Ask a friend to join me on the walks so we can encourage each other*
Goal 1				
Goal 2 (optional)				

Part 4: Starting the conversation

...With your healthcare provider

The many symptoms of menopause can be devastating, so please don't struggle alone. Your healthcare provider is an important partner in helping you to manage your heart health, especially around menopause.

Changes in your risk factors for heart disease usually occur silently so you often don't notice them. Your healthcare provider uses certain measurements, like in the questions below, to measure your risk of heart disease and stroke.

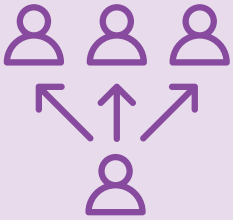
Questions you can ask your healthcare provider:

- What are my blood pressure, cholesterol and blood sugar levels? What do the levels mean for me? What can we do to manage them if needed?
- What are my body mass index (BMI) and waist circumference measurements? How do they affect my risk?
- How often should I return for my heart health checkup?
- How can changes to my lifestyle support my heart health?

...With the women in your life

Be part of the movement of women who want to see change and protect all women from one of Ireland's biggest killers. Spread the word to your sisters, mothers, daughters and friends.

Talk



Share

Empower

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The Irish Heart Foundation is a community of people who fight to protect the cardiovascular health of everyone in Ireland.

Irish Heart Foundation
17-19 Rathmines Road Lower,
Dublin 6, D06 C780

01 668 5001
info@irishheart.ie

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Charity Registration No.: CHY5507 Charity Regulatory Authority No.: 20008376

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