



SUPPORTING WOMEN TO PLAY TABLE TENNIS DURING MIDLIFE AND MENOPAUSE

TABLE TENNIS ENGLAND

X

WOMEN IN SPORT



THE GAME OF LIFE 2022

(PRIMARY AND TEENAGE STATS UPDATED)



At every stage in a woman's life there are different challenges for being active from early years and throughout her life.

PRIMARY

'Sometimes people think you can't play certain sports'



Gender stereotypes limit expectations & opportunities

TEENAGE

'I would say my self-confidence has changed, which has stopped me from taking part in sports'



Physical changes steal confidence and reinforce 'I am not sporty'

ADULTHOOD

Hard to prioritise time for herself. The family comes first!



No permission or time to prioritise time for self

MIDLIFE

"I find activity much harder now and I am less flexible. I also have less confidence in my physical abilities"



Ignored, undervalued and excluded as natural fitness diminishes

LATER LIFE

"At my age its very important to be as mobile as you can. It enhances your mood and lifts your spirit"



'Invisible' life
Low 'healthy' life expectancy

MENOPAUSE: A REMINDER OF THE BASICS

What is menopause?

- Most women go through menopause between the ages of 45 and 55; the average age of onset is 51.
- Symptoms usually start before a woman's final period, a stage called perimenopause, and last on average 4 years, though some women experience symptoms for longer.
- During perimenopause, periods can be erratic and/or extremely heavy.
- There are a range of symptoms and every woman's experience is different. Some of the most common symptoms are hot flushes, night sweats, difficulty sleeping, low mood, memory problems, and vaginal dryness.⁴
- During and after menopause the reduction in oestrogen levels means that bone health and muscle strength decline more steeply, with consequent health implications.

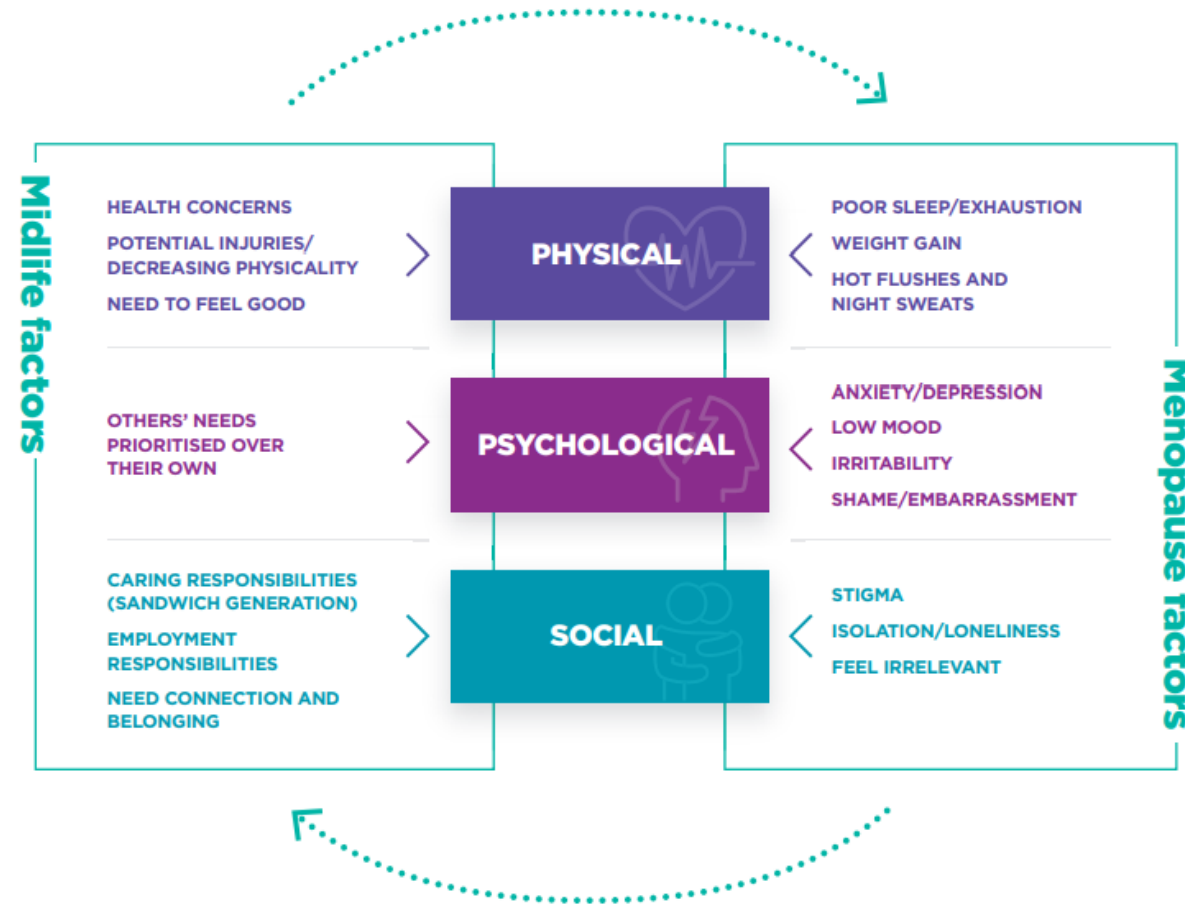
MIDLIFE AND MENOPAUSE

WHAT OUR PREVIOUS RESEARCH HAS TOLD US

Women during midlife and the menopause, cannot be thought of as a single group of women with the same needs.

Each women has a different story, a different journey with sport and different external/family/caring responsibilities.

Attitudes towards sport, physical activity and 'looking after themselves' all vary in importance for each individual.



“When you are younger, before you have children...you can spend your time how you like. As I've grown older, I have had less time to spend as I choose.”

- WOMAN, 47

THE SANDWICH GENERATION

‘The Sandwich Generation’ refers to both men and women within this life stage. This is when the caring responsibilities for both their own children, but also aging parents, who now are more ‘demanding’ of their time.

68%

of sandwich
carers are
women

84%

of carers
spending 35+
hours per week
caring for family
are women



WHERE CAN TABLE TENNIS ENGLAND PROVIDE A POSITIVE IMPACT?

- Menopause can be a time of **reappraisal** and a great time to reintroduce exercise.
- Finding 'me time'.
- Women feel overlooked/need more support.
- Sport and exercise can provide meaningful benefits now and into later life.
- Women **want** to be more active.

84% OF INACTIVE WOMEN IN THIS LIFE STAGE WANT TO BE MORE ACTIVE.¹⁴

90% OF WOMEN WOULD CONSIDER EXERCISE IF RECOMMENDED BY A GP OR HEALTH PROFESSIONAL.¹⁴



PURPOSE AND APPROACH

Table Tennis England believe table tennis as a sport can enrich the lives of women in midlife and the menopause and want to inspire and showcase the opportunities they have for women in this age bracket.

OBJECTIVES

- Understand how table tennis can be an **inclusive and inviting** sport for women in their midlife and through menopause.
- Understand how to **engage new members and maintain current members** of women in their midlife and through the menopause.
- Provide information to aid Table Tennis England to **reach their goal** of communicating to women the multitude of benefits participating in the table tennis can have.

METHODOLOGY

- 6 Focus groups (1 face to face, 5 virtual)
 - Total N = 31
- Menopausal women age 45-65
 - Or, male/female coaches who have worked with women in this life stage
- Diversity of participants:

White British, N=25

White European, N=2

Black-African, N=2

Black-Caribbean, N=1

East Asian, N=1

- February – March 2023

FOCUS GROUPS:

Current members:

1x F2F social players (n=6)
1x competitive players (n=5)

Non-members, non-active:

1x never been active (n=6)
1x previously active (n=5)

Current Coaches:

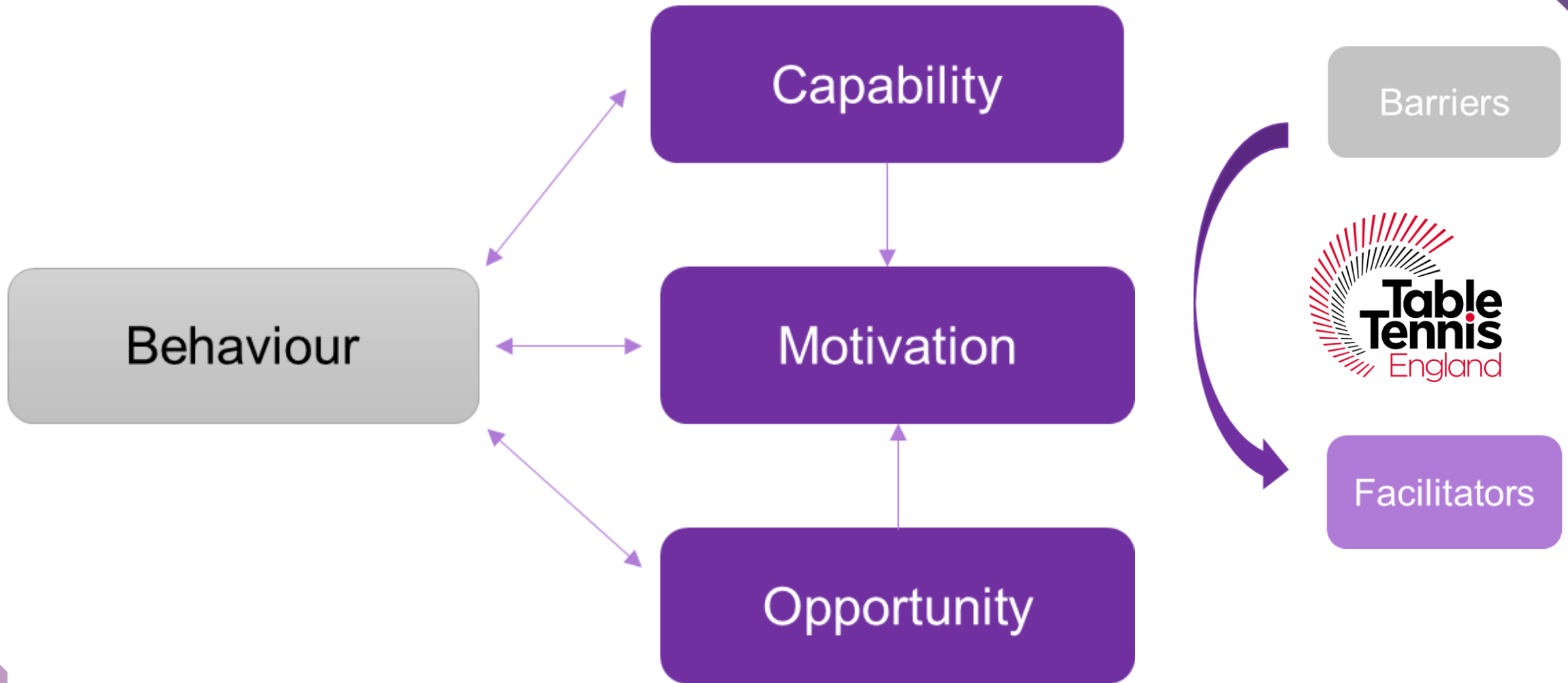
1x male coaches (n=3)
1x female coaches (n=6)

HEADLINE INSIGHTS

- Table Tennis is a sport which has a very good opportunity and potential to engage women in midlife and menopause.
- A large focus needs to be put on behavioural change for menopausal women who are not currently active.
 - Inactive women suffering with menopausal symptoms want to be more active.
 - Table tennis is a sport with great potential to increase activity levels.
- Understanding the barriers women face is key when designing, delivering and marketing future sessions.
- Current members have felt the benefits of table tennis and keen to get more like minded women involved.
- Women of this life stage are drawn to the social and flexibility of sessions.
- Coaches want to be able to support and encourage more women in this life stage.
- Coaches feel they need more education.

MIDLIFE AND MENOPAUSE

COM-B MODEL OF BEHAVIOUR CHANGE



MIDLIFE AND MENOPAUSE

COM-B MODEL TO BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

“[What holds me back is] how I’m feeling day after day – tired, sluggish and unmotivated. Getting even more hot and sweaty doesn’t appeal.”

- WOMAN, 49

“I’m overweight and go red very easily. I would feel as if they are looking at me and I’d feel embarrassed.”

- WOMAN, 54

“I have conditioned myself to think of exercise as painful, humiliating, and not fun.”

- WOMAN, 55

CAPABILITY

- Limited view of exercise
- Self-identify as not sporty
- Health issues
- Declining fitness levels
- Lack of energy

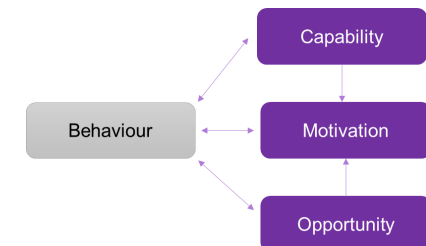
OPPORTUNITY

- Embarrassment about weight
- Shame about menopause symptoms
- Exercise spaces not “for” them
- Fear of ridicule
- Access / transport / cost / time

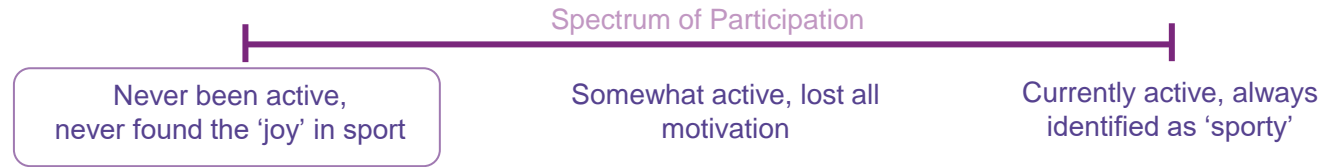
MOTIVATION

- Don’t relate exercise benefits to their needs
- Fear of judgement
- Don’t think they’ll enjoy exercise
- Others’ needs come first
- Worried about going alone

BARRIERS TO ACTIVITY



BARRIERS TO ACTIVITY: CAPABILITY



For the women who had never experienced the joy of sport or physical activity, and it has never been an important part of their life, they struggled to see the benefit – if anything it was viewed as another **burden** or **demand**/expectation of them.

Our previous research highlighted that **47% of ‘sandwich carers’ having less than 35minutes to themselves per day** → If these women have never found any enjoyment within sport and physical activity, they may struggle to justify using their only spare time to do sport.

*“I just don’t want to spend my time doing something that I feel **uncomfortable** doing and I’m not enjoying. I’m not getting any younger. I don’t want to waste that time doing something that **I don’t want to do.**”*

*“All those things that come with this time of our lives just made me think, I’m not going and doing something new. I know it could help but I’m **barely holding on to...**my life now, **I need a break.**”*

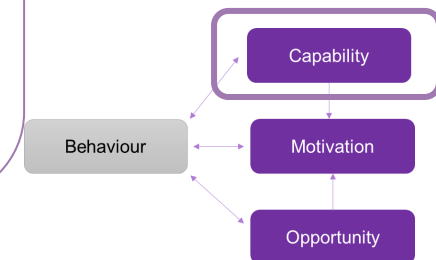
“I just think ERGH [rolls eyes, pulls face].”

*“I get...**dread** when I think about exertion.”*

*“Yes, pure **dread.**”*

[Explaining why exercise is not right for her:] “There’s always so much to do and sometimes you just need to be kind to yourself.”

Non-players, never active



BARRIERS TO ACTIVITY: CAPABILITY



“The fatigue is **unreal**. I’ve gone beyond just tired”
Non-player, previously active

FATIGUE was debilitating for the women and negatively impacted every aspect of their day to day life.

This was universal for all women during the menopause. Generally speaking, women struggled to get to sleep, frequently woke through the night or suffered insomnia.

This sets a critical context for participants’ views of physical activity in general and their willingness to try TTE.

“I am **exhausted**. I close my eyes, three or four hours later, I’m still lying there awake. And then I hear my alarm go off, and it’s like, oh my goodness, I **haven’t slept a wink**”
Non-player, previously active

BRAIN FOG which manifests as memory loss, unable to retain information, noticeably slower mental processing, temporary vocabulary recall issues.

Causing women complete frustration and losing confidence, especially when starting a new activity/sport/joining a new community.

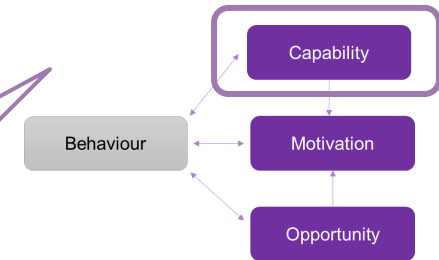
“The brain fog is the worst. I used to be sharp and really on it, you know, but now I **just have to accept** my mind is like a sieve and that’s **gutting**”
Current Social player

“By the time I’ve got through the day and not killed anybody at work, come home, and now killed my family, I’ve not time to then go and mix with other people who I may want to kill.”
Non-player, previously active

ANXIETY/DEPRESSION low mood, low resilience were all clearly very prominent for these women.

These turbulent and unfamiliar emotions exacerbated their fear of stepping out their comfort zone and trying new experiences.

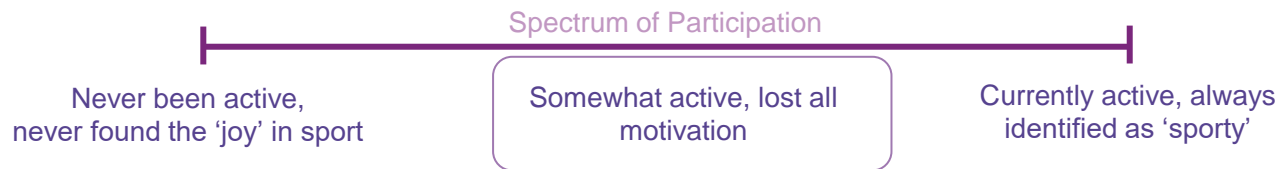
“One minute I’m fine. And then you take a look at my face and it’s like, what’s the matter? What’s going on? It’s just...I can’t describe it. Sometimes I’ll just **burst into tears** for no reason at all.”
Non-player, previously active



BARRIERS TO ACTIVITY: CAPABILITY

LOSS OF SELF-IDENTITY Many women lose a sense of self during the menopause. Their bodies are changing, mood is changing and their joy for things they previously enjoy has gone. This is especially prominent for women who used to identify as sporty. The combination of symptoms left many women we spoke to feeling at odds with their younger selves and out of touch with their former lives.

Left women feeling disorientated, upset and a loss of self-worth.

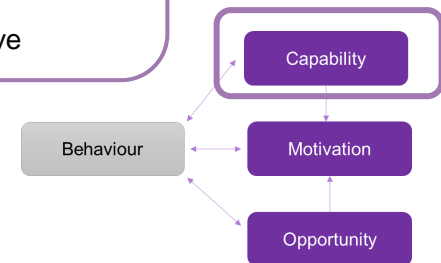


"...but since the last 18 months, I've just not had any motivation. I'm tired. I don't know, **I'm just not myself**. And I know that the exercise helps, but I just can't motivate myself to do anything"
Non-player, previously active

"I just seem to have **lost** who I am, my **identity**"
Non-player, previously active

"Not the person I **used to be**"
Non-player, previously active

"Forget the exercise. Now, it's not happening. There's just no drive there. There's no motivation. It's just gone. I can't explain it, I really can't, **I used to be so active before.**"
Non-player, previously active



BARRIERS TO ACTIVITY: OPPORTUNITY

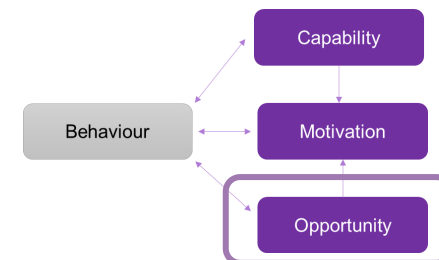
FEAR & EMBARRASSMENT are two of the major barriers women face when being active. Many physical symptoms associated with the menopause, lead to women losing their sense of worth and can feel very lost with their place in society.

- Feeling they are too overweight for the gym.
- Fear of being embarrassed if suddenly hit by a hot flush.
- Fear of standing out.

*“...the thought of having the right gear and looking right, that would totally put my off” –
Non-player, previously active*

*“One of my reasons that stops me from exercising, as much as I’d like to do, is the physical state of me. Several stone over weight. A lot of things about my creek” –
Non-player, never active*

*“My fear would be I won’t be very good at it, and I’d spend more time running after the ball, which would put me off it” –
Non-player, never active*



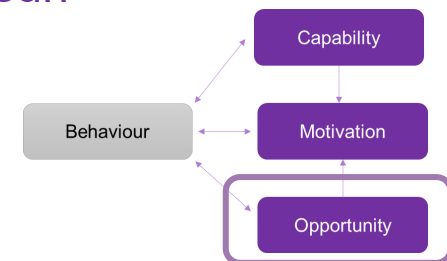
BARRIERS TO ACTIVITY: OPPORTUNITY

SHIFTING CURRENT PERCEPTIONS OF TABLE TENNIS

Many of the women, do not associate table tennis as something that is even an opportunity for them or remotely on their radar.

Current perspectives of table tennis include:

“Youth” “Holidays” “Youth Club”
“Elderly” “Nerdy” “It sounds more like an activity than a sport”
“Not for me” “Younger Generation” “A fun activity that you play in the sun”
“Paralympics” “Elite sport”



BARRIERS TO ACTIVITY: OPPORTUNITY

FEAR OF NOT BELONGING

*“I don't enjoy going to the gym or anything like that. I wish I did, but now I don't particularly enjoy it. And like some of the other ladies said, when you do go there and everyone's all like in **crop tops and filming** and doing all these exercises. **It's quite intimidating** if you don't really know what you're doing or you just feel **a bit more body-conscious** than they do.” – Non-players, never active*

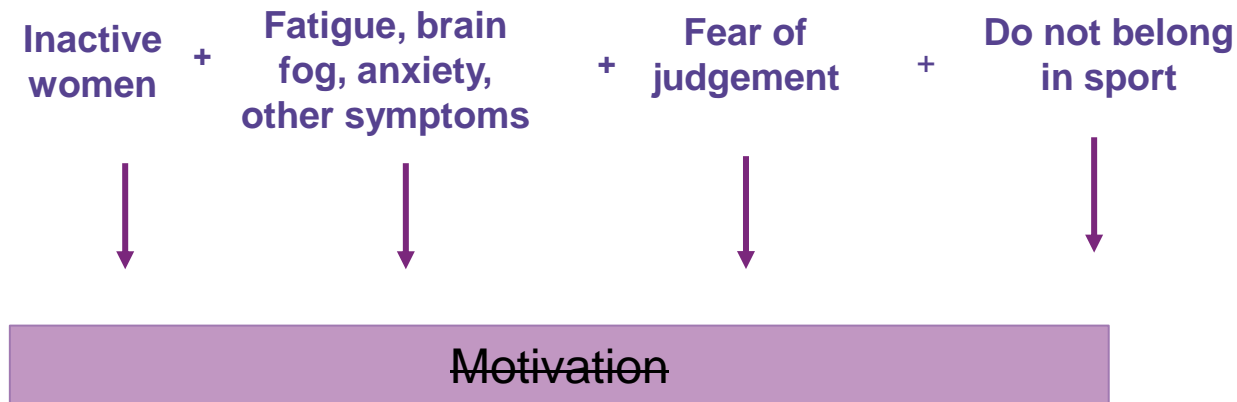
*“I don't want to go to a gym where it's all **fitness freaks** and trying to build the muscles. I don't want to do that.” – Non-player, previously active*



BARRIERS TO ACTIVITY: MOTIVATION

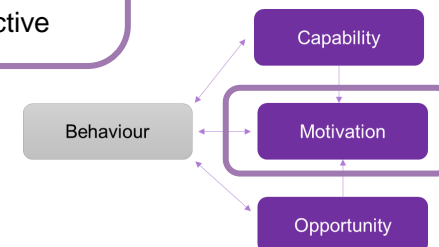
Inactive women do not have the motivation to try something new, especially to exercise on top of all other challenges and commitments in their lives.

Recap: Capability + Opportunity → motivation → behaviour change



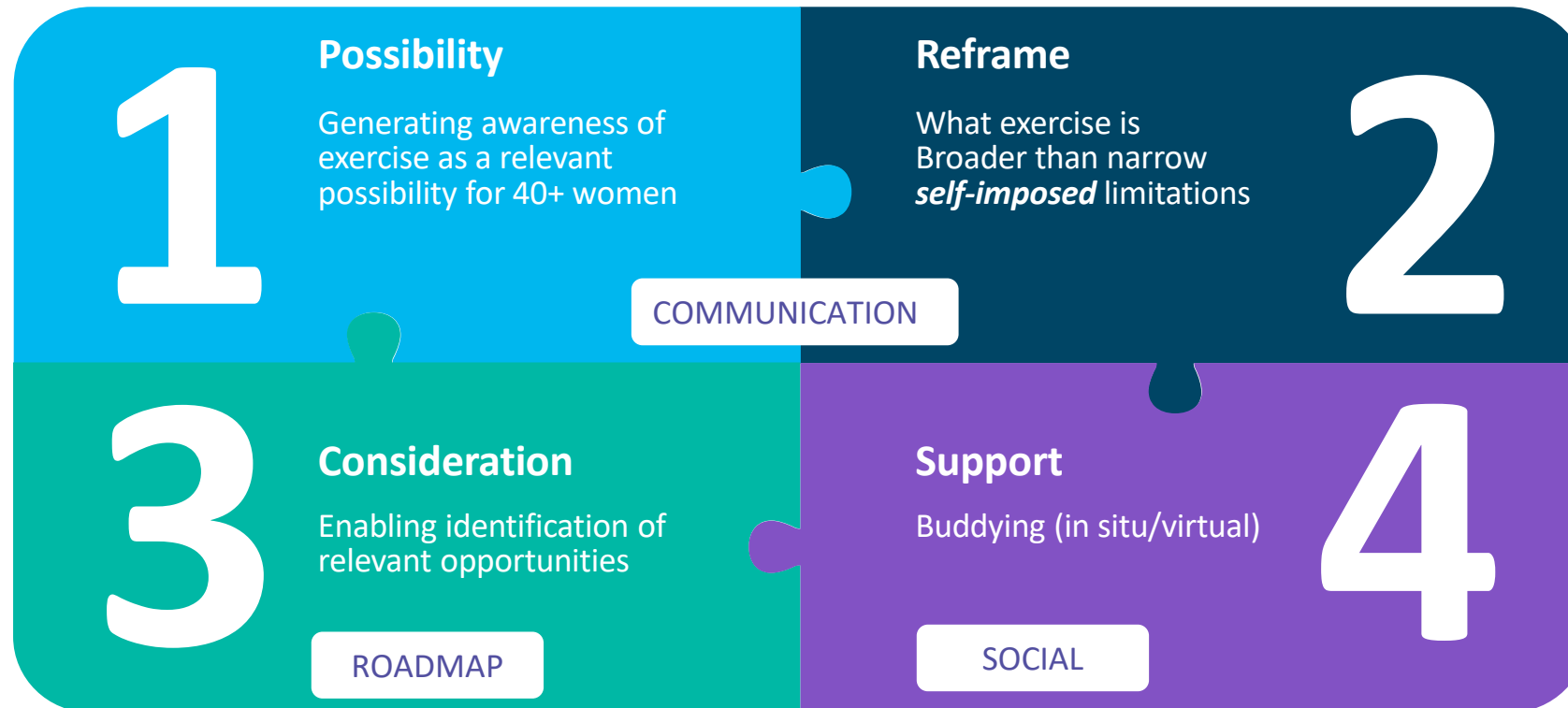
“And I know the exercise helps, but I just can’t motivate myself” –
Non-player, previously active

“I’ve got no motivation to do it...And probably the worst thing for me is like...I just can’t be arsed” –
Non-player, previously active



OVERCOMING THE BARRIERS

We must generate a sense of possibility and relevance to get women to take the first step.



THE IDEAL EXERCISE OFFER ACCORDING TO NON-PLAYERS



With exercise being such a unfamiliar part of the non-active women's lives, we asked them what their ideal exercise class or activity would be...

- “Fun”
- “Flexible”
- “Understanding”
- “Friends”
- “No commitment”
- “Inclusive”
- “not daunting”
- “Sociable”
- “Self-therapy”
- “Turn up if you want to”
- “like-minded people”
- “Move at the pace you want to”
- “Worth while”
- “No judgement”

*...it is a way that you can turn up, be with some **friends**, be **sociable**, **move**, but **at the pace that you want** to move at. And it's quite **inclusive**. So you can just work at your pace, what you're happy to do. And it's also something where you **don't have to commit** to a certain regimen if you don't want to. You can turn up on a Tuesday evening if you want to, and if you're not feeling it that week, then you don't have to go. – Non-player, never active*

SO WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR TABLE TENNIS?



WHAT THE CURRENT MEMBERS TOLD US

- Current members made it clear that table tennis has significant potential to support women experiencing menopausal symptoms, and the challenges of mid-life more generally.
- Players told us how the sport helped them, physically and emotionally, and were keen to engage other women who could find similar benefits.
- Table tennis can 'tick so many boxes' of what ideal sport looks, according to the inactive women.

“Friends”

“Laughing all the time”

“Social”

“Gets you thinking, gets you moving”

“Fun”

“It's for everyone”

“Active”

“Any age, any fitness level”

- Although, current members were worried about the low number of other female members, and if they wanted to play competitively, there were very few other women to play against.

THE POWER OF COMMUNITY



In a time where women feel alone, isolated and irrelevant, joining a table tennis club can bring a sense of community and comradery for women.

It is a safe space for women, where they can enjoy a new activity, without the fear of judgement.

With the correct environment and opportunities, table tennis could become a huge support network for women.

“The women that are playing competitively, we talk about it with each other all the time. It's really supportive and in that sense, it's great. It's just open and we laugh about it and cry about it.” – Competitive player

“That's partly why you come out really. You could sit at home having a hot flush and be miserable or you could come and get sweaty anyway and be with people who know what you're going through.” – Social player



RETAINING CURRENT MEMBERS

The low number of other female players was a concern for current members.

They felt like the '**forgotten members**', and that they feel more investment into improving opportunities for women in the game, is needed in order to retain members.

"If you belong to a club that's what I would call a proper club rather than most of our league clubs which are **one or two tables, then it's three, four mates who play together**. If you're **fortunate enough** to have a larger club in your vicinity, it's a social thing and it does bring people together and it is a community."

"Just interestingly that point, I think **it's male dominated**. I mean, it was just so noteworthy at the weekend there was, like, **about seven times as many men** as there was women. And I think it **wholly impacts the sport** anyway and the imbalance there... **Hopefully a bit more can be done about it, but it's incredibly male dominated and I wish it wasn't.**"

"There's a **lack of clubs**. There's of course support for juniors and I don't think that there's the **support for senior people** who want to do it, be it at a social level or a more competitive level."

EDUCATING COACHES CAN HELP ACHIEVE THE GOAL



Coaches, whether male or female, all wanted more education. They did not feel confident in approaching or having meaningful conversations. All coaches expressed interest in more CPD to better support women and 'signpost' accordingly.

*"I don't think they would consider a table tennis coach to be **qualified** in any way to help other than just be supportive and understand that some ladies may not feel very well at a session, but they've come along and just encourage them to make it enjoyable." – Male coach*

*"I think it's equally important because there's a lot **more male coaches** than female coaches. Even though you're probably more likely to discuss it with a woman coach in a lot of clubs that's not that available so they are being coached by males. So I think it is important ... because undoubtedly you're more likely to be coached by a male." – Female coach*

*"I do think it's something that's not been talked about for so long. And if there's any way that table tennis could be one of the **leading sports** to sort of make a stance on this, that it is an important thing." – Female coach*

APPLYING THE INSIGHT: PRINCIPLES FOR SPORT SECTOR



ENDLESS POSSIBILITIES

EXPAND PERCEPTIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR BEING ACTIVE



JUDGEMENT-FREE ZONE

WELCOMING AND SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENT



SUPPORT NETWORK

OFFER BUILT-IN SOCIAL SUPPORT



EXPAND THE IMAGE OF WHAT SPORTY MEANS

INSPIRING, RELATABLE ROLE MODELS



MAKE IT RELEVANT

REFERENCE SPECIFIC, RELEVANT BENEFITS



PUTTING TABLE TENNIS ON THE RADAR

MAKING TABLE TENNIS INVITING TO WOMEN IN THEIR MIDLIFE AND DURING THE MENOPAUSE

- Successful marketing, specific to women of this age group, can really reframe women's perceptions of the sport and open eyes of the opportunities table tennis can offer them.
- The women told us, in order to 'get them off the sofa', adverts and marketing need to be:
 - Specific to them – making them feel like they belong.
 - Inviting and fun.
 - Inclusive.
 - Showing like minded people, of a similar age.
 - A sociable, stress free, judgement free and not daunting.
 - Importance of relevant imagery.



NEW-MEMBER SESSIONS

Open evening

‘Try before you buy’

Wine and Table Tennis
Night

Accessible

No fixed term
commitment

Somewhere where ‘I will
already be’ e.g. shopping
centre or workplace

Bring a friend along for
free

Options for day and
evening sessions, to fit
around already busy
lives

Not in a gym/intimidating
environment



CREATING THE COMMUNITY



- 🎯 Make your social media and website inviting for women.
- 🎯 Show relatable and achievable content – make sure women can see themselves in the images you are promoting.
- 🎯 Harness your online communities – e.g. promote and push your Women in Table Tennis Facebook group.
- 🎯 Harness the power of social media to keep women connected – e.g. WhatsApp group

Start the conversation, remove the taboo.



SUMMARY

- Table tennis, as a sport, has vast potential to attract women in their midlife and during menopause
 - *It is a realistic goal for them.*
 - As a sport is already very accessible for women experiencing menopause.
- Current members benefit from the social and community aspect of table tennis.
 - Which is what non-active women are seeking.
 - Although current members feel investment is needed to make the women's game better.
- Marketing and messaging to women during this life phase, must be relevant and specific to them.
- Coaches want better knowledge and education around how to support their players in this life phase.



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