



The **Physical And Mental Health of Older Prisoners (PAMHOP)**

Practical guidance for working with and developing activities for older women in custody.



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The Physical And Mental Health of Older Prisoners (PAMHOP)

Women being 50 plus in prison

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Welcome to the practical guidance for working with and developing activities for older women in custody

This document should be used to assist you in the development of practical approaches to caring for older (50 years plus) women in custody. This information was gathered through a research study conducted by the University of York at HMP New Hall and funded by the National Institute of Health Research ([NIHR203484](#)). This information was informed by evidence collated from a systematic review of the literature [1], a survey, and a series of interviews [2] and workshops [3] with people in custody, prison staff at HMP New Hall and the project advisory team.

Who is the guidance for?

This short and informative resource is for prison staff who are interested in the mental and physical wellbeing of older women in custody. It aims to improve the provision of activities through a series of case study examples, which were tested in HMP New Hall.

This is not a finite list of suggestions and equally we are not suggesting that all of these things might apply within your prison site. We accept that the level of support will differ from site to site determined by the local function and the needs of your specific population. It is expected that this guidance will be adopted in a trauma informed way in which the response is person centred. At the heart of this document is the voice of the service user and the focus on the continued wellbeing, mental and physical health of this group of people in custody.

What impact does custody have on older women in custody?

Exacerbated mental and physical health problems

- Women are more likely than men to suffer from depression
- Women are more likely than men to suffer from anxiety
- Compared to men, women report higher levels of self-harm behaviour
- In this study just over 50% of women reported physical health conditions

What does the evidence tell us about the physical and mental health of older people in custody?

As the general UK population of older adults increases, so do the numbers of older people living in custody [4]. Since 2002, older incarcerated adults (aged ≥ 50 years) represent the fastest growing age group within the UK prison population. By 2030, it is estimated that older people will make up a third of the entire prison population [5].

The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) Guidelines recognise the need to provide appropriate evidence-based health care to support people who are ageing and involved with the Criminal Justice System (CJS).

Up to 90% of people living in prison aged 50 years or older report at least one moderate or severe health condition, and more than half of all older prisoners present with a mental illness [6]. Up to a third of the people who are incarcerated have depression [6]. In addition, people with a mental health problem are up to 17% more likely to reoffend than their counterparts without a mental health diagnosis [7,8].

What does the evidence tell us about the physical and mental health of older people in custody?

Studies reporting on the physical health of older people in custody are scarce. Some studies refer to prevalent physical health problems linked to poor diet, resulting in obesity and including complicating factors such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) and diabetes [9]. However, often both physical and mental health problems are confounded by problems of substance misuse [10]. There is some evidence to suggest that the presence of mental and physical health problems link to exacerbated misconduct while incarcerated and subsequent reoffending behaviour [11]. For these reasons, it is important to consider both the mental and physical health problems of people in the CJS.

Evidence from a systematic review of the literature [1] found no targeted interventions to support depression or anxiety for this group of people. A minority (10%) of the overall study population did contain some people within this age group but no single study reported outcomes of physical health.

Future interventions need to consider the needs and views of this vulnerable group. Specific gendered and coproduced interventions are required to enhance the implementation, feasibility, and acceptability of interventions that are delivered in prisons [3].

Facts about prison health and life in custody:

What do older women in HMP New Hall say about their mental health and well-being?

20 women prisoners completed the survey

Mental health

- Half of the women met the threshold for depression and anxiety using PHQ-9¹ (56%), and GAD-7² (44%).
- Nearly all women reported high levels of anxiety (80%) and depression (70%).
- About half of the women reported a previous history of attempted suicide (55%) and/or self-harm behaviour (75%) and PTSD (55%).

Physical health

- Just over half of the women (55%) reported hypertension, pain and back pain.
- The majority of women reported poor quality of sleep (84%) relating to the physical prison environment.

Family connections

- Nearly three quarter had face-to-face visits (72%),
- Most (89%) used phone more often than email/letter (50%) with family members,
- Most (78%) were financially supported by the family.

Experiences of social isolation

- Being bullied (94%)
- Loneliness (50%)
- Alcohol abuse (42%)
- Drug abuse (37%)
- Preferred to live on older prison wing (33%)

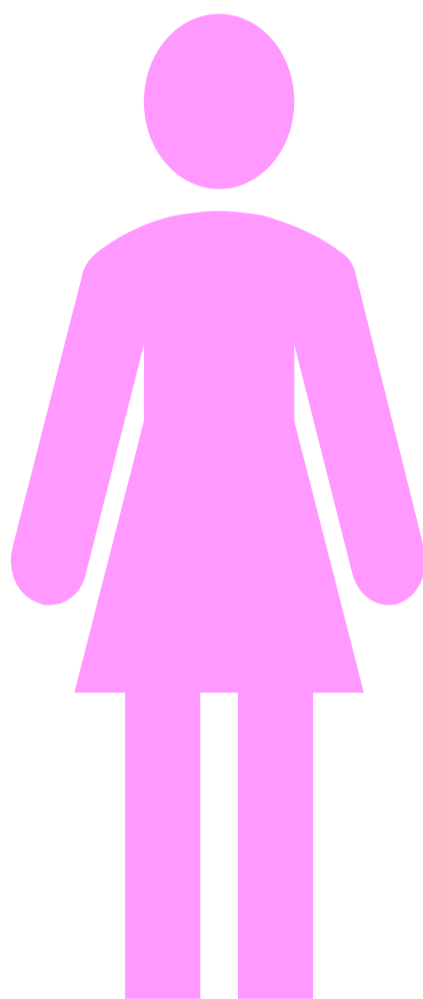
7 women prisoners in custody were interviewed

What activities do older women like to do?

- Exercise, walking, around the grounds
- Adapted gym
- Socialising (such as over 50's coffee morning)
- Listening music
- Cooking
- Watching TV
- Art-related activities
- Creative workshops; short taster sessions
- Adapted gardening
- Adapted yoga and meditation
- In-cell activities (reading)

What do older women in custody spend their time doing?

- Gym (17%)
- Yoga (22%)
- Arts-related (50%)
- Reading (44%)
- Music (17%)
- TV (56%)
- Workshops (22%)
- Socialise with own age (22%)



¹ Spitzer, R. L., Kroenke, K., Williams, J. B., & Löwe, B. (2011). Generalized anxiety disorder 7. *Medical Care*.

² Kroenke, K., Spitzer, R. L., & Williams, J. B. (2001). The PHQ-9: validity of a brief depression severity measure. *Journal of general internal medicine*, 16(9), 606-613.

What do older women say makes a difference to their mental health?



- Consistency of the regime.
- Predictable activities.
- Talking to others of their own age.
- Activities that are held outside.
- Having the opportunity to 'try something new'.
- Having activities delivered in different spaces across the prison site.
- Having an opportunity to share each others' problems.
- Being together in a group with the like-minded people.
- Feeling safe in the environment that they live in.
- Having positive relationships with staff; (preferably with staff of a similar age).

Consideration for the physical environment



Meeting the basic need:

- Providing dark curtains that block out the light promotes relaxation and sleep.
- Providing a comfortable mattress, to support existing mobility problems and long-term chronic pain.

What are the key ingredients to supporting positive mental health and well-being?

Requirement for purposeful activity



- Older women in custody want to contribute to the prison community. They can offer many skills to those that are younger than them. Having a sense of purpose provides a positive impact on self-esteem; sense of self and confidence. Older women wanted to have activities that could benefit the community outside of the prison.

Requirement for physical exercise



- Brief, regular periods of physical exercise, especially outdoors; helps to boost mood and improves physical functioning. A change in the environment can help stimulate engagement in activities such as an over 50's walking club, adapted gardening projects; generating motivation and pre-determined goals to support and experience an adapted park run.

What are the key ingredients to supporting positive mental health and well-being?



Requirement for activities that promote connectivity

- Group activities that promote friendships, sharing problems and generating a sense of community both inside custody and in partnership with agencies on the outside. These help to provide continuity of purpose through the gate. Older peer to younger peer activities can deliver experience and knowledge to those that are younger in age.

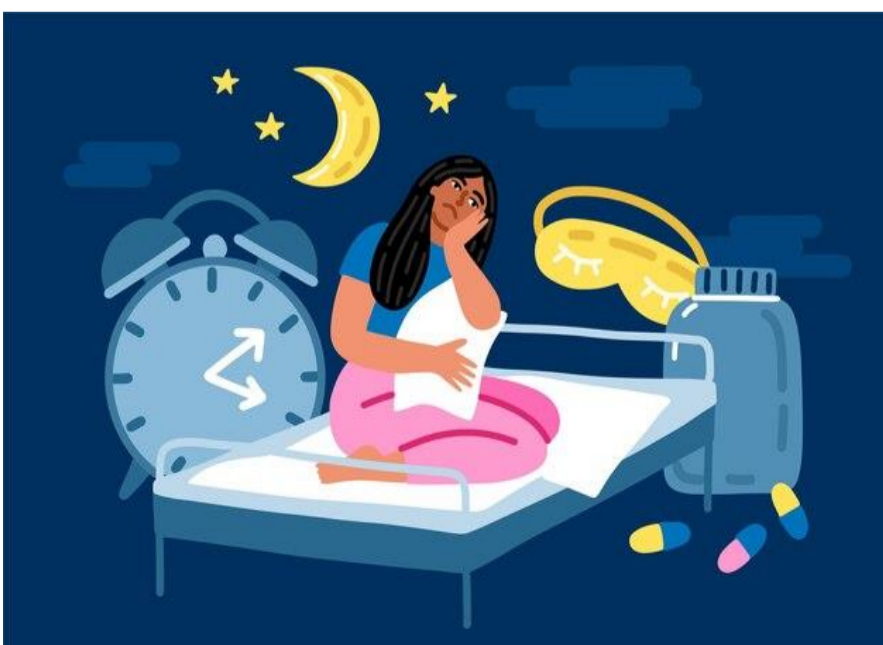


Socialising with staff and other people in custody of their own age

- Talking to people of their own age, helps reduce isolation, loneliness and provides the ability to relate to someone of a similar age. Older women in custody preferred to talk to staff of a similar age.

Promotion of sleep

- Poor sleep is particularly apparent in women of this age group; especially those that are going through the menopause. The physical environment plays an important role in promoting relaxation, positive mental health and sleep.



Activity considerations

We know from the research evidence that getting older people in custody to engage in activities can be challenging for lots of reasons.

Some of these challenges can include:

- Getting sufficient 'engagement' from those willing to take part;
- The logistics of the prison regime;
- The consistent delivery of the activity and having sufficient available resources;
- The ability to deliver a sustainable activity.

Getting sufficient engagement...

(Older women lose their confidence in taking part in activities)

- Can you offer a range of activities and give a group of women a choice?
- Can you buddy people up on wings to come along to a group together?
- Can staff go and collect individuals on a wing to take them to an activity?
- Can staff of a similar age be prioritised to work with this age group?
- Can someone be identified to represent the voice of the group?
- Where could this representation fit into other aspects of prison life?
- Can you build in a sense of achievement (use of a certificate; small reward, pin credit or incentive as part of the activity process)?

The logistics of the prison regime

(older women find the length of the regime slots too long to conduct a single activity)

- Can you offer a series of activities within one regime slot (e.g., a reading group, following a debating or crafting session)?
- Can adaptations be made to the length of gym sessions and the volume of the music reduced?
- Can activities be used to mimic the community outside of the prison walls where attendance may be possible on an evening or over the weekend?

The consistent delivery of the activity...

(older women report that consistency is important for maintaining mental health and well-being)

- We know that 'one size does not fit all'.
- Consider – can the same activity be provided in different ways? For example, could a reading group also include in-cell activity?
- Finding different ways to deliver the same activity will help more people to access the activity. This also encourages the activity to be delivered in different ways providing an alternative when the unpredictable happens.
- Offering and doing what offered promotes trust and self-belief that an individual is valued

The sustainability of the activity

(planning in advance for a sustainable activity makes it more likely to continue)

- Having a small team of staff willing to deliver the activity helps to cover for holidays and ill health.
- Consider working in a holistic manner, joining operational and healthcare staff together.
- Consider how the future staff appointments can promote partnership working with agencies in the community and model activities on a weekend or in the evening.
- Link activities to the strategy of the individual prison.
- Obtain support from a key member of the Senior Management Team who can help identify staff time for the activity.
- Have the backing of the Governor in supporting the activity in 'making it happen'.

Things to consider when setting up your activity

These are somethings you might like to consider when thinking about how to set-up your activity.

Getting sufficient engagement

Can the women be given a choice of what to do?	<input type="checkbox"/>
What do they want to achieve?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are partners needed to support the activity?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does the activity require resources; if so what resources are required?	<input type="checkbox"/>
How will the provision of resources be sustained?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does the activity fit within the prison strategy?	<input type="checkbox"/>
How can the activity form part of a protected time?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Can staff of a similar age make the approach?	<input type="checkbox"/>

The logistics of the prison regime

Consider combining a few different activities into one slot in the regime	<input type="checkbox"/>
Consider what adaptations are required to meet the needs of this group	<input type="checkbox"/>

The consistency of the activity

Do you have an alternative plan for delivery? (e.g., in cell sheets)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you have a team of staff willing to support the activity on rotation?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you have cover for staff sickness and holiday?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Could this activity be done in a different location if the usual place is unavailable?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you have a mechanism to allow the activity to run without resources?	<input type="checkbox"/>

Planning ahead for a sustainable approach

Which staff are going to be involved?	<input type="checkbox"/>
How will the organisation activity run?	<input type="checkbox"/>
When will it run?	<input type="checkbox"/>
How will the staff rota be supported?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you have someone on the SMT to support the activity?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Qualified staff members who can run the workshop or qualified facilitators	<input type="checkbox"/>
Do you have a designated room and space?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Where will it be held?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is this space regularly available?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Where else could it be held – are there different spaces in the prison that could be used?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Could the activity be delivered in different spaces?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Consider how the activity can be delivered in a flexible manner. (individually/group/ on wing/in cell). Always try and account for what if? Do you have a plan B?	<input type="checkbox"/>

Ideas for 'easy win' activities— easy to facilitate and use of little resources

Wing or unit-based sessions

- Reading club
- Create an older person representative
- Arts and crafts, (diamond, jewellery, card making crafts, knitting, crochet, origami)
- In-cell exercise routines
(<https://www.prisonadvice.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=f88fa317-4efc-446f-b865-e74e57951ece>)
- Coffee morning (knit and natter)
- Keep fit club

Examples of 'building back' activities

Activities on and off wings or units:

- Dancing, gym and exercises tailored to their ability such as walking group,
- Outdoor activities, gardening in raised beds, cooking, book club, crafting, needlework, Taster/short courses,
- Chair yoga/meditation/tai chi (Shibashi Qigong) in the evening,
- Music course, arts class, creative writing, creative therapy/project such as 'Talent Unlocked' evening, where prisoners had showcased their performing skills,
- Caring activity,
- The Open Academy, peer to peer mentors in education or domestic works.
- Adapted 'Park Run' – creating a sense of goals; achievement; a sense of belonging; supported by other peers and at their own pace.
(<https://blog.parkrun.com/uk/2023/07/25/the-positive-impact-of-parkrun-in-custodial-estates/>)

Case study I – How to implant a book club and shared peer to peer crafting session

Activity session:

Prisoner and Staff led book/reading club with peer-to-peer crafting (within the line route slot 2-3 hours)

What does the activity promote:

- Mental health benefits – Mental stimulation, therapeutic effects, sense of achievement, increased engagement and motivation.
- Open communication - debate, constructive opinions, increased confidence and self-esteem
- Group activity - Having time to relate to others over an activity and making new friends
- Opportunity for socialising- interacting with each other, skill sharing, sharing of ideas
- Keep up with the skills - promoting literacy, reading skills, sharing of crafting skills
- Engagement with staff - Promotion of engagement between staff and prisoners with staff taking part in the book club activity itself.

Where could the activity be delivered?

In the library, on the wing, on a location where staff already exist (education), outdoors. Activity within the regime time slots.

How often could the activity be delivered?

Monthly or every six weeks

The engagement approach:

Pair up buddies on each wing to attend; canvas opinion about time and location. Give choice to the books to those in the group; get the group to organise a rota of who was going to start by leading each session of reading and crafting. Agreed level of engagement with the staff members supporting the running of the group.

The resources and working in partnership:

Free books available at: <https://giveabook.org.uk/project/prison-reading-groups-2/#:~:text=PRG%20promotes%20reading%20for%20pleasure,no%20right%20or%20wrong%20answers.>

Free crafting wool is available for postage only at: <https://knitforpeace.org.uk/>

The potential barriers:

Hearing and visual impairments; identifying enough books for the group; ordering books in large numbers; ensuring all members of the group have a library card; getting the books to individuals on the wing; providing enough time for the book selection; having staff available in the library.

The sustainable plan:

Use of short story excerpts or newspapers instead of books

Use of a flexible staff team approach to lead and support the activity

Consideration of whether this can be achieved at different times of the day (weekend or evening)

Case study 2: - How to deliver an adaptive chair yoga and mindfulness script to promote sleep

Activity session:

Chair yoga and individualised mindfulness script development aimed at promoting sleep (1-hour session)

What does the activity promote:

- Physical and mental benefits – Reduce stress, anxiety and pain, improve flexibility and balance, and increase overall wellbeing
- Mobility- Good for the older prisoners with limited mobility
- Flexibility- Practice as either as a group activity or in-cell activity
- Sleep well– Feel relaxed and promotes positive sleep
- Group activity - Having time to relate to others over an activity and making new friends
- Individualised and tailored script making for mindfulness activities in cell.

Where could the activity be delivered?

In a room with reasonable space

Requires one chair per person with some space around the chairs to extend the arms and legs

Once the session is complete the person has their own individual mindfulness script to practice in their cell at night or at times when the regime is disrupted.

Initiated first in the evening in preparation for bed/ or at other alternative times of the day.

How often could the activity be delivered?

Once a month and then practiced weekly. Each month a different theme of mindfulness could be used to generate positive benefit to different aspects of mental and physical health.

Joint approach with healthcare staff and operational staff members

The engagement approach:

Pair up buddies on each wing to attend; canvas opinion about time and location. Remind those in the group about wearing suitable clothing. Agreed level of engagement with the staff members supporting the running of the group. Staff to collect individuals from the wing.

The resources and working in partnership:

Request to wear loose and comfortable clothing:

Internet information on mindfulness scripts <https://www.crowdfunder.co.uk/p/mindfulness-in-prisons-project?>

Health and operational staff working together; sharing the delivery and organisation of the session.

The potential barriers:

Dedicated group room

Qualified and suitably trained staff

If held around line route need staff escort because the session only lasts for one hour

The sustainable plan:

Development of mindfulness groups on each wing

Designated leader of the group who support each other around the theme

Plan the one-hour session with another activity to fit around the line route; for example, perhaps a talk and discussion around giving information on the menopause and available treatment; or coffee group.

Case study 3 – An example of how to learn through Heritage and Local history

Activity session:

Cultural belonging and a sense of historical community (2–3-hour session around line route)

What does the activity promote:

- Doing something that they hadn't done before – this helped to build an unexpected sense of confidence.
- A sense of place knowing where you are provides a greater sense of belonging and community.
- Having time to relate to others over an activity - Working together in a team and making new friends
- Outdoors - Working outdoors and breathing fresh air has helped improve both physical and mental health
- Interests widen with age – Interests go beyond stereotypes like knitting or chess, often exceeding assumptions.
- Supports a 'can-do attitude' to believe in themselves, even when faced with challenges.
- Promotes teamwork; communication and task organisation to produce something that can be shared in the prison.
- A sense of achievement and worthwhile activity.

Where could the activity be delivered?

Indoors and outdoors depending on the weather and the allocated task.

How often could the activity be delivered?

Once every six months as a standalone workshop or a series of classroom exercises.

The engagement approach:

Staff talk to people on the wing and in a group to explain what is expected in the session

Answer and questions and/or concerns that the individuals might have

Provide reassurance that this is something they can achieve

The resources and working in partnership:

Copies of old maps

Outdoor clothing

Pencils, paper, rulers, clip boards

Sufficiently trained staff to be able to run the session

The potential barriers:

Barriers – mobility issues, back pain, difficulty with walking, cannot draw.

Having a staff member to deliver the session

Security checks with the Department for all equipment

Operational staff escort to support the log in and log out of equipment

The sustainable plan:

Partner with an outside agency

Art work generated to be displayed around the prison

Plan ahead in advance

Feedback from the women that took part in these activities

"These [activities] have been a great uplift, I've felt more human for it. Extra time and extra fresh air also helped against my rheumatoid stiffness"

My overall general well-being improved; taking part made me realise how important it is to be active in old age and keep myself as healthy as possible in prison and in the community on release

"I was able to come off the wing and mingle with other prisoners of my own age group"



"I have found that my confidence has been boosted very much"

Talking people with similar age group who share same interests, my mental health has improved just by doing something different"

I really love it! Finding out the history of when the building was built and knowing how far.... You wouldn't have thought of it, I really enjoyed it and, yeah, looking forward to [doing] more

It helps my mental health because it's something that I wouldn't have thought ... I am just like, I can't do this, I can't do that then you get up, and you do it... you feel a lot better in yourself...being part of something as well... more interesting than anything that we have done before ... meeting new friends

Strengthening partners in the community

Case studies from the Models for Operational Delivery³

<https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/forget-me-not-appeal>

This group are often 'forgotten' in terms of effective care available in the community because they live within the prison system. To address this, Cognitive Stimulation Therapy is carried out in HMP Norwich's library by staff and volunteers, in partnership with the [Forget-Me-Not](#) charity.

This intervention is recognised to help combat isolation and improve wellbeing by participation in physical activity, validation therapy (being listened to), encouragement of new learning and encouraging these men to talk about their week.

"The success of this project has been down to the sterling efforts of library staff working alongside the brilliant and dedicated volunteers from the Norwich based charitable group Forget-Me-Nots which is dedicated to supporting people with memory loss and dementia."

<https://www.ageuk.org.uk/>

Governors should consider whether it is feasible for older prisoners to have timetabled separate PE and gym sessions. Reports from some establishments suggest older prisoners can be intimidated by, or uncomfortable attending the gym at the same time as, younger prisoners. Age UK North Tyneside run over-50s gym sessions in HMP Northumberland and have seen increased numbers of older prisoners attending the gym.

<https://www.salvationarmy.org.uk/prisons>

Case Study – Come and Meet Each Other (CAMEO) at HMP Wymott

CAMEO is an activities centre for older and disabled prisoners set up by Paul and Rita Conley, two Majors in the Salvation Army, who won a Butler Trust Award (<https://www.butlertrust.org.uk/paul-conley-rita-conley-hmp-wymott/>) in recognition of their work. With the help of HMP Wymott and the Salvation Army they have created an area offering the men an opportunity to get off the wing and to spend time in a supportive environment. The centre is located near the older prisoner unit and has private access to a small garden and a kitchen.

The centre provides a range of meaningful activity. Examples of these include; indoor bowls, sessions on geography, history, handicrafts and microwave cooking, music and book appreciation, discussion groups and cheese tasting. The centre also has a practical focus on resettlement, equipping prisoners with skills for their release including courses in practical living (paying bills, accessing resources and health care services), domestic living (health and hygiene), reality living (wills, enjoying life) and really living (dietary advice).

3. HMPPS Models for Operational Delivery: Older Prisoners

<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/1740/documents/16889/default/>

Partnerships for sustainability

Provision of knitting and crafting ideas

Knit for peace

<https://knitforpeace.org.uk/>

Tel:020 7794 9835

Fine Cell Work

<https://finecellwork.co.uk/>

Yoga and Meditation

<https://www.theppt.org.uk/>

<https://www.theppt.org.uk/2021/06/02/aging-prison-population-gets-support-from-yoga-and-meditation/>

Provision of reading books

Library staff & volunteers in partnership with the Forget-Me-Nots charity.

<https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/forget-me-not-appeal>

Distraction Packs

<https://www.recoop.org.uk/how-we-can-help/distraction-packs/>

Promoting the introduction of Dementia Friends for both staff and prisons

<https://www.dementiafriends.org.uk/>

Menopause Awareness

<https://www.recoop.org.uk/menopause/>

Some useful links :

<https://www.recoop.org.uk/>

<https://clinks.org/>

<https://www.ageuk.org.uk/>

<https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/forget-me-not-appeal>

<https://www.helpandkindness.co.uk/organisations/219/restore-support-network>

<https://www.uservoice.org/what-we-do/councils/>

https://www.clinks.org/directory?f%5B0%5D=people_you_work_with%3Aolder%20people

<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/1740/documents/16889/default/>

<https://www.prisonadvice.org.uk/pact-staff-packets-for-prisoners>

Conclusion

This Practical Guide provides information and resources on interventions that can be used to improve the wellbeing of older prisoners.

The guidance is based on the principles of tailoring interventions to the individual needs of older prisoners and delivering interventions in a respectful and supportive way.

Twitter/X @PAMHOP_PROJECT

<https://www.york.ac.uk/healthsciences/research/mental-health/projects/physical-mental-health-older-prisoners/>

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<https://prison.radio/>

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<https://www.rdash.nhs.uk/>

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