

Driving for Better Business

Podcast: Louise Clarkson

Simon: Welcome to Let's Talk Fleet Risk – a podcast for those who manage drivers and vehicles and want to reduce road risk in their organisation.

For this episode, I'm handing the reins over to my colleague, Anne-Marie Penny of National Highways and the Driving for Better Business Programme Manager. She's talking to Louise Clarkson, who is Operational Assurance and Capability Business Services Team Leader for National Highways' Customer Services Division. Louise founded the Menopause and Hormonal Conditions Network for National Highways. This was a fascinating discussion covering how menopause can impact a woman's ability to drive for work, the impact on a menopausal woman's partner who may also drive for work, the need for a corporate menopause policy, sharing corporate best practice across different sectors, and finally, Louise's award for the valuable work that she's done to support others.

Anne-Marie: Hello everyone and welcome to the Driving for Better Business podcast. My guest today is Louise Clarkson, Operational Assurance and Capability Business Services Team Leader for National Highways Customer Services Division.

Welcome to the podcast Louise.

Louise: Thank you for having me.

Anne-Marie: We've got a bit of history going back a couple of years.

Your role is in a critical part of National Highways' business Operational Assurance for on road officers and control room operatives. What was your route into this role and what does a typical day look like for you?

Louise: I started in the control room at South Mimms as a Control Traffic Officer about 18 years ago. I then became the team manager, after that I moved into the role of National Control Room Training Manager with the responsibility of training new Control Room Operators and when that role ended, I was asked to join Operational Assurance as the Business Support Manager.

My role covers a number of areas, managing the operational capability observation reports that are completed by team managers – both on and off road – and managing the assessments of those team managers from an administrative perspective. I am business support for the fatal risk control group, operational risk assessments and currently operational business continuity reporting.

Any one of these can form part of my working day, whether it's managing materials or pulling together reports and data, it can also include a little bit of IT help for the team or our control room and on road team managers.

Anne-Marie: I mentioned that your role is a critical part of the organisation, but that's really understating it – because making sure that our roads are as safe as possible, including our staff that work to provide safe spaces... it's critically important. I can't underestimate how important that part of our business is.

Louise: Absolutely. And having a process where we can ensure that the people working on our roads are working as safely as possible, and evidencing that - and making sure that the constant upskilling of their understanding of process is yearly.

Anne-Marie: Now, alongside the day job you founded the Hormonal Warriors group. I just love the title... so what is the group about and what led you to start it?

Louise: So, the official title is the Menopause and Hormonal Conditions Network – but Hormonal Warriors is much more fun. The group is about raising awareness of menopause in the workplace, the symptoms, and effects that individuals can experience, how that then manifests itself in the working environment, and what reasonable adjustments can be put in place to support an individual and keep them as a valued member of National Highways. We have worked with HR to put together a robust menopause policy, that in itself has won an award. I started it when I began experiencing the most intense anxiety about everything and anything – I was losing words, and my concentration was non-existent. I was convinced I had early-onset dementia or a brain tumour – I was 46. When I finally plucked up the courage to go to the GP and found out that this was perimenopause, I was both stunned and angry. Angry that I did not know about these symptoms, stunned that so many parts of us are physically affected by the declining hormones, and I knew there would be other people out there feeling exactly the same, thinking they are losing their mind and not knowing where to turn. Had I still been in the control room I would have probably left, for fear of setting signals incorrectly and endangering someone's life. Let alone for people who are on-road, and staring at traffic coming at them. I stopped driving because I knew I wasn't concentrating well, and quite frankly, I was just too terrified.

Anne-Marie: The symptoms are quite far-reaching, and some women go through the menopause with barely a batted eyelid – and the rest of us... we talk in the group a lot, and we have these shared experiences. You do feel like you're going mad. Somehow, you've changed from the person you used to be, but you don't know quite when that happened. It sneaks up on you and whacks you from behind.

You mentioned about not remembering the names of things, the names of people... the times I've stood in front of someone I've known for years, and I cannot bring their name to my lips. Apart from being embarrassing, you do wonder what's going on in your head. It can be really frightening.

So, talking about menopause. Even the name, people sometimes avoid saying it. It's not a subject that is often easily discussed, especially in the workplace. The symptoms can have a huge impact on life – including relationships and work. I think we need to be clear, it's not a disability but it can be really debilitating. There's a subtle difference in those two things.

You've talked a little bit about the experience of women who are pre-menopausal and going through the menopause. These things are entirely natural and normal – and this is not women making excuses. Sometimes that debilitating bit, you absolutely feel that you can't do something. It's the anxiety, and for people who have never been anxious to suddenly feel anxious... again, it comes back to that frightening sense of not knowing what's happening to you, because we don't talk about it. So, we need to talk more about it in the workplace. And just the experiences of people from the group... listening to people and talking, you understand that whilst they're varied experiences, there is that shared anxiety and worry part of it that goes through everybody.

Louise: Yeah. Intense anxiety is how mine started. The lack of concentration, inability to multitask, not being able to sleep, joint pain, memory issues – there are approximately 44 symptoms attributable to perimenopause, and I would recommend anyone Google them. Because your journey may start at a different point. There is no particular flow they come in – they can come at any different time in any different combination or severity.

The hot flush is probably one of the most obvious and well-known symptoms, and that in itself can affect your concentration and your sleep. There's intolerance, anger, rage, and breaking down into tears for no apparent reason. The individuals that have contacted me directly when they are in crisis, are usually struggling to explain their symptoms to either their line manager or their family. This can lead to a breakdown of relationships which just makes the whole process even harder to manage. The Samaritans statistics for suicide in women has their average age at 51, which is right in the middle of perimenopause.

[Transition]

Simon: There are plenty of resources available to help employers understand menopause, as well as guidance on how to start discussions with staff and address the potential impact. There are links to many of these resources in the show notes.

[Transition]

Anne-Marie: Women over the age of 50 represent the fastest-growing segment of the workforce – which surprised me, I have to admit. In 2021, the Government commissioned an independent report to look at the issue of menopause and employment, which contains 10 recommendations to support women going through the menopause.

What do these recommendations mean for employers and what they can do, and should do, to support women going through the perimenopause and menopause itself?

Louise: Businesses should have a robust menopause policy; they need to be training their line managers to have difficult conversations. Because this is a subject that most people don't want to talk about. They have to understand how something as simple as a reasonable adjustment of a fan on a desk can save the loss of a knowledgeable and experienced employee.

Perimenopause can last up to 10 years – it is not the same for everyone and each symptom can present in a different pattern or severity, with some lucky ladies not getting any symptoms whatsoever. So, each case must be treated independently of any other experience that that line manager may have had. But they need to educate themselves.

Anne-Marie: Yeah. And you mentioned the National Highways menopause policy which won an award. What is the approach of National Highways, and how has it improved the workplace for women?

Louise: Their approach was to speak to people like me, who were in the midst of perimenopause and go out to other businesses and ask for guidance on any successful menopause policies that they had implemented. I know they went to Lincolnshire Police, for example, and some of the councils in London who have also put together a really good menopause policy.

It's about understanding what a reasonable adjustment looks like for menopause – and that can be something as simple as a desk fan. It can be allowing people to work from home when they need to. Sometimes just the act of getting up, getting dressed, putting make-up on, feeding the kids, doing

sandwiches, getting them to school, getting on the train, and coming to work... it's just too much. If they could just sit there, open their laptop, and get on with work, that might be just what they need that day.

So, it's that kind of flexibility to understand where someone is at – it's not forever, and everyday won't be the same. But there's got to be an understanding of what could happen.

Anne-Marie: And as you say, women are skilled in the workplace – just as much as their male counterparts are. And when you've got a skilled part of your workforce, you want to retain them. You want to make sure that they can still provide that value to the business that you've seen before. The policy doesn't just help women going through the menopause, it helps the business to continue delivering what it needs to deliver. I think that's a really important point.

Louise: It's cost-effective. Having to start again with somebody new, and give them all the training and the experience...

Anne-Marie: And with more women over 50 being in the workplace, many will be driving as part of their or even as their main role. You mentioned driving – something you felt was so affected by the symptoms of menopause that you stopped driving. Many women will be driving as part of their job or as professional drivers as their main role.

Menopausal symptoms can pose unique challenges, especially when driving. How did you find that it affected your driving – what was it that really worried you about it – the physical and mental effects?

Louise: Concentration was the biggest challenge. We've all had that experience where we switched off while driving and we can't remember what we went through – but it was more than that. I had a couple of near-misses because I wasn't concentrating at all. There were a couple of 'slam the brakes on' moments. Our ability to multitask completely disappears, and this makes driving harder and more tiring – because functions that we normally do with muscle memory, like changing gears, require an even bigger effort to focus on.

Sometimes the anxiety of driving at all is so overwhelming that people will leave their jobs. It's just easier. I didn't drive for three years because I was so anxious, and I knew I wasn't concentrating. If you then have issues with your sleep, you are driving tired – which is a risk all of its own.

Managers need to be flexible and be able to have open conversations, sometimes a change in shift pattern can help, as an individual may be more alert at certain times of day. If there is an ability to partner with someone, that allows the individual to say on a particular day, 'I am really struggling with my concentration, can you drive today?'

So those are all considered reasonable adjustments. You can only have that through conversation.

Anne-Marie: This should be something that is on the radar of organisations and employers when they're looking at the risks for driving in their organisation. Some may not have women that drive, there may be a different environment altogether. But for those who do have women in their workforce that drive, that is a risk that they should look at, assess, and then look at mitigation so they're prepared.

Louise: Yes. And don't forget – it's not always the women that are suffering here. The husband, the partner – they're the ones lying in bed at night with the wife tossing and turning, having to get up because they're having hot flushes, and they want to change the sheets because they've soaked them with sweat. It disturbs their rest period as well. So, there may be partners of menopausal people who are equally struggling with sleep, and they then turn up tired. It's not just the women that it affects.

Anne-Marie: That's a really, really good point – and probably one that most people don't think of. We often think of mums and dads being tired when they've got a new baby in the house. But actually, think about partners of women going through the menopause – it's equally as important.

Louise: And some of us aren't lucky enough to have a supportive partner – some women don't have that open relationship to share exactly how we're feeling, which can leave the partner feeling very isolated and alienated, wondering what they've done wrong when actually they've not done anything.

Anne-Marie: Yeah – that is something to be aware of when you're looking at risks that you need to assess in your Driving for Work policy. That's something that we recommend people are mindful of.

How do we meet in the middle to ensure women are supported and the business need is met? What would your advice be to anyone managing someone going through the menopause?

Louise: Open conversations. We don't want to feel like this, and we don't want to let anyone down, so an open conversation where compromise can be made, that allows women to be honest – or a man – but equally allows the opportunity for the business to think differently in order to get business needs met.

Just being able to speak openly, and not hide the symptoms, can sometimes be all that is needed for an individual to carry on with the day job. An adjustment to uniform maybe, to help with hot flushes. We created a menopause animation as guidance for managers – view that. On your own as a manager, but also with the person that is struggling. Reading the menopause policy and asking for help from the menopause network. The Menopause Group has two Yammer pages: one for menopause and hormonal conditions, which is a private group for ladies only and 'Let's Talk Menopause' which is an open page where support can be gained, or anyone can go on and ask questions.

We were lucky to have that launched with Steve Bird, who presented a day in the life of the menopause husband, and how he supported his wife and how they talk about things. So, there is stuff there.

Or just simply Google it to educate yourself – you'll find the information. But be open to having those talks.

Anne-Marie: Excellent.

Finally, I understand that you've won an award – would you like to tell us a bit more about that?

Louise: Yes. I have, as of January, just stood down from the group. I've founded it and been its lead for 5 years, and it's time to hand over the baton. Duncan Smith nominated me for an Honours Award for going above and beyond in support of colleagues, which went to DfT, and I found out two weeks ago that I have been accepted. I have an invitation to a garden party at the Palace with the King on the 8 May.

I'm still quite stunned and I can't quite believe it, because I'm not really Palace material... I'm trying to work out what to wear, do I have to learn to curtsy! It's all a bit of a shock – it's lovely to be recognised, just by

being nominated. That's wonderful. It's wonderful to have been able to help the ladies I've helped. I hope that it continues with the current committee.

There's always a desperate need for ladies to join the committee – there's always so much to do. I wish them all well – but for now I'm happy to take a backseat. It's a nice epilogue to my journey.

Anne-Marie: It's so well deserved. The number of women in that group that come every month to talk about their problems and find help, and the support from the group which you started... it's phenomenal. Women are feeling easier about things because of what you did.

I would encourage people in organisations to look at whether they could start their own Hormonal Warriors group – we could have a chain of them! What a thing that you've started.

Louise: Yeah. A couple of years ago, I started an extended group for stakeholders, and that's grown and grown. People come in and say, 'this is what we've done', and we steal each other's ideas and share things to make it less of an icky word.

Anne-Marie: It's absolutely fantastic and very well-deserved. Thank you for joining us today.

If you want to know more about menopause, its effects on women, and what you can do in the workplace, we'll be posting some resources on the Driving for Better Business website.

Louise, thank you so much for today – good luck with whatever you do.

Links:

- Government Report 2021
<https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/33631/documents/183795/default/>
- NH Menopause Policy:
<https://highways.sharepoint.com/sites/HRZone/Shared%20Documents/Forms/AllItems.aspx?id=%2Fsites%2FHRZone%2FShared%20Documents%2FMenopause%2FPolicy%2FMenopause%20policy%202020%2Epdf&parent=%2Fsites%2FHRZone%2FShared%20Documents%2FMenopause%2FPolicy>
- 'Let's talk menopause' yammer group:
<https://web.yammer.com/main/groups/eyJfdHlwZSI6Ikdyb3VwliwiaWQiOiIxMTkyODkyNDE2MDAifQ/all>