

Can Graphic Design really save your life?

Explore the association of wellbeing and personal growth in Design in your discussion.

Menstruating is challenging every month, but for some it's debilitating. I will be exploring the topic of menstrual issues throughout this essay and whether Graphic Design has saved the lives of people experiencing these difficulties. Firstly, I shed clarity on the condition of Endometriosis and learn how useful Graphic Design has been in spreading awareness of the condition. Subsequently, I move on to challenging the stigma of periods and how design has allowed women to feel more secure and unashamed of their bodies. Moreover, I cover period poverty and highlight the life-threatening experience that refugees go through just to menstruate every month. Finally, I finish on everyday sanitary products containing toxins that are considered the most "dangerous chemicals on the planet" (Goop, 2021)

The area I have decided to focus on first is Endometriosis after a close friend was helped by informative design. Endometriosis affects 'approximately 176 million women in the world' (Endometriosis Org, 2021). Endometriosis is a condition "where tissue similar to the lining of the womb starts to grow in other places, such as the ovaries and fallopian tubes." And this can result in infertility. (NHS, 2019) This is very distressing for those who suffer from the condition, they not only face the constant excruciating pain every month, but they also must live with the fact that if they want children, they could potentially struggle in doing so biologically.

The period product brand *Body Form* (2019) recently put together a virtual exhibition to display the suffering resulting from Endometriosis. The brand titled the exhibition “pain stories” and visitors can view and read women’s first-hand stories of living with Endometriosis. (*Body Form: Pain stories* 2019) stated on their website that women with endometriosis experience “chronic misdiagnosis, a continued lack of funding and an ingrained culture of neglect, and this has left women undiagnosed and untreated for years”.

(*Body Form: Pain stories* 2019) wanted to raise awareness through Graphic Design to give women’s pain the “expression it deserves and the demand to be taken seriously”. This is so important because the “lack of funding” has previously led to women being unaware and uneducated on this condition. Therefore, awareness like this is a positive step forward into more conversation about the topic which will in turn create a demand for more research.



Figure 1. Body Form (2019) *Pain Stories*

Figure 1 displayed above is taken from the pain stories exhibition and it is a representation of the excruciating pain that is experienced with Endometriosis. The pain in the visual is being compared to that of someone tearing up a uterus, this brings shock to the audience as it adds another level of realism, they start to imagine how it feels as they visualise it. Graphic design like this adds another level of thought to the viewer and as “approximately 65 percent of the population are visual learners” (Inc, 2019) This allows the audience to take away more of an

understanding when educating themselves on the topic and they are more likely to retain the information for a long period of time. To add to this, Graphic Design visuals like (*Body Form: Pain stories* 2019) allow for those who believe they have Endometriosis, to understand they aren't alone in the agony that they go through. As a result, they might book an appointment to see the doctor and explain their symptoms are similar to the visual they saw.

A close friend of mine; Codi Newlands (2021) is a prime example of someone who researched Endometriosis and could relate through the informative design of Fig 1. As a result, finally had a visual to represent how her periods made her feel.

(Newlands 2021) suffered from agonising periods since she can remember and was "conditioned by society to think it was normal". After the recurrent pain, she made an appointment with a female doctor, and she states that "Before I could even sit down in her chair - I was belittled. The doctor told me - "They "aren't that bad though, are they? It's just something we have to go through."

(Newlands 2021) left the appointment feeling defeated "I went to the car, and I cried. I wasn't listened to. She didn't even let me speak to voice my concerns. I was embarrassed and disappointed. Turned away. Misdiagnosed. This happens to so many women and girls every day. Suffering in silence because they fear being ridiculed for voicing their pain. A few days later my mother pushed for me to go again and make another appointment with a specific doctor that specialises in women's reproductive health. I sat down and she asked me what I

was experiencing. It was automatically like a weight lifted off my shoulders, she cared about what I had to say.

The second doctor sent Newlands off for multiple medical tests and she was later diagnosed with Endometriosis. Without the motivation and the support, women like Codi Newlands (2021), may not go for that second consultation and then never know they are suffering from Endometriosis. It's creative visuals like (*Body Form: Pain stories* 2019) that allows an abundance of women to reach for guidance, women who just assumed their pain was normal, to push to get the answers and the help they desperately need. By (*Body Form: Pain stories* 2019) encouraging this through Graphic Design is a powerful visual tool that is thought provoking and can make a revolutionary change to the world.



Figure 2. Amy Ottely (2019) *Ruby Box*

To further challenge period stigma, an illustration student, Amy Ottely, from Plymouth college of art, created 'Ruby Box' *fig 2* a monthly menstrual subscription to "change the negative relationship women have with their period through its vibrant packaging and branding" Henry Wong, (2019) She was "Inspired by research into the severity and growing rates of period poverty in the UK" (Plymouth Art, 2019)

The idea and result of Ottely's work are progressive, as it helps confront the stigma of periods head-on. This stigma that every woman has at least once been ashamed of, especially young women who are experiencing periods for the first time. After all, from the age we start periods we are told a hundred different phrases to use instead of saying we are on our periods such as "having the painters in" Cassidy, (2016). All because of the stigma society has

created. Therefore, these vibrant designs Ottely has created are allowing women to feel more comfortable and at ease about their normal bodily functions.

Too add to this, the depiction of the boxes is luxurious compared to the standard period product packaging. This would transform the perception a woman has of her period, as now, with these products, she would feel like she's treating herself as it looks like more thought has gone into the product.



Figure 4, Tiffany Kezia, (2020) *Flow Stickers*

Continuing the theme of stigma Figure 4 by Tiffany Kezia is a sticker set with motivational messages for young girls starting their period. Just like Ottely's work the vibrant colours used to create these stickers are so that whilst you wear them you can feel proud and show others, they shouldn't feel ashamed either. Both artists are encouraging women to be loud

and proud that their body is healthy enough to produce a period, not hide away and pretend they don't experience it. According to Action Aid (2018) "37% of UK women have experienced period shaming". Therefore, this goes to show why women feel too uncomfortable to discuss any concerns they have about periods, for example, if they think they have abnormal periods. This can result in dangerous long-term effects as there could be an underlining health condition.

The messages on the stickers that state "break period stigma" and "period is not a shame" will change the stigma at the root of the cause which is the early years as a girl of starting your period. This would make women less embarrassed as they grow up, so then they don't have to hide their tampon up their sleeve, or they stop caring if anyone hears them open their pad in the all-women's bathroom, after all, why are women judging other women for something they all go through.

Furthermore, Ottley isn't the only one to create work to tackle period poverty head-on. In this case it's period poverty affecting refugees, this is a major concern not just in 3rd world countries but even in the UK. to tackle this issue, product design student Cheuk Laam Wong has created "*Loop Can* a concept for a portable kit to clean menstruation pads that aims to reduce period poverty among refugees. Each *Loop Can* kit includes a container for cleaning, 70 grams of baking soda and a reusable sanitary pad made from bamboo terry fabric called the *Loop Pad*." (Deezen, 2021).



Figure 4. Cheuk Laam Wong (2021) *Looop Can*

The process of the “*Looop Can*” can be seen in Figure 4. This is extremely beneficial for refugees as “Almost 60 per cent of female refugees suffer period-poverty problems” (Deezen 2021) and ‘may spend years and even decades living in camps’ UN Refugee Agency (Not Dated) With the reusable period products like this, periods as a refugee, would be a worry of the past. Especially as Laam Wong states in an interview with *Deezen* (2021) that the product would last up to ‘5 years’, this means that refugees would always have access to period products, plus they wouldn’t have to choose between feeding themselves or their health.

In addition, for a woman like Marie (2019) who is a refugee from Africa, living in Birmingham, period products like Laam Wong’s would be revolutionary. In an account from (*Refugee Women Org*, 2019), Marie stated that ‘Not having enough money to buy pads was heart-breaking and stressful. I would enter any public toilet to get tissues that I could use instead. I

was too ashamed to ask a stranger for a pad. There was a time when I had to use my baby's nappy as a pad. That was so degrading"

With Laam Wong's product available to charities it would be given to all female refugees for free, and they would be able to clean their period products discretely and safely in the refugee camps.

To add insult to injury "According to one estimate a menstruator will spend \$17,000 (£12,000) on period products in their lifetime" (Diamant, 2021, p.59) this is an extortionate amount for something that women simply can't control. There's no wonder period poverty exists when sanitary products should be free in the first place, so that no woman must live in fear like Marie (2019) did. Therefore, reinforcing the point that the Graphic and Product Design that Laam Wong has created would most definitely save the lives of refugees and asylum seekers.

Moreover, even if you have access to period products, there's the argument as to whether the mainstream products are safe to use every day. According to (Goop, 2021) "Tampons are made of rayon, in addition to cotton. This process contributes to dioxins in tampons. Dioxin is one of the most dangerous chemicals on the planet. Even just a small amount can cause damage." As the vagina is a "highly permeable space. Anything we put inside can be easily absorbed into the bloodstream" (Goop, 2021). This is not common knowledge to the majority of women as there is extreme lack of education and continued use of this toxic chemical, even in a small amount, could have such devastating effects.

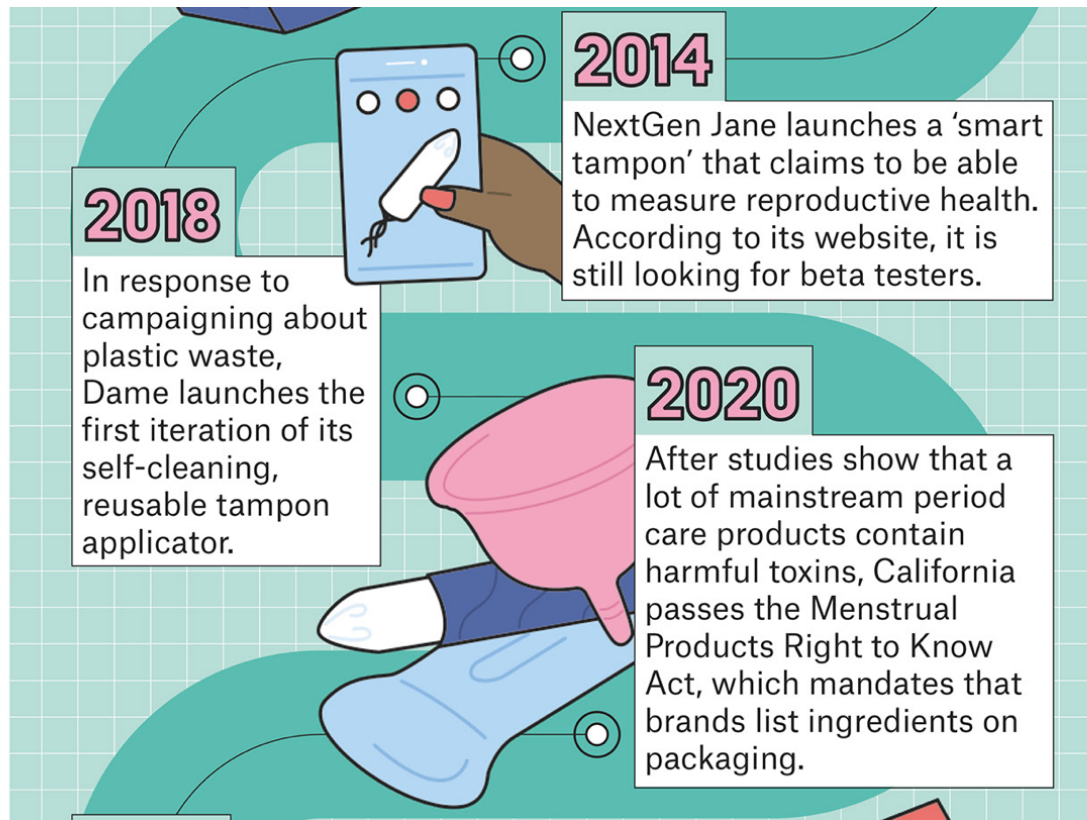


Figure 5. Elisabetta Calabritto (2021) *Period products*

A useful source of information to help educate women about the toxins would be Figure 5 as it is an example of an infographic explaining the history of sanitary products. It is an informative piece of design, and the illustrations hook your attention to want to learn more. With the information being simple and clear this means having this piece in a school bathroom or public bathrooms would be useful for women to read and make safer choices in period products.

To add to this, the infographic states that California discovered there were toxins in menstrual products and there is now a "right to know Act" where ingredients must be listed. California is one of the most forward-thinking states in America and for them to make a move in the right direction is an exemplar of how the rest of the world should follow.

However, even if the ingredients are listed, those who can't afford to buy the products without the harmful toxins don't have a safe alternative. Therefore, the products that are dangerous should be taken off the shelves entirely and replaced with ones that are more "natural such as organic cotton pads and tampons, which are less likely to be toxic and wildly available as well as the menstrual cup" (Hess and Hess, 2014, p. not listed)

Evidentially, this essay has displayed how Graphic Design has helped save the lives of those who have been affected by menstrual issues. Whether it is directly saving their life by creating discrete and reusable period products for refugees, allowing them to have access to period products without having to rely on someone else or whether it is passively saving lives by giving someone the encouragement to tackle period stigma. Either way, graphic design is a powerful tool that when used correctly can have a positive outcome and save someone's life.

In addition, this essay only focused on the topic of menstrual issues and there are multiple other, life hindering topics, that could be considered in the argument of whether graphic design can save a life. Therefore, suggesting that graphic design has an even stronger amount of evidence in other aspects of life and the answer to the question is clear, Graphic Design can really save a life.

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