

‘No time to rest’: A feminist-immersive study on women’s relationship with rest

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Introduction

Despite being one of most natural and essential components of human life, critical for both wellbeing and performance, rest has been a long-neglected topic by both researchers and practitioners that is also undervalued in everyday life. This undervaluing of rest is especially relevant to women who, due to deep-rooted social norms and gender stereotypes, experience excessive demands to meet expectations and responsibilities at the cost of ignoring their need for rest. In this feminist-immersive project, I seek to fill an empirical gap within the study of rest and to harness the power of stories to help women adopt rest as a health behaviour, inspire cultural shifts in performance-orientated sport and open doors to broader social change. This research practice involved immersing myself in social settings where I could develop a shared understanding of women’s relationship with rest before interviewing 40 women on their lived experience of rest by creating a safe space for rest-full conversations through a care-full feminist ethos. Based on these conversations, I share ten composite narratives along with diffractive questions to offer readers a glimpse into the realities of women’s lives and their experiences of and barriers to rest and to evoke an embodied and empathic awareness of what it is like to be a woman with ‘no time to rest’ and ‘no place to rest’. The process and findings of this research have implications for transforming our own restful and caring practices and I offer recommendations for how we can use these composite narratives and diffractive questions to support healthy rest practices at individual and system levels so that rest is no longer the long-overlooked and yet desperately awaited experience it is for many of us.

Memories of Learning to Rest

*Some days, all I
have to offer the world
is my being.*

*I am learning
that this
is enough.*

I am learning that it is enough to be a loving presence. I am learning that the world needs me more than it needs what I do. I am learning that one of the hardest parts of being a woman is accepting how much I can realistically do in a day, a week, a year when I don't abandon my body. When I don't override the natural pace of my nervous systems. When I don't push through. I am learning that what I expect myself to get done in a day – what society has normalised women getting done in a day – is often unsustainable, a kind of violence that leads to disconnection from my body, my heart and those I love most.

As I sink deeper into my healing, I am beginning to experience my body as a living, breathing being instead of a machine. I am beginning to feel love and beauty and awe. And I am also beginning to feel my tiredness. To hear when my body says no. To sense my limits. To feel my body's yearning for rest. Despite what women have been told, I am discovering that I can't 'do it all'. That I can't achieve anything I want if I 'just work hard enough'. This can be difficult to accept, to allow. Because it goes against a patriarchal, capitalist culture where performance and achievement are so valued.

It can, at times, feel like a kind of failure to fall back down into the depths of my humanness. To accept myself as a limited being with a body that needs sleep, a brain that needs rest, a nervous system that can only be nourished in stillness, in nature, in the deep and loving presence of another. Sometimes, I feel a deep shame that I can no longer pull myself together and push through in the way I once did. After years of mechanising my body, it takes courage to be with what is alive within me in each moment. To prioritise rest in a society that worships busyness. To slow down my life to the pace of my nervous systems. To accept that some days, all I have to offer the world is my being. And that my being is enough.

Rest: The Long-Neglected Research Topic

Rest is the most effective way to prevent and treat overtraining and burnout, as well as a key component of recovery, motor skill learning and expertise development (Eccles & Kazmier,

2019). But despite being a key concept within sport and exercise psychology, critical for both performance and wellbeing, rest has been a long neglected topic by both researchers and practitioners that is also undervalued in everyday life (Jakowski, Heidari & Kellmann, 2023).

In their review of literature of the psychology of rest in athletes, Eccles et al. (2022) suggest that the concept of rest has been overlooked in sport psychology in part because of researchers' and practitioners' tendency to prioritise athletes' physical actions in training and competition because these can be observed, objectified, defined and measured. In contrast, rest may be seen as intangible and covert, and often occurs behind closed doors hours after training and competition has finished (Eccles & Kazmier, 2019). The opposite may also be true and some researchers and practitioners may assume that rest is so self-explanatory it doesn't warrant further investigation (Eccles et al, 2022).

Rest may also have been undervalued as a research topic in sport psychology because it is undervalued in 'the hegemonic, hypermasculine subculture of sport' (Tibbert et al., 2015) which is characterised by performance narratives that normalise ignoring injury and playing in pain (Douglas & Carless, 2014) and a 'rest-is-for-the-dead' mentality (Tibbert et al., 2015). With the increasing 'technologisation, medicalisation and scientisation of elite sport performance environments' (Wagstaff & Lerner, 2015) and increased pressure to meet stakeholder needs, performance outcomes are treated as paramount, often at the expense of self-care, wellbeing and vulnerability (Hägglund et al., 2023), which inevitably leads to overtraining and burnout.

Cultural norms in sport subcultures may be an extension of norms, values and beliefs inherent in wider society (Eccles et al, 2022). Despite Socrates' warning millennia ago to, 'Beware the barrenness of a busy life', in modern society, busyness has become a status symbol (Bellezza et al., 2017). This value system can be attributed to historical cultural influences such as the puritan/protestant work ethic (Weber, 1930), contributing to the 'ideal worker norm', which posits that work should be the primary commitment in life (Williams, 1989). The capitalist glorification of individualism, competition and meritocracy (Cederström, 2018) contributes to the relentless pursuit of improved performance and productivity as one of the most 'significant cultural principles operative in contemporary Western societies' (King, Gerisch & Hartmut, 2018).

In addition, 'we are busy imitating machines' (McGilchrist, 2019, p.256). Nineteenth century industrialisation dehumanised the body, forcing labourers to work 'like a machine' (Kuskey, 2012), contributing to collective denial of our 'bounded physicality' (Rush, 2023) – the material reality of our bodies – and resulting in the belief that rest is dispensable rather than a necessary component of human life.

This undervaluing of rest is especially relevant to women who, due to deep-rooted social norms and gender stereotypes, effectively work for free for two months of the year compared to

men due to the gap in average wages (TUC, 2023). For decades, women have provided the bulk of unpaid domestic work as well as carrying the majority of the mental load – the invisible, boundaryless, never complete work of caring and mothering (Dean, Churchill & Ruppanner, 2022). Women are also faced with additional workplace pressures to challenge sexist stereotypes by going above and beyond what is expected of male colleagues (Yammarino & Connelly, 1991). For example, in their review of literature, Winslow and David (2016) found that institutionalised policies and subtle biases perpetuate gender inequality in academia and, in sport and exercise psychology, Lafferty et al. (2022) found evidence of patriarchal beliefs such as assumptions of female incompetence compared to their male counterparts. These gender-based societal norms may place excessive demands on women to meet expectations and responsibilities at the cost of ignoring their needs for rest (Beckmann, 2023).

According to The Rest Test, the world's largest survey on rest involving more than 18,000 people from 134 countries, 68 percent of people feel that they don't get enough rest (Hammond & Lewis, 2016). The endocrine disturbances caused by being under-rested are of particular concern to women, where underrecovery can manifest as amenorrhoea, putting them at risk of infertility and osteoporosis (Mountjoy et al., 2014). Other costs of underrecovery include a decrease in performance and productivity, depressed mood, sleep disturbances, fatigue, loss of appetite, increased vulnerability to injury, irritability, anxiety, immunological dysfunction and biochemical abnormalities (Frank et al., 2018).

Underrecovery is a major factor in sport attrition and dropout in young athletes (Frank et al., 2018), and fatigue (a common symptom of being in a rest deficit) is one of the most cited barriers to regular exercise, especially for women. A recent YouGov poll commissioned by World Cancer Research Fund found that 40% of the women studied cited 'feeling too tired' as a reason for not being able to make healthy changes to their diet and activity levels (YouGov, 2022). Fatigue is a major perceived barrier to exercise for low-income women (Hoebeker, 2008), pregnant women (Evenson et al., 2009) and African American women (Joseph et al., 2015), as well as adults with type 2 diabetes (Korkiakangas et al., 2009), obesity (Joseph et al., 2019) and mental illness (Firth et al., 2016).

Over the last few years, as I have been exploring rest as an embodied process of resting-reading-relating-knowing, I have discovered that the concept of rest in the literature is still vague and 'epistemologically immature' (Rush, 2023). Within sport psychology literature, conceptualisations of rest rarely extend beyond rest as physical inactivity (Kellmann et al., 2018), although in their literature review, Eccles et al. (2022) proposed a descriptive model for the psychology of rest in athletes where rest is described as both a psychological state of feeling fresh and motivated and a process involving both sleep and wakeful resting experiences. In her review of literature Bernhofer (2016) synthesised a plethora of definitions to define rest as 'a

human need, a beneficial state that is intentional, temporary, and restorative, involving cessation, minimization, or change in physical, mental, or spiritual work, fatigue, trauma, illness, or stress'. Asp (2015) highlighted how rest is taken for granted in everyday life and that the phenomenon of rest has hardly been reflected on in a scientific way. By drawing on a lifeworld perspective, she conceptualised the essence of rest as consisting of movement between states of rest and non-rest, temporarily allowing oneself to let go of responsibility, experiencing harmony between one's feelings, actions and motivations, being accepted without judgement, dwelling in calm and perceiving pleasurable sensations.

Insights from my own experiences as a rest-practitioner-researcher and the limited rest-based literature point to the need for a deeper, more immersive, feminist understanding of rest so that rest no longer remains the 'long-neglected and yet desperately awaited' experience it is for many of us (Jakowski, Heidari & Kellmann, 2023). Because the current state of knowledge in sport psychology is overwhelmingly male-dominated and therefore poorly equipped to provide evidenced-based interventions for women (Walton et al., 2022), this need for a deeper understanding of rest is even greater for females so that they receive support that is appropriately tailored to their lived experiences.

Following a brief discussion of the research process, this paper focuses on filling the gaps in the research by exploring women's experiences of and barriers to rest. In doing so, I hope to fill an empirical gap within the study of rest and to harness the power of stories to help women adopt rest as a health behaviour, inspire cultural shifts in performance-orientated sport and open doors to broader social change.

The Research Process

A rigorous human science is prepared to be soft, sensitive and soulful (van Manen, 1994, p. 18). Instead of aiming for objectivity, a way of looking at things that prioritises detachment, I chose to explore women's relationships with rest through immersion, intimacy and intuition, allowing a feminist-immersive (un)methodology to unfold.

Similar to post-qualitative inquiry, feminist-immersive research has no 'pre-existing research designs, methods, processes, procedures, or practices' (St. Pierre, 2021) because they can over-determine thought and close off new ways of thinking and being, limiting what can become from the research. Nor does feminist-immersive inquiry see research as a 'a process of data extraction from a human or non-human world that can be represented as an unproblematic 'truth'' (Fullagar, 2020, p. 2). Rather, drawing on concepts from post-qualitative inquiry, I was able to 'plug in' (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013) to the experience of rest in an embodied and relational

way that invites disruptive and creative possibilities to emerge. This meant relinquishing the desire for a step-by-step method and instead attuning myself to the different rhythms of reading-researching-resting, allowing myself to get lost in moments of uncertainty in order to open up possibilities for new ways of (un)knowing and (un)becoming (Fullagar, 2020).

This approach to research embodies feminist ethics where 'affirmative ethical relations create possible forms of transformation of the negative by mobilising resources that have been left untapped, including our desires and imagination. The affective forces are the driving energy that concretises in actual, material relations' (Braidotti, 2008, p. 4). These relations allow for the production of affective intensities of connection and belonging (Fullagar, 2020).

Key to this research process is myself as a rester-researcher, seeking to create a safe space for rest-full conversations through a care-full feminist ethos. An ethics of care has five elements: Caring about (attentiveness), caring for (responsibility), caregiving (competence), care receiving (responsiveness) and caring with (solidarity) (Tronto, 2013). All human interaction has the potential to be healing and emancipatory so, rather than treating interviews as 'neutral encounters in which participants share their experiences with an impartial interviewer' (Marn & Wolgemuth, 2017), I sought spaces within interviews for 'flickers of transformation' (Way, Zwier, & Tracy, 2015, p. 2). In a similar way that Matthews used his experience of competing in boxing to leverage acceptance as a 'cultural insider' in his immersive study on the use of drugs in amateur boxing (Matthews & Jordan, 2020), I shared my own experiences of being a woman-exerciser-rester to develop an 'intimate familiarity' (Matthews, 2021, p. 62) with the lives of the women I was interviewing. Because the purpose of this study was rooted in a hope that my research would 'transcend field and topic and embrace a broad agenda of making the world a better place' (Hansen & Trank, 2016, p. 353), rather than aim for 'dispassionate inquiry' (Maier and Monahan, 2010), I forgoed claims to objectivity and infused compassion into the research itself – offering interviews as spaces where pain can be witnessed, felt and alleviated (Hansen & Trank, 2016).

My immersion and compassion provided the basis from where I could lift the veils (Bumber, 1986) on women's relationship with rest and access the guilt, fear, shame, pain and exhaustion that often remains hidden.

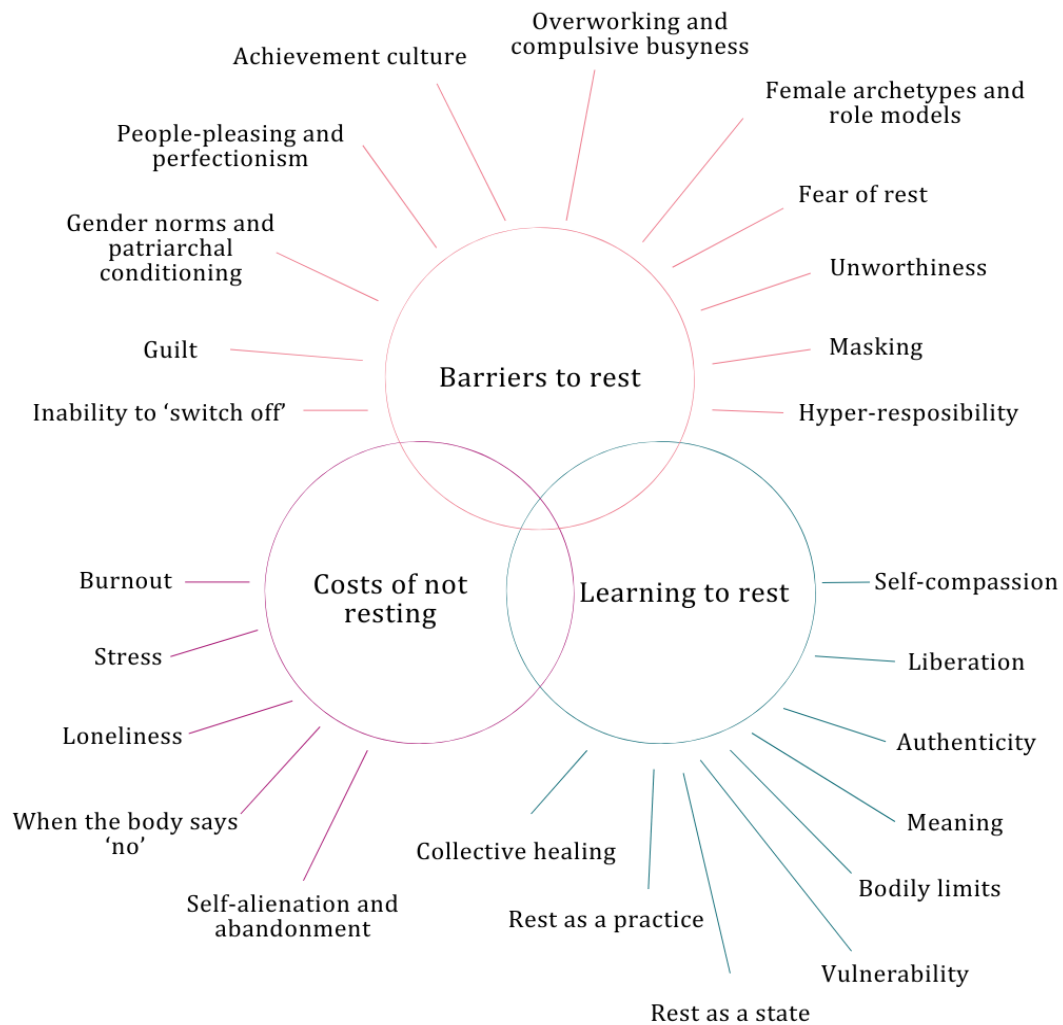
Because it is only through an intimate participation in life that makes knowing possible (Wertz et al., 2011), between June and December 2023, I became deeply embedded in social settings where I could develop a shared understanding of women's relationship with rest. These included in-person spaces like yoga studios, women's circles and female founders meetings, as well as online spaces such as Mumsnet and Menopause Matters. The goal of this immersion was to get a 'felt sense' (Gendlin, 1993) of women's relationship with rest by witnessing discussions

on relevant concepts such as rest, productivity and burnout that could provide useful starting points for interviews.

Between August and November 2023, I interviewed a demographically diverse sample of 40 women. This was carried out via 32 individual interviews and two focus groups. For the focus groups, participants were invited to 'Rest and reflect sessions', with the aim of providing a supportive environment for women to connect and discuss sensitive issues related to their experiences of and barriers to rest (Jarrett, 1993). Whilst no broad claims can be made on the generalisability of this sample, it provides a window to begin exploring women's relationship with rest which can help inform pathways for more systematically structured research and interventions.

In advance of each interview, I sent participants some questions that we might want to explore but interviews didn't follow a specific structure. Instead, whilst each interview centred on similar themes, each unfolded in slightly different ways based on participants' experiences and my own 'intra-action' (Bared, 2007, p. 185) and 'entangled, affective relations' (Nicholas, Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2023, p. 136) with them. With the consent of the participants I recorded the interviews, which I conducted online and in public spaces such as cafes that could still offer the necessary privacy. I later transcribed these and adopted a thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. I also paid attention to where data glowed for me, the 'hot spots' (MacLure, 2013, p. 172) and affective intensities that fascinated, exhilarated, disconcerted and created a sense of wonder (Ringrose & Renold, 2014).

Figure 1: Schematic diagram of themes and sub-themes



Because we make sense of the world through stories (Christiansen, 2016), and in order to present my findings in a way that is useful to those outside of academia, from these themes and hot spots I created composite narratives (Willis, 2019), weaving together relevant extracts from the transcripts to create a cohesive story, offering a collective voice to participants and a source of connection for readers. In order to explore the textures, tensions and contradictions, I analysed each narrative diffractively so that as well as reducing the 'data' down into themes, I also opened it up into possibilities (Mazzei, 2014).

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the Canterbury Christ Church University ethics committee and all participants were provided with research information and consent

form. All efforts were taken to ensure that participation in the research was entirely voluntary, and they had the right to withdraw at any time.

Stories of (Un)rest

Ten composite narratives are presented below. To protect the identity of participants, all names used are pseudonyms. Following each narrative are diffractive questions that emerged from plugging in and reading the narratives and theories through, with and in relation to one another (Mazzei, 2014).

Grace teaches Geography in a local secondary school. She is a single mother to her two daughters. She also cares for her sister's children two evenings a week. In her narrative, the following subthemes are emphasised: 1) hyper-responsibility, 2) overworking and compulsive busyness, 3) inability to 'switch off', 4) stress, and 5) fear of rest.

I'm on the go from the moment I open my eyes until I collapse into bed at night. I'm always busy, always tense. I can't switch off. Even after I'm home from work and the kids are fed and the chores are done and I could technically have some downtime, I'll always find something else that needs doing. On the rare occasion that I do sit down and watch a movie with my family, my brain won't switch off and I'm constantly thinking about the next thing I need to do. I feel like a train that never stops. I'm afraid to rest because I'm scared that if I take my foot off the gas, my whole life will fall apart.

How does increasing individualism in the Western world – 'pursuing one's own personal goals above the needs of a community' (Nezlek & Humphrey, 2023) – impact women's capacity to rest? How would having a deeper sense of community allow us to take our 'foot off the gas' in the knowledge that if we did 'fall apart' we would be caught in the arms of a loving community?

Elizabeth is a 56 year old mum of three teenagers who works in hospital administration. She also cares for her elderly mother. In her narrative, the following subthemes are emphasised: 1) female archetypes and role models, 2) achievement culture 3) self-alienation and self-abandonment, 4) meaning, 5) gender norms and patriarchal conditioning, and 6) authenticity.

A lot of the women in my life are the superwoman archetype, and it's phenomenal and it's also toxic. I see so many of my friends trying to juggle so

much and uphold these unrealistic expectations of what a woman 'should' be – expectations that we never even wanted in the first place. And I used to be like that too. I used to feel a strange sense of pride when my friends would refer to me as 'superwoman'. I took pride in how busy I was and how much I could juggle and how, even when I felt exhausted, I would just push through. But I began to feel increasingly alienated from myself and those I loved and life started feeling more and more meaningless. One day, out of nowhere, I had a memory of this relaxed, playful version of myself from my childhood, a little girl who read books for pleasure and wandered around the garden listening to the birds and looking at moss and leaves. Growing up, the message I received – the message I think all women receive is, 'You've got to speed up. You've got to get ahead. You've got to achieve. You've got to succeed'. But, at 56 I started sensing a deep longing for this relaxed self, for the relaxed woman that was buried in me. As I'm recovering from burnout, I feel like I've come full circle. When I was very young, I was intuitive and playful and carefree. I didn't feel like I had anything to hide or anything to prove. And now, as I'm getting older, I feel like I'm returning to that authenticity. I'm remembering what's important to me and, rather than trying to prove myself and please everyone else, I'm more able to focus my energy on what truly matters. Recently, I was offered a promotion. The prestige and money would have been nice, but for me, it's just not worth it. There's more in life that I value and I'm never going to get this time back. In a strange way, it doesn't feel like I'm creating a more relaxed life, it feels like I'm returning to it. Deep down I've always known what matters, I just forgot for a few decades.

How does the 'rulebook of shoulds' that women have internalised from society create a barrier to rest? How can we begin to identify and detach from these 'shoulds' so that we can live more authentically by acknowledging our 'bounded physicality (Rush, 2023) and honour our needs?

Hazel is a sports nutritionist and semi-professional footballer. In her narrative, the following subthemes are emphasised: 1) stress, 2) overworking and compulsive busyness, 3) rest as a practice, 4) people-pleasing and perfectionism, 5) authenticity, and 6) self-compassion.

I didn't realise how stressed I was. I thought being anxious and short-tempered and indecisive was just my personality. I didn't realise that the coping mechanisms I'd developed – compulsive busyness, overworking, trying

to control everything – were not who I am. They were behaviours I did when I felt unsafe. Over the last few months, as I've been practising yoga and mindfulness and going to therapy, I've realised that it's not that you're either a stressed person or a relaxed person. Rest and relaxation are things you can learn, things you can practise. And so I'm beginning to unlearn those habits that were keeping me stressed – rushing, overthinking, staying compulsively busy, always trying to fix and rescue and people-please – and learning new skills and practices that can help me live more authentically and peacefully. I always used to worry about how dangerous the world is so now I practise looking for beauty. I always used to rush unnecessarily so now I practise doing things slowly. I always used to pick my body apart in the mirror so now I practise speaking to myself compassionately. I'm learning how to set boundaries, how to express my emotions, how to simply rest and breathe. And I wish someone had taught me these things in school. Because, as I do these practices, I'm learning that the anxious, overwhelmed, exhausted woman that I thought was 'me', is not me. When I'm not stressed, I'm passionate, I'm fun, I'm lighthearted and lively and bubbly.

How does living in a chronic rest deficit constrain the development of our inherent personality traits (Schmitt et al., 2008)? How can rest offer women a path to authenticity?

Eloise is a 34 year old personal trainer and mum of two. She also runs a dog walking business. In her narrative, the following subthemes are emphasised: 1) unworthiness, 2) guilt, 3) people-pleasing and perfectionism, 4) gender norms and patriarchal conditioning, 5) collective healing.

I work so hard to compensate for the feeling that I'm not good enough, that there's something wrong with me. It doesn't matter what I do or what choice I make, I always feel guilty. My sense of worth is so low that it's like I have to earn my right to exist – and so I spend my life rushing to try and do everything and please everyone. There's no time to rest. And there's a part of me that knows what a gift is to have this brief time on earth and that I don't have to do anything or achieve anything to deserve to be alive, but there's another part of me that feels like I need to prove that I am worthy of being here – as if I need to compensate for something bad or broken in me. A big part of my healing journey is around this belief that there's something wrong with me that I need to fix. And as I've started talking with other women, I'm realising this isn't just

a me problem. It's just really hard to be a woman in a patriarchal society that constantly tries to convince you you're unworthy. There's so much power in community. When I'm with other women and I'm hearing them talk and hear their struggles, I realise I'm not the only one feeling like this. We have to hear each other talk. We have to rest together. We have to heal together. We need a safe place to rest. There are so many groups for celebrating achievements and accomplishments and reaching goals. But there are no spaces where we can rest together. Imagine being in a space that celebrated resting and being. Imagine what that would affirm. Imagine the kind of world we could create.

How do patriarchal norms, capitalist values and religious narratives around original sin interact to legitimate female oppression and create collective beliefs around women as unworthy and undeserving of rest (Pioli, 2022) ? How can we embrace rest as a way of disrupting oppressive gender norms and narratives?

Gemma is a psychotherapist and yoga teacher. In her narrative, the following subthemes are emphasised: 1) people-pleasing and perfectionism, 2) stress, 3) self-alienation and self-abandonment, 4) rest as a practice, 5) rest as a state and 6) liberation.

I've lived a lot of my life from a trauma response, desperately trying to find safety in pleasing others. When I was stuck in that state of stress, I unconsciously believed that being in a relationship meant I had to abandon my own needs. Just the thought of setting a boundary or expressing a need made me feel physically sick. I was this codependent, overcaring, overfixing, overgiver. But I'm slowly unravelling this identity. Because constantly trying to help and fix can be so damaging for other people and for myself. Over the last few years, as I've begun to prioritise rest and recuperation in my life, I've learnt that if I'm going to hold space for someone who is in pain, I need to be in a very grounded, relaxed state. Now, when there is chaos outside and other people are falling apart, I can stay in this relaxed state because I know it's not my job to fix anything or save anyone. I can witness. I can hold loving space. But I'm not there to rescue. And it feels liberating to be able to reclaim this relaxed state, even when I'm active and engaged in the world.

How do gender roles in individualistic societies contribute to increased sociotropy (an excessive concern about what others think of oneself, dependency on others for support, and a strong desire

to behave in ways that please other people) in women (Yang & Girgus, 2018)? How could the cultivation of 'caring masculinities' – integrating values of care and interdependence into masculine identities (Elliot, 2016) – liberate women from excessive relational responsibilities so they can rest?

Mya is a 31 year old teacher and PhD student studying climate justice. In her narrative, the following subthemes are emphasised: 1) self-alienation and self-abandonment, 2) hyper-responsibility, 3) burnout, 4) bodily limits and 5) self-discovery.

I'm 31 and I have no idea who I am. I've spent so many years taking care of everyone else and juggling all the balls that I've lost myself. As a teacher, I spend my days empowering my students to find their voice, but I've lost mine. I don't know what I want or what I enjoy. Looking back, I started losing myself as a child. I come from a broken family and had a really difficult childhood. Both my parents struggled with addiction and I had to be extremely responsible and deal with problems I wasn't mature enough to handle. I've been carrying all that childhood trauma with me and, over the years, as my life has gotten busier and more stressful, I've become more and more alienated from myself. I've lost connection with my body. I've lost connection with what really matters to me. I've lost connection with my self. About three years ago, I burnt out and was diagnosed with chronic fatigue. It's led me on this journey of self-discovery and changing the way I see the world around me. I still struggle with chronic fatigue and, at the moment, I feel pulled between wanting to return to my PhD and really trying to listen to my body and see if I'm ready. I feel so frustrated by the limitations of my body but I'm tired of pushing through and pretending I'm not exhausted. I don't want to get to the end of my life and not know who I am beyond what I achieve and how well I please others. I want to make friends with my body. I want to make friends with my self.

How do cultural pressures for women to engage in an overactive lifestyle to prove their 'good citizenship' contribute to the development of chronic fatigue syndrome by normalising overburdening the body by exceeding physical limits (in work or sport) as a way of coping (Van Houdenhove et al., 2001)?

Annie is a 33 year old pilot and mum of one. In her narrative, the following subthemes are emphasised: 1) female archetypes and role models, 2) gender norms and patriarchal conditioning, 3) masking, 4) rest as a practice and 5) vulnerability.

In my family, female role models like my mum and grandma had an extreme attitude of martyrdom and selflessness. The women in my life were always running around taking care of everything and everyone. There was no place to rest. My mum would tell me that I need to work twice as hard as men to be taken seriously. That I always need to look in control. That I can't cry, that I can't let anyone see my vulnerability or they'll take advantage of me. She was trying to protect me but it taught me that being a good woman meant masking my emotions, overriding my body and suppressing my femininity. Slowly, I'm reparenting myself. I'm learning how to listen to my body and let myself rest, how to be vulnerable, how to let my guard down and allow people to see the soft and tender parts of me.

How do performance narratives inhibit women's capacity to acknowledge our physical and emotional vulnerability? How can we begin to create conversations around vulnerability in sport, work and wider culture (Hägglund et al., 2023)?

Zara is an entrepreneur, triathlete and mum of two. In her narrative, the following subthemes are emphasised: 1) burnout, 2) overworking and compulsive busyness, 3) gender norms and patriarchal conditioning, 4) when the body says 'no', 5) achievement culture and 6) bodily limits.

Years of chronic stress eventually led to a point where I completely crashed and burned. I wanted to show my daughters that women can have it all, but it was absolutely exhausting. Deep down, I knew I needed a break. I wasn't sleeping, I kept getting infections and, even though I probably looked successful to the outside world, I felt like a robot, functioning but not really alive. I'd been white knuckling it for so long and one day, my body just said 'No'. I was signed off work with stress and I spent three months basically in bed whilst my amazing husband supported me and our family. Since then, I've come to understand my burnout in mythological terms as an underworld journey. All the things that had given me a sense of worth and identity – my career, my supermum role, my people-pleasing – were stripped away. I'd always found my worth in my achievements and productivity, but now I had to

find it in something deeper than accomplishments and degrees. One of the things that has been so healing for me is learning to work with my body's rhythms and cycles, to allow myself those periods when I need to focus inwardly and rest deeply and then, at other times, to live daringly, work passionately and give generously.

How has the increasing 'technologisation, medicalisation and scientisation' (Wagstaff & Larner, 2015) of sport, psychology and society contributed to women experiencing a 'machine-like version of ourselves' (McGilchrist, 2019, p. 120)? How can demechanising and rehumanising ourselves help us to acknowledge rest as a basic human need?

Emma is a 38 year old family lawyer and competitive crossfitter. In her narrative, the following subthemes are emphasised: 1) gender norms and patriarchal conditioning, 2) unworthiness, 3) achievement culture, 4) fear of rest, 5) rest as a practice and 6) collective healing.

I feel like the only time I'm allowed to rest is when I'm so exhausted that it's the only option. I got the flu last year and in a strange way it felt like a relief because I feel like I don't deserve to rest unless I'm sick. And I know this is internalised from living in this capitalist, patriarchal society, but I gain so much of my worth through productivity and I'm terrified of being judged as lazy – by myself as much as by anyone else. I feel like if I'm not always doing something productive or working towards a future goal or contributing to the world in some meaningful way, I'm worthless. I used to judge the women at my work who took lunch breaks and left on time and didn't reply to emails outside of office hours as being lazy and uncommitted. But now, I'm starting to see them as my role models. I don't want to normalise overworking or contribute to a culture of toxic productivity. And feeling this sense of interconnectedness with other women – and realising how my behaviours either contribute to or challenge the unrealistic expectations society places on us to 'do it all' – is helping me to give myself the permission to rest, not just when I'm sick or exhausted, but as a natural part of everyday life.

How does women's sense of interdependence influence our relationship with rest? How can we cultivate a sense of interdependence to enhance wellbeing (for example, via outdoor team challenges (Cohen et al., 2023))?

Lila is a writer who is pregnant with her first child. In her narrative, the following subthemes are emphasised: 1) compulsive busyness, 2) exhaustion, 3) unworthiness, 4) loneliness, 5) rest as a practice, and 6) authenticity.

Sometimes I grieve for how much of my life I spent ping-ponging between compulsive busyness and bone-deep exhaustion. I grieve for all the times I overworked and overexercised and traded sleep for productivity, for forgetting to treat my body as sacred. I grieve for all the precious times with loved ones I've lost because I was 'too busy', for all the opportunities to rest I've ignored because I didn't think I'd 'earned it', for all the glorious, ordinary moments I've missed because I was in too much of a rush to notice them. Allowing myself to rest has felt healing in so many ways. Now I'm no longer stuck in a state of chronic stress, I'm beginning to feel okay with things not being perfect. I no longer feel the need to plan, predict and control every aspect of my life. I am able to stay grounded when traumatic memories arise, to accept loss, change and uncertainty as inescapable parts of life, to let people see the parts of myself I once worked so hard to hide.

How does 'rushing woman's syndrome' (Weaver, 2017) create a barrier to rest? How can valuing and prioritising rest as a culture open possibilities for personal healing and collective flourishing?

Restful reflections and recommendations

My hope in offering composite first person narratives and diffractive questions is to express insights gleaned through my immersion in women's relationship with rest in a way that is accessible to others, that will fill an empirical gap in the research on rest, that will build bridges between sport and exercise psychology and disciplines such as women's health, cultural studies, and caring ethics, and that will offer a 'felt sense' of participants' relationship with rest, deepening empathy and compassion in practitioners – both towards themselves and the people they work with.

The majority of these stories are made up of direct quotes, blending the voices of 40 participants into 10 narratives. Whilst each woman's story is unique, when woven together these 'data chunks' (Wibberly, 2017) can offer us a meaningful whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Woven into these voices is my own voice and my own life-world that is

influenced by my own barriers to and experiences of rest, simultaneously similar and different to participants' stories. Through this 'complex re-telling' (Wert et al., 2011) of themes and hot spots woven together in a texture-rich and authentic way, I hope to have evoked a 'felt sense' in the reader, eliciting an embodied and empathic awareness of what it is like to be a woman with 'no time to rest' and 'no place to rest' – it is exhausting, lonely, terrifying, alienating, overwhelming and grief-filled. In doing so, I aspire to awaken in readers what immersing myself in this research has awakened with me: an ever-deepening embodied and relational understanding of rest which evokes a 'driving energy' (Braidotti, 2008), transforming my own restful and caring practices.

For sport and exercise practitioners, this embodied understanding is essential in offering support that is sensitive to the unique needs of the people they are working with and the contexts they are working in. A deepening experience of and respect for this 'felt sense' offers practitioners a 'caring practice' (Wert et al., 2011) rooted in 'being with' (Kass, 2014). This can help to demechanise sport psychology from increasing technologisation (Wagstaff & Larner, 2015) and instead rehumanise it by awakening personal qualities that play a significant role in developing an effective therapeutic relationship such as empathy, trustworthiness, presence, authenticity and spontaneity (Chandler et al., 2014).

There are also applied opportunities arising from this research for sport and exercise practitioners with respect to moving beyond the hypermasculine subculture of sport that normalises a 'rest-is-for-the-dead' mentality (Tibbert et al., 2015), as well as the hypermasculine practice of sport psychology itself – a psychology that is dominated by the masculine 'doing for' rather than the feminine 'being with' (Kass, 2014). In practice, this might look like a shift from an overreliance on cognitive-behavioural approaches that have been dominant in sport psychology for the last 25 years towards a feminist, existential sport psychology that emphasises depth, presence, interdependence, intimacy and nurturance (Kass, 2014).

As the composite narratives evoke a 'felt sense' within practitioners, they may feel a 'driving energy' to challenge the 'rest-is-for-the-dead' mentality both in sport subcultures and in themselves. In order to effectively support and care for athlete-exerciser-resters, sport and exercise psychology must begin to integrate rest – and conversations around rest – into our work. In a similar way that Hägglund et al. (2023) recommend starting conversations about vulnerability in elite sport using word clouds and poems, practitioners can use the composite narratives in this study to begin conversations about rest so that we can create cultures – within sport, psychology and in wider society – where rest is valued as a core component of performance and wellbeing.

Additionally, these composite narratives, when shared with other women, practitioners and athlete-exerciser-resters, can offer them new understandings of their own barriers to and experiences of rest. Seeing our personal experiences echoed in the stories we read can deepen our sense of our common humanity, awakening self-compassion and reminding us that we're not alone.

The themes highlighted in the composite narratives show that conversations around rest between women and between practitioners and athlete-exercisers-resters can open a door to deeper conversations around stress, fear and loneliness, as well as authenticity, meaning and compassion. These non-judgemental discussions around the role overworking, overtraining and compulsive busyness play in athlete-exercisers-resters' lives may enhance relational intimacy and increase engagement in psychological support and readiness to change.

As practitioners, we must also look closely at our own relationship with rest. In their systematic review, McCormack et al. (2018) found that between 40-56% of psychologists reported moderate to high levels of emotional exhaustion. This high-rate of exhaustion amongst psychologists combined with a culture of elite sport that perceives support-seeking as weakness, can put pressure on sport and exercise practitioners to deny their 'bounded physicality' and mask their exhaustion, putting them at risk of burnout (Olusoga et al., 2019). Both individual practitioners and systems within sport environments are responsible for supporting healthy rest practices and cultivating a culture of recovery (Dieffenbach, 2023).

As I have immersed myself diffractively by 'plugging in' participants' stories into theories into stories (Mazzei, 2014) and reading them through the insights of feminist theory and literature exploring gender imbalance in sport psychology (for example, Gill, 2023; Lafferty et al., 2023; Goldman & Gervais, 2021; Walton et al., 2022), the following questions have emerged: How is the neglect of rest as a concept in sport and exercise psychology related to the male dominance of the discipline? In what way is the lack of research into rest a result of women's absence from elite sport, leadership roles and sport and exercise publications? Alongside rest, what other important issues and perspectives that are especially relevant to women are we missing because of the gender imbalance within sport and exercise psychology? How is delivering coaching, support and psychological strategies from a heavily male-orientated evidence base neglecting the needs of women? How can we move from judging rest as unnecessary and unproductive to experiencing rest as a liberating practice that can transform individualist, capitalist and patriarchal norms?

It is essential that we re-imagine sport and exercise psychology research (un)methodologies and interventions to nurture practices that treat women as subjects not objects, opening up safe spaces where our feelings can be felt, needs can be met and stories can

be shared. This calls for greater interdisciplinary research where we can embrace the thresholds between disciplines as sites of possibility and transformation (Jackson & Mazzei, 2013) and prevent 'naive overspecialisation' (Kincheloe, 2011), as well as an increased emphasis on a 'feminine' version of sport psychology that is rooted in depth, presence and being (Kass, 2014).

This study was originally inspired by my own discovery of rest as a path to meaning, authenticity and liberation after experiencing overtraining as a national level Olympic weightlifter and burnout as a young counselling practitioner. Findings echo my own experiences as a woman-athlete-practitioner in that, whilst burnout, underrecovery and 'exhaustion can impede joy' (Nichols, Pavlidis & Fullagar, 2023), they can also create 'boundary situations' (Jaspers, 1970) – moments that transform us and open us up to possibilities and new ways of being. Boundary situations or 'critical moments' (Nesti & Littlewood, 2011) are often very lonely experiences but, with the right support, these moments offer powerful opportunities to (un)learn and (un)become, to remember what truly matters to us and to return to our most authentic selves.

By developing an embodied understanding of participants' experiences of rest, we can develop a 'felt sense' of why rest matters – for athletes, for women and for ourselves. We can create rest narratives that offer alternatives to dominant performance narratives that deny our 'bounded physicality'. We can prioritise rest as a practice of self-compassion and self-discovery, a path to personal wellbeing and collective liberation.

When I first began this research, I discovered that rest is an area where sport psychology has failed. Findings highlight how rest isn't valued socially or economically, and this apathy towards one of the most natural and essential components of human existence goes hand in hand with the failure of science to address it. Unless we research rest, speak about rest and see one another rest, it cannot be normalised and our need for rest will remain a shameful secret.

This study can be seen as a first step in researching the psychology of rest. Further research could further explore the psychology of rest in different genders, professions and exercise populations, as well as looking at the connection between individuals' relationship with rest and variables such as personality, adverse childhood experiences and psychological wellbeing. Another avenue for research could be the co-development of rest interventions, for example through feminist participatory action research, which could support women to both understand and practise rest, as well as transforming the oppressive social structures in which our lives are embedded (Gatenby & Humphries, 2000).

Ultimately, by researching rest, speaking about rest and letting ourselves rest we are saying: 'I matter. We matter. Rest matters. Together, we are transforming what matters'.

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