

Menopause

By Kate Quinn

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Try mentioning the word “menopause” at work and it is likely to stun people into silence or cause an embarrassing giggle at a hormonal woman’s expense. The most many employers offer to their menopausal women in the workplace are fans – but is this enough?



Menopause is a normal life event for women and so it is not an illness or a medical condition. This often means that the symptoms of the menopause are too often under recognised, undervalued and not taken seriously.

The psychological symptoms associated with the menopause such as loss of self-confidence, low self-esteem, anxiety and depressive symptoms are the ones that often affect women the most.

What is Menopause

- **Menopause** is the biological stage in a woman's life that occurs when she stops menstruating
- **Perimenopause** is the time leading up to menopause when a woman may experience irregular periods or other menopausal symptoms. This can be years before menopause starts
- **Postmenopause** is the time after menopause has occurred, starting when a woman has not had a period for 12 consecutive months
- **Menopausal symptoms** affect 75% of women, meaning not all will need help or support

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(Pictured Kate Quinn)



It was not until I experienced menopausal symptoms myself that I appreciated the full extent of how symptoms can have a detrimental impact on my ability to

work, relationships, energy and self-worth.

Looking back, I probably started experiencing menopausal symptoms when I was around 45, but did not recognise them at the time. To be honest I thought I was going mad. I thought it was something that happened much later on, I am now 50.

So it was a bit of a revelation to find out the average age of achieving menopause - when your periods have stopped for 12 months - is 51.

For me, the hot flushes and sleepless sweaty nights came much later and actually once these started it at least started to make sense of the years of other symptoms that I hadn’t really thought of as menopausal.

I started noticing that I lost concentration easily and that the fog in my brain made it feel like I was sat in meetings and everyone was talking another language. I started to doubt my ability to do my job and I personally started to think I had something seriously wrong with me.

Then there were the journeys in to work with a deep feeling of anxiety and panic. Sobbing all the way in to work because of the complete sense of panic for no apparent

reason and then dusting myself off and deep breathing to manage the feelings so that I could at least try and present myself as capable. I felt disconnected from everything and couldn't work out why. Loss of energy, moodiness with my husband and children and feeling like an observer rather than a participant at social events. It feels like it will never end.

It also seems that a woman's body cruelly starts to challenge her just at the point that her children are leaving home and so there is often a double whammy of realising that your body can no longer produce children at the same time as your children no longer need you. It is just as challenging psychologically as it is physically.

All of these types of symptoms have caused many successful and capable women to give up work either because they simply couldn't cope any more or believed themselves to be "losing their mind".

Many women feel afraid of showing signs of menopause in the workplace. We try and shrug it off as 'just my age' or make light at 'having a hot do', but in reality there can be a lot more going on for women.

I would like women to be able to feel confident in speaking to colleagues and managers about this transitional stage of their life and to seek support where possible. Workplaces can make "very small, reasonable adjustments" to help cope with symptoms. Suggestions include giving women fans for their desks, flexible working to cope with a lack of sleep, and offering a quiet space at work to tackle poor concentration.

I am constantly staggered and surprised how little women (and maybe more importantly men!) know about symptoms of the menopause and health risks of the menopause (including increased risk of cardiovascular disease and osteoporosis).

More than three quarters of women have said that prior to reading a list of symptoms they did associate those they were/are suffering from as being associated to the menopause.

Around 3.5 million women aged over 50 years are currently in employment in the UK. Studies have shown that at least of 50% of women have reported as finding work somewhat or fairly difficult due to their symptoms of menopause. Around 10% of women have actually given up work all together as a result of their symptoms.

A recent survey undertaken by West Midlands Police has found that over 80% of women admitted to their symptoms having affected them at work including reduced hours, changed their roles at work or even given up work all together as they have been making mistakes, struggling with learning new tasks and generally feeling too shattered.

Research has shown that the more frequently women reported experiencing menopause-related symptoms and the more bothersome the symptoms were, the less engaged they felt at work, less satisfied with their job, the greater their intention to quit their job and the lower their commitment to their employment.

Studies have shown that menopause symptoms can have a significant impact on attendance and performance in the workplace, with some women being misdiagnosed as suffering from mental ill-health or other conditions, and the impact on their work can be wrongly identified as a performance issue.

It is very likely that early diagnosis, education and adjustments can act as a preventative measure for menopause related sickness. When menopause is managed correctly not only can it reduce absenteeism (for example reasonable adjustments being put in place), it enables women to talk about their concerns with their work colleagues and

managers. There should be measures in place to provide some support in what is considered a significant physical change, in line with puberty or pregnancy.

Managers have responsibilities for the health and safety of all their employees, but there are also clear business reasons for proactively managing an age-diverse workforce. Some employers have been slow to recognise that women of menopausal age may need specific considerations and many employers do not yet have clear processes to support women coping with menopausal symptoms.

Whilst menopause obviously directly affects women, consideration should also be given to the fact that partners and family members can be significantly affected, and their working ability also potentially impacted.

There is clear guidance from the Faculty of Occupational Medicine for women whose menopausal symptoms are affecting them at work. The recommendations include encouraging discussions to take place with managers about practical needs, speaking with the occupational health service and also talking with other colleagues.

Advice regarding healthy lifestyle and wellbeing is also mentioned which are clearly very important when considering the management of the menopause. The guidance also recommends that women seek advice regarding available treatment from their GPs.

Many women are still suffering in silence and do not realise how effective hormone replacement therapy (HRT) can be at dramatically improving both their symptoms and also their quality of life with the effect of being able to help them function better at work.

For women starting HRT under the age of 60, the benefits usually outweigh any risks.

So, while we joke about our age, the menopause is no laughing matter for many women.

Managers need to help women as part of a holistic approach to employee health and well-being including risk assessments to make suitable adjustments to the physical and psycho-social work environment, provision of information and support, and awareness for staff.

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