Menopause at work – let’s talk about it

Coping with menopausal symptoms at work can be tough and some women are, understandably, reluctant or even afraid to talk to their employer about it. Dr Louise Newson thinks it’s time for a change.

As the average age of the menopause in the UK is 51 years, this is often an age when women have more senior posts and may have more stressful jobs that can sometimes be more difficult to juggle around family life, let alone cope with having menopausal symptoms too. It’s also an age when many women are experiencing significant life events that are occurring outside of their work and careers. For example, problems with older children or ageing relatives.

Menopause is a natural condition that affects all women at some stage of their life. The vast majority of women, around 80%, have symptoms related to their menopause. Whilst the average age is 51 it’s not just these women who are experiencing difficulties - around 1% of women under 40 years of age in the UK experience an early menopause.

So, with around 3.5 million women aged between 50 and 65 years currently in employment in the UK, women now represent nearly a half of the UK labour force. That surely makes menopause mainstream and as important as any other occupational health issue.

Challenges
In addition to the classical symptoms of hot flushes and mood swings, menopausal symptoms can really affect a woman’s confidence, concentration, energy and ability, which can negatively affect work performance.

Many people don’t realize the hugely significant effect the psychological symptoms of the menopause can have. If women do not recognize that it is the menopause causing their symptoms, then they will not

“I became withdrawn, felt hopeless, worthless – I couldn’t see a future. I couldn’t bear any pressure; I had sleepless nights, palpitations, and huge anxiety. I couldn’t even bear to be alone at home. I couldn’t work…” Following a visit to her GP Diane began taking plant-based estrogen and the impact was positive: “It was such a weight off my shoulders. I could begin to think about work again.”

Diane Danzebrink, 50, talking to The Telegraph online

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Working through the menopause

• Many women find they are little prepared for the onset of the menopause and are even less equipped to manage its symptoms at work. They tend not to disclose their symptoms to their manager
• The majority of women feel they need further advice and support
• Workplaces and working practices are not designed with menopausal women in mind
• Heavy and painful periods, hot flushes, mood swings, fatigue and poor concentration can pose significant and embarrassing problems for some women, resulting in lowered confidence
• Women are often uncomfortable disclosing their symptoms and problems to managers, particularly if they are young or male.
• Where women have to take time off work to deal with their symptoms many do not disclose the real reasons for their absence
• Some women say they have to work extremely hard to overcome their perceived shortcomings due to their menopause
• Others consider working part-time, despite the concern about the impact on their career. Some even think about leaving employment altogether.

Source: UNISON’s Health and Safety guide to the menopause.

I have seen numerous women over the years who have either stopped work or seriously considered stopping work as they have simply felt their ability to concentrate and do their job properly had severely diminished. All their decisions and feelings have been direct consequences of their menopausal symptoms.

Stop the silent treatment

Menopause is still a ‘silent issue’ in most companies and menopausal/peri-menopausal women represent a group whose working lives, experiences and aspirations are poorly understood by employers, national governments and even academic researchers. There is still a taboo around addressing menopausal issues in the workplace, which I really feel has to change.

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The majority of organisations still provide little support (formal or informal) or line management training about the menopause. Many workplaces (and individuals) still underestimate the possible impact that the menopause and associated symptoms can have on a woman’s enjoyment and engagement at work.

Also a lot of companies and individuals remain unwilling to raise awareness of the menopause and see it as a very sensitive issue, which should not be mentioned in the workplace. This makes it very difficult for individual women to discuss their symptoms and can result in time off work and sick notes that don’t reveal the real reason for time off work. This leads to collusion between employees and their managers, which can, in turn, create other problems.

Some research has shown that around 70% of women would not consider disclosing to their line manager about difficulties with their work, brought on by their menopausal symptoms.

However, if managers are in the dark about what the underlying problem or symptoms employees are experiencing they cannot offer appropriate support. All this often means they make wrong assumptions about the reasons for a woman taking time off work.

This is shortsighted. Studies have shown that it is very expensive for businesses to fail to recognize the value and needs of their menopausal employees. It can increase health insurance bills, time off work and demand for health care – all of which have an impact on productivity.

“One of the main issues for menopausal women is that difficulty sleeping, hot flushes at night, lack of concentration, memory loss and hormone imbalance can have a real effect on their working life. They start to miss targets, make mistakes and situations which they would have dealt with easily become more difficult – they become less tolerant, more emotional and in a lot of cases, anxious. This can be misunderstood by fellow workers – perhaps attracting allegations of bullying. It might also lead to poor performance and possible conduct issues.”

Beverley Sunderland, managing director of Crossland Employment Solicitors

“Wouldn’t it be great to see employers providing …

• Greater awareness among managers of the menopause as a real occupational health issue

• Provision of a culture where women feel comfortable about discussing their symptoms and what impact that has on their working lives

• Options around flexible working hours and working arrangements to help manage symptoms

• Improved access to support – formal or informal

• Options to improve your work environment temperature and ventilation.

Professor Dame Sally Davies, Chief Medical Officer

How can employers help?

I strongly feel that there needs to be less of a taboo so men and women can be encouraged to talk freely about any menopausal symptoms that might be affecting work.

After all, it’s often acceptable to give a pregnant women sympathy for feeling tired or a mother of a young baby sympathy for sleepless nights. So, why should it not be conventional for employers to sympathise with women who have disturbed nights’ sleep due to their menopause?

Many women are awake numerous times in the night, either being woken by night sweats, feeling generally too hot or even being too cold when the duvet has been flung off for too long after being too hot. Even menopausal women who do not experience these symptoms can still experience poor quality sleep, which can affect their energy levels the following day.

So, there needs to be more education regarding potential symptoms of the menopause so employers can recognize these symptoms and show more empathy and understanding.

The great taboo of menopause should be discussed between employers and female workers as openly as any other issue.

“I want to encourage managers to ensure working women feel as comfortable discussing menopausal symptoms as they would any other issues affecting them in the workplace. This will help to ensure that the talent and potential of all women can be realised to the full.”

Beverley Sunderland, managing director of Crossland Employment Solicitors

Wouldn’t it be great to see employers providing …
Increasingly many organizations are looking at health and wellbeing strategies in the workplace as there is an established link between health and performance in the workplace. The general hypothesis is that the healthier and happier people are, the more productive they are likely to be. Clearly, menopause needs to be included in these wellbeing sessions.

**How can women help?**
Research has shown that, understandably, many women do not want to formally discuss their specific menopausal symptoms with the organization or even feel ‘managed’ through their menopause by their workplace. However, many women do feel that if their organization took a proactive approach and the cultural perception of menopause shifted, then this could significantly affect their work and career opportunities in a positive way.

It is also important that women are properly educated about treatment options for menopause including hormone replacement therapy (HRT).

HRT is the most effective treatment for the control of symptoms such as difficulties in remembering, disturbed sleep, hot flushes, depression and anxiety attacks and it has been shown to improve the function of women at work.

HRT also has other proven health benefits including reducing the risk of osteoporosis and probably reduced risk of cardiovascular disease. For women under the age of 60 the benefits of HRT usually outweigh any risks.

Very few women have sufficient knowledge regarding HRT to make an informed choice regarding treatment. This means that too few women are currently taking HRT as they feel they do not know enough about its potential benefits. However, the vast majority of those women who do take HRT notice that their performance at work improves dramatically. They also find that their energy, mood, concentration and sense of wellbeing improve too.

However, it is important that a woman’s menopausal status is not seen as an automatic indicator to employers of their likely performance in the workplace. Equally every woman’s menopause is different and they must not perceive what is, after all, a natural condition as a stigma or event to be dreaded. Talking and seeking appropriate treatment is key.

It’s clearly time to talk more when menopause is at work.

**Dr Louise R Newson**  
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### Support and education in the workplace is important:

“It’s common sense, looking after the wellbeing of your workforce. A lot of male colleagues say it is helping them to understand what is happening at home as well as in the workplace. The younger ones are learning what’s happening to their mum.  
“It becomes important, not only how you manage it personally, but also how you model it for others. “I was not sleeping well, which makes the pressure and intensity of the job I do even harder. Identifying the problem behind my insomnia with my GP was halfway to solving it.”

Sue Fish, Chief Constable of Nottinghamshire, talking to The Telegraph.

**You might find it helpful to ...**

- Find out more about menopause in general
- Talk to your GP about treatment choices
- Talk with a manager / HR department you feel comfortable with
- Use technology where it can help you – setting up reminders on your phone or taking more notes
- If you have supportive work colleagues talk about your experiences with them, you may find you’re not alone. Humour can help deflect embarrassment and increase your confidence
- Look into mindfulness techniques you can practice at work and home
- Consider lifestyle changes – could you exercise more? Stop smoking or set a revised weight goal?