



Creating and working in a menopause confident organisation

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balance
the menopause support app

This booklet is written by Dr Louise Newson, GP and menopause specialist and founder of the Balance app and website, The Menopause Charity, and the Newson Health Menopause Society. Dr Newson is working with the NHS and UK Government bodies to improve awareness and treatment for all those affected by the perimenopause and menopause.

This booklet is written for individuals and workplaces, for men, women, and non-binary people, and for colleagues, managers and CEOs. The perimenopause and menopause affects everyone either directly or indirectly and, just like with mental health, creating an open and supportive culture around the menopause should be core business for organisations that seek to look after, retain and attract experienced staff.

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The perimenopause and menopause affects women of all ages and is currently responsible for a huge loss of talent in the workplace as well as an estimated 14 million work days lost in the UK per year because of the debilitating symptoms that can arise.

Many individuals do not realise they are in perimenopause or menopause and put their symptoms down to stress, tiredness and the pressures of life. But there are effective and safe treatments out there that can have a huge impact on how you feel and improve your future health, helping you stay in work and organisations benefit from keeping skilled and experienced staff.

This booklet is for individuals to understand the peri/menopause and know how to get the right help, and for organisations to instigate cultural change that leads to them becoming a menopause confident employer.

What is the perimenopause and menopause?

The menopause is when the ovaries stop producing eggs and the production of the hormones estrogen, progesterone and testosterone fluctuates and then falls. This usually happens as a natural process, but it can also be caused by removal of the ovaries, or due to certain treatments for cancer.

When hormone levels drop, it can cause a wide range of unpleasant symptoms and the hormones stay low forever which results in a raised risk of developing certain diseases such as osteoporosis, heart disease, and diabetes.

Medically, the menopause is defined as the point in time when there hasn't been a period for more than 12 consecutive months; on average this is at age 51. The perimenopause

is the time leading up to this when hormones fluctuate and start falling, symptoms start to creep in and periods are still occurring even if irregularly.

The perimenopause can last for years and most commonly affects you during your 40s. Some individuals enter an early menopause (under 45 years) or have Premature Ovarian Insufficiency (POI) if their periods stop under 40 years.

The menopause is not a condition that just affects 'older' women, it can affect women in their 20s, 30s, 40s, as well as trans men and some non-binary people. The menopause affects everyone indirectly as you will most likely live with, love, and work with people going through the menopause at some point in your life.

The menopause is a hormone deficiency

Although it is (usually) a natural process, the menopause is a hormone deficiency with health risks and there are safe and effective treatments that can minimise its impact on lives and enhance an individual's future health.

Perimenopause and menopause should not be considered as 'just part of life' or something to put up

with. Once the hormones are low, they stay low forever. It is not a transition that you have to 'pass through' and then all is well. Some people have symptoms for decades afterwards, and the health risks such as osteoporosis and cardiovascular disease are applicable to all that go through the menopause if hormone replacement therapy is not taken.

What changes can happen and how can they be recognised?

The drop in hormones affects all systems of the body, so symptoms can be widespread and varied, but each person will be different in terms of when and how they experience perimenopause and menopause. Because symptoms can be subtle at first, many people do not realise what's happening, and they will think it is stress, tiredness, or put it down to other factors such as age-related aches and pains, work problems or relationship issues.

Symptoms can be physical such as headaches or migraine, joint and muscle pain and stiffness, tinnitus, palpitations, dry skin, mouth and eyes, hair loss, hot flushes, night sweats and difficulty sleeping.

Psychological symptoms are just as common and often even more troublesome and these can be

anxiety, brain fog, memory lapses, paranoia, intrusive thoughts, mental fatigue, and panic attacks.

If the menopause happens naturally (not due to surgery or medical treatment), it is common for symptoms to have an insidious onset, subtly worsening over time as other symptoms emerge as well. It can be difficult to join the dots and realise that hormones could be the cause of all these varied problems. This is why understanding some basic information about the perimenopause and menopause and how it can affect people is really valuable for individuals. Organisations need to understand the impact of the peri/menopause to encourage and facilitate help for employees and create an open and supportive environment for all who need it.

How can the menopause affect individuals at work?

The most common symptoms that impact individuals at work are anxiety, brain fog and fatigue, and these often lead to lack of confidence and self-esteem in personal and professional lives. Tasks and responsibilities that would never have phased someone before can suddenly seem overwhelming and intimidating. Organisational skills can be impaired by brain fog and memory lapses, fatigue and sleeping problems can have a huge impact on punctuality, performance and stamina at work. And physical symptoms such as hot flushes, heavy and unexpected periods, and the need to urinate frequently and urgently can be embarrassing and inconvenient.

Looking at the impact on a bigger scale, a survey by Newson Health Research and Education¹ of over 3,800 women revealed that 99% found their peri/menopause had a negative impact on their work, 59% had taken time off work due to their symptoms, and 18% had taken more than 8 weeks off work.

The survey also revealed that 21% of respondents did not go for a promotion because of their

symptoms, 18% reduced their hours and 12% resigned from their role because of the negative impact their menopause was having. Sadly, workplaces offered no support for 59% of those that completed the survey.

In many organisations, more than 50% of the workforce are women, some employers such as the NHS has 76.7% female staff, and over half of the total workforce are women of typical peri/menopausal age. A survey of NHS employees, carried out by Newson Health Menopause Society², revealed that 82% of these women said they experienced both physical and mental health symptoms that impacted on their lives.

The menopause is a big issue that urgently needs to be addressed. In the same way that awareness and support for mental health has increased over recent years, the peri/menopause needs to become a part of everyday conversations in the workplace, peer to peer, between line managers and individuals, and through organisational change, culture, processes and support services.

What support and treatments are there for an individual and how can you access them?

It is really important to be aware of how to help individuals and know where to signpost them. The main message is you don't have to put up with symptoms and the consequences of them, HRT is safe and effective, a healthy diet and

regular physical activity is crucial to wellbeing, and speaking to someone either informally or professionally can really help individuals make sense of all the changes they are dealing with.

Treatments: HRT

Hormone replacement therapy does exactly that, it is medication that tops up the missing hormones and reduces symptoms. The safest type is body identical HRT (not to be confused with 'compounded bioidentical' HRT which is unregulated and unlicensed).

People can access HRT from their local GP practice after an appointment with a doctor or nurse. It usually involves taking estrogen through the skin in a patch, gel or spray and the hormone progesterone in either tablet form or in the form of a Mirena intrauterine device (although progesterone isn't usually needed if the person has had a hysterectomy). Taking estrogen usually helps reduce most symptoms after a few months and helps people feel like themselves again.

Some people also benefit from taking testosterone and this comes in a cream or as an implant. Testosterone can be particularly useful for stamina, energy levels, and helping brain fog (as well as often improving libido).

HRT also protects your future health by reducing your risk of developing heart disease, osteoporosis, diabetes, depression, dementia,

bowel cancer and early death.

If someone is reporting or showing signs of symptoms that could be peri/menopause, encourage them to see a healthcare professional to discuss having treatment.

These are the key facts to be aware of and share with the individual if appropriate:

- Although it's normal to go through it, the person doesn't 'just have to put up with it', help and effective treatments are available and the sooner it's started the better. There's no such thing as 'too young' to be experiencing peri/menopause, it can happen at any age.

- HRT is safe and very effective and if they have seen a healthcare professional who doesn't think it's the menopause or won't prescribe HRT, suggest they see a different doctor or a menopause specialist if they can.

- Most people take a few months to settle on the treatment but usually feel a lot better and more like their old self after 3–6 months. And there's no time limit for taking HRT, as it continues to protect your future health for as long as it's taken.

Treatments: Lifestyle changes

It is an important time in life to try and make some changes to improve diet and fitness levels. Healthy nutrition can improve menopausal

symptoms and give the energy boost that's needed. Cutting down alcohol and smoking improves mood, sleeping and overall wellbeing.

Regular exercise that raises the heartrate and impacts through the joints is really important to stay well and keep bones strong, not to mention, the benefits on mood and mental health. Activities that maintain flexibility and core strength such as yoga or Pilates are very beneficial and also include breathing and relaxation work which can

benefit anxiety and mood changes.

Making time to relax and do things just for pleasure remains just as important, even if it can be a struggle to make this a priority. Connecting with others and spending time with close friends and family is known to improve mood and emotional health.

Treatments: Psychological therapies

Mood changes and emotional challenges are very common during the peri/menopause and having an opportunity to talk about these, explore them in more detail, and find a safe and supportive space for doing so can be extremely valuable. Therapies such as CBT can

equip individuals with helpful tools to manage difficult emotions and anxious moments, and psychotherapy or counselling can help individuals if they're feeling a sense of loss or lack of worth that can be very common at this stage of life.

Resources for individuals

Understanding more about hormone changes and the impact they have will help individuals recognise their own perimenopause when it happens and empower them to seek help. If you are not directly affected by the menopause yourself, knowing some helpful pointers will be invaluable as a manager or simply a trusted colleague.

1. Visit <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/menopause/> for a short summary on diagnosing and treating the menopause and if you want to know more about the NICE guidelines

on menopause visit <https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng23>

2. You can track your symptoms and periods in the Balance menopause support app, <https://www.balance-menopause.com/balance-app/> This is a free app that is available on Google Play or the App Store. You get your own health report from the app to show to a healthcare professional when you go for an appointment. This will show at a glance how your hormones are impacting you and will speed up getting a diagnosis

and treatment plan.

3. For more information about the perimenopause and menopause and all related aspects of women's health visit the **Balance website** including a vast library of resources and information such as factsheets, podcasts, films, and personal stories.

4. Watch the Channel 4 documentary with Davina McCall titled **Sex, Myths and the Menopause** this helps show the scale of the problem, how women suffer and how difficult it can sometimes be to get help and support.

How can managers help?

As mentioned, less than 10% of people going through the perimenopause and menopause speak to their line manager about their symptoms and this silence restricts opportunities to signpost individuals to get the medical help they need and put supportive measures in place for them at work.

As a line manager, it is not your role to become an expert on the menopause or seek to solve all the issues at play. Your role is to provide a place for open and supportive conversations that can inform someone where to get the help they need (for example, "see your GP about it and ask for help with your symptoms") and to know what internal resources are in place within your organisation to encourage and facilitate the employee to use.

The most important thing you can do is just have that first conversation, show that you're willing to discuss these matters and that you will listen and try and understand in a supportive manner. Don't worry about getting it wrong or using the wrong term; starting the process of an open dialogue and exploring the issues together is what matters most

at the outset.

Although it will be important to know the details of your menopause policy and carry out an assessment to identify what adjustments are needed, these things shouldn't be approached as merely a tick-box exercise that give the impression the 'menopause issue' is done and dealt with in a single meeting. Handle it as a process you will keep coming back to together; the experience of the peri/menopause is dynamic and can change over months and years as new symptoms emerge or treatments begin or change.

If your organisation doesn't have a menopause policy, raise it with the appropriate person and show them the policy example listed at the end of this booklet. In this policy example there is also guidance for managers to have discussions with your colleagues.

If there are no formal systems in place for menopause support, link up 2 or 3 individuals (with their permission) who are going through it so they can support one another and feel less alone.

How can organisations help?

Your organisation probably has a process and services in place for supporting those with mental health issues, does it have the same for those in the peri/menopause? Addressing the menopause should be an integral part of looking after your workforce and be included in your Diversity and Inclusion agenda.

This involves some or all of the following:

- having a robust menopause policy that means more than simply another file on the shelf
- providing menopause education for all staff
- training all your managers in the impact it can have at work and how to support employees
- peer support systems such as a menopause café or support group
- menopause champions/mentors /role models for 1-1 support and advice to managers
- specialist training for HR and Occupational Health staff
- access to menopause specialist clinics if appropriate

While these tangible aspects are very useful, they are not the whole picture. It is not simply about processes and support groups. At all levels there needs to be fostering of a culture that is open and supportive and normalises the peri/menopause but doesn't normalise the suffering (because it doesn't have to be inevitable). This culture is one that doesn't accept jokes, 'banter' or discriminatory remarks about the menopause or the often embarrassing experiences faced by many.

The organisation can help spread the message that there is help and effective treatments out there and facilitate people accessing accurate information and medical help. As individuals and as a company, you can actively demonstrate that the peri/menopause does not have to mean people's work lives are negatively impacted. Employees need to feel they belong to an organisation that recognises the potential consequences of the peri/menopause but is doing all it can to combat this and create a supportive environment that values and supports all staff experiencing symptoms.

Legal requirements of employers

As an employer, you have duties to ensure the health and safety of all workers, and to identify any risks and issues that impact staff. Once an assessment of risk has been done,

you have a responsibility to identify and implement whatever possible measures can be put in place to minimise those risks.

Don't make assumptions about what is needed for someone as individual experiences vary greatly. Have open conversations and make a plan on a case-by-case basis. The onus is on you as the employer to consider what reasonable adjustments can be made to support the individual.

If a staff member is struggling, you need to evidence what measures are put in place to support them with their performance, absence or conduct. Do not tolerate bullying or banter regarding the menopause or

the symptoms it may cause. A lack of evidence of your supportive measures, and acceptance of discriminatory remarks may be grounds for unfair dismissal or discrimination claims.

Although the menopause isn't yet protected specifically under the Equality Act 2010, age, sex and disability discrimination are protected characteristics and many menopause-related claims have been successful on these grounds.

What are my rights as an employee?

Employee rights relevant for people going through peri/menopause and experiencing symptoms at work are:

- to work in a safe, healthy environment including access to toilets, water, ventilation
- to not be subject to harrasment or discriminated against either directly or indirectly; relevant protected characteristics are age, sex and disability
- to sick pay and annual leave

- to request flexible working (if worked for more than 26 weeks at company)

- protection against unfair dismissal (usually if employed for more than 2 years).

If your company has a menopause policy, be familiar with it and ensure you are following the roles of the individual, especially with regard to taking personal responsibility for your own health and being open and honest in conversations with managers or HR.

How can men be allies at work?

This is not just an issue for women or HR staff. Most men will live with or have relationships or friendships with women outside of work as well as professional relationships with women inside work. Reading this booklet is unlikely to be your first

encounter with female hormones or talk of periods and the menopause. The peri/menopause will impact you via your family and/or friends at home and in your professional life, if not now, then at some point in the future.

So here are some tips on how to support loved ones, friends and colleagues:

- learn a bit about the basics to show you're making an effort to understand, (reading this booklet is a great start), and attend any menopause education sessions at work

- be open to have a conversation if it crops up and brave enough to initiate one if it's relevant

- be comfortable with saying the words periods, perimenopause or menopause

- recognise that symptoms can start years before periods stop and can cause an array of physical and psychological symptoms, even to the point where your loved one or

colleague can seem completely unlike their usual self, and they may or may not realise what's going on

- know that HRT is safe and effective for the majority that need it, and it's available on the NHS, you just need to go to your GP and talk about it, offer to attend an appointment with them if it's your friend or loved one

- know the resources to signpost people to for evidence-based information and advice, such as the free **balance menopause support app** and **website**

- know what help is available within your organisation when being an ally to a colleague, such as the menopause policy key features, types of support available and who the menopause role models are.

Further Resources

Balance website and library of resources for menopause information
<https://www.balance-menopause.com/>

Balance App

<https://www.balance-menopause.com/balance-app/>

Example of Menopause Policy

<https://www.balance-menopause.com/balance-for-corporates/>

NHS information on menopause

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/menopause/>

NICE guidelines on menopause

<https://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/ng23>

References for impact at work surveys:

1. <https://www.balance-menopause.com/news/menopause-symptoms-are-killing-womens-careers-major-survey-reveals/>

2. <https://www.nhmenopausesociety.org/news/>



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