



Menopause & Mental Health

An introduction



It's common for women to experience mental health difficulties as a result of the hormonal changes which happen during menopause. Menopause can cause a variety of physical symptoms such as tiredness, night sweats, sleep difficulties, hot flashes, and memory loss, which can all cause you to feel distressed. It's also common to experience mood changes such as irritability, sadness, lack of motivation, aggression, stress, difficulty concentrating, and depression. These effects can cause further emotional strain.

As well as the known impact of hormone levels, there can also be many other factors which affect women's mental health during this time of life. It's common to feel burdened with emotional stressors such as: ending or starting romantic relationships, grown children leaving or returning home, financial or career changes, concerns about ageing parents, and getting older in a society that values youth.

In addition, if you have a pre-existing mental health problem, it's possible that the effects of menopause could cause a relapse or change to your mental health. However, many women report feeling embarrassed to talk about their symptoms of menopause and are less likely as a result to reach out for support from friends or professionals.

This booklet will help you understand more about the potential impact menopause can have on mental health, as well as offer support on how women can best manage their symptoms or where they can seek further help.

What is menopause?

Menopause is a natural process when you stop having periods and are no longer able to get pregnant naturally. It happens when your ovaries stop producing eggs which in turn lowers production levels of reproductive hormones (oestrogen, progesterone, and testosterone). The average age of menopause is 51 but it may happen sooner or later than this. If you've had a hysterectomy and had your ovaries removed, you will immediately reach menopause. This is known as surgical menopause and can happen to women of any age. Furthermore, around one in 100 women experience the menopause before they reach 40, which is known as Premature Ovarian Insufficiency (POI). POI or early menopause can be triggered by surgery involving the ovaries; treatment for cancer, such as chemotherapy and radiotherapy; an underlying condition such as Addison's disease or Down's Syndrome; or an autoimmune disease like type 1 diabetes.

We often use the word menopause to describe when we notice our periods changing and we start to experience menopausal symptoms, which is called the perimenopause. Menopause itself is defined as the day when you haven't had a period for 12 months. For most women, menopause doesn't happen overnight. Instead, your ovaries gradually slow down over a period of time as part of the natural menopause and this transition period can last for a few months or several years – the average is around four years.

During perimenopause, you may notice your periods getting lighter or more irregular, and you might also experience some of the symptoms described below. It's common to start noticing these changes around the age of 45, but you might notice them earlier or later. It may even take you a while to realise that your symptoms are not caused by the everyday stresses of life.

Physical symptoms of menopause

80% of women have physical symptoms in addition to their periods stopping. The type and severity of symptoms can vary and some are the same as the symptoms that can occur during the perimenopause. Common physical symptoms of menopause are shown in the table below.

Hot flushes – short, sudden bursts of heat that can leave your skin sweaty and red	Night sweats – hot flushes that occur at night
Sleep difficulties	Weight gain
Vaginal dryness or pain	Low sexual desire
Headaches	Aches and pains
Urinary tract infections (UTIs)	Heart palpitations
Fatigue	Dizziness
Breathing difficulties	Dry or itchy skin
Thinning hair	



Hot flushes/flushes are a common symptom of the menopause



Difficulty sleeping or sleep which is disturbed by night sweats can lead to tiredness during the menopause and exacerbate other symptoms

The above list is not exhaustive. Some women will experience many of these symptoms and others just a few, and this may change over time. These symptoms can have a significant negative impact on your overall mental health. For example:

Physical appearance

Symptoms that affect your physical appearance such as weight gain, dry skin, or thinning hair, can lead to lower self-esteem, low mood or social withdrawal, particularly if you feel embarrassed about the way you look or no longer feel confident about your appearance or the way your clothes fit.

Hot flushes

The consequences of experiencing a hot flush such as redness and sweating may leave you feeling embarrassed, particularly at work or when out with friends. Because of the unpredictability of hot flushes, you may find yourself avoiding certain events or feeling anxious while out, which in turn can worsen your symptoms and make you feel more self-conscious and isolated.

Tiredness

Tiredness can make it more difficult to cope with the everyday stressors of life and can make you more irritable, less motivated, and sometimes leave you with a feeling of hopelessness. You may be tired due to difficulty sleeping, or as a result of having your sleep disturbed by night sweats, which often requires you to change clothing and/or bedding before going back to sleep. This can negatively impact your performance at work as well as your relationships with colleagues and friends.

Sexual relationships

You may have a significantly decreased libido or sexual desire, or you may be experiencing vaginal dryness or pain, both of which can affect your sex life. It can affect your confidence and, if not well understood by your partner, can lead to conflicts where both parties feel they are lacking, or not being understood or desired.

Psychological symptoms of menopause

In addition to the physical changes in your body, you may also notice significant changes to your mental health, motivation, and concentration. Some of the most common psychological symptoms of the menopause include:

- Low mood
- Anxiety
- Feeling tense or nervous
- Memory problems
- Attacks of anxiety or panic
- Difficulty concentrating
- Loss of interest in most things
- Feeling unhappy or depressed
- Crying spells
- Irritability
- Mood swings
- Loss of confidence
- Reduced self-esteem
- Brain fog

Not surprisingly, trying to cope with the emotional ups and downs of menopause in your own head is exhausting. However, the psychological symptoms can also make the workplace, relationships, and any pre-existing mental health difficulties more challenging, which can have a compounding effect on our mental health. For example:

Workplace

Women are likely to experience challenges when it comes to completing tasks which require concentration, focus and memory. This can significantly affect your professional life and your relationships with colleagues. For example, if a manager has a lack of understanding of the menopause, they may perceive changes to your behaviours or outcomes at work to be a result of laziness or carelessness. This can add additional pressure to do well and meet expectations. This in turn can increase feeling of stress, anxiety, and guilt, and is more likely to lead to burnout.

Relationships

Due to an increase in cortisol levels during menopause, women may experience more stress and anxiety. One consequence of prolonged stress and anxiety is that you are more likely to feel irritable or angry towards others. This can negatively impact your professional and personal relationships and can further lead to guilt and self-criticism because of your behaviour towards others. This can make coping with stress and mood changes more difficult as you may not feel that you have the support of others or may not feel that you can ask for support.

“Psychological symptoms can make workplace, relationships and any pre-existing mental health difficulties more challenging...”

Pre-existing mental health difficulties

Hormonal changes during menopause can make pre-existing mental health difficulties worse. For example:

- If you have a history of depression, you're more likely to be depressed during menopause
- If you have bipolar disorder, you may experience more depressive episodes (this can be linked to a decrease in oestrogen)
- If you have schizophrenia, you may find your symptoms get worse and you need a higher dose of medication.

Not all women are affected but you should speak to your GP if you are finding your mental health difficulties harder to manage.

Life stages and menopause

Going through menopause is a transition from a time of youth, fertility and reproductive possibilities, the loss of which can often result in a feeling of grief. However, the impact of menopause on your mental health is a very individual experience and can also be influenced by the other emotional stressors in your life. For example:

- Changes within your family unit
 - Adult children moving out or returning home
 - Divorce or re-marriage
- An increased responsibility in looking after aging parents
- Winding down in your career
- Financial changes
- Re-evaluating the next stage of your life when you retire

If you are struggling with any stressors like those listed above, you may find it more difficult to cope with the physical and psychological symptoms of the menopause or may find that your symptoms are more severe. Read on to find out more about how to cope with the symptoms of menopause.

How are trans people affected by menopause?

If you're trans, how menopause affects you will depend on which medical interventions you've undergone and whether or not you're taking hormones. Speak to your doctor if you have any questions or concerns. Rock My Menopause has some information about the menopause and trans people <https://rockmymenopause.com/get-informed/transgender-health>

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Getting help with menopause symptoms

Medication

You can speak to your GP if the physical or psychological symptoms of menopause are affecting your life as there may be treatments available to help you. For example, one of the main treatments is Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT). This replaces the hormones that are reducing in your body and is very effective at relieving menopause symptoms. It can also help with thinning of the bones, which is more common after the menopause. There are many different types of HRT available so the dose and type of HRT can be altered to suit your individual needs and risk factors for other conditions.

You don't have to continue taking HRT for the rest of your life. There's no limit on how long you can take HRT, but most women stop taking it after their symptoms stop, usually after a few years. You may find your menopause symptoms come back for a while after stopping HRT. If they're severe, speak to your GP about managing them.

Your GP may offer alternative medical treatments to help with sleep and night sweats, such as anti-depressants or sleeping aids. It is always your choice whether to take medication or not. Some women prefer not to take medication and to manage their symptoms in other ways until this stage in their lives has passed.

Talking to your employer

Menopause symptoms can have a big impact on your work life, with difficulty sleeping, hot flushes, and trouble concentrating and remembering. A lot of women reduce their hours or quit their jobs. This may be due to not feeling comfortable talking about symptoms with colleagues or a manager, or women may not know where to go to ask for help or support. Fortunately, more and more organisations are beginning to take the menopause seriously and already have a menopause policy in place. If menopause symptoms are affecting your work, the first step is to talk to your line manager. It can be embarrassing to talk about your menopause, but being honest about your symptoms and asking for help is an important first step to help you continue working the best that you can. Before you meet, it might help to prepare a list of the symptoms you're experiencing and suggest some practical solutions. *See the box on the right for some examples.*

If your line manager isn't approachable or sympathetic, consider asking for a meeting with HR, or talking to a different manager who makes you feel more comfortable.

If you work in the UK and your employer doesn't yet have a menopause policy, you can download the Faculty of Occupational Medicine's 2016 Guidance on Menopause in the Workplace. This gives practical advice on how to improve workplace environments for people who are going through the menopause: <https://www.som.org.uk/sites/som.org.uk/files/Guidance-on-menopause-and-the-workplace.pdf>

Practical solutions at work

Flexible working

- A later start might help if you're having trouble sleeping.
- Schedule meetings for later in the day if there are times you are more alert/focused.
- Work from home if you are more comfortable there.
- Have more flexible breaks so that you can take time out if you have a hot flush.

Keeping cool at work

Suggest options for keeping your workspace cool, e.g. a fan/window

Psychological support

Make use of your organisation's psychological support services/EAP

Use technology

Make use of technology and reminders to stay on track with tasks and meetings

Self-care

Looking after your overall health and wellbeing is crucial during perimenopause and menopause as it can have a significant impact on the severity of your symptoms and your mental health. For example:

Practising good sleep hygiene

A lack of sleep – for example, 4-5 hours a night instead of 7-8 hours – can have a negative effect on how your brain functions and exacerbates brain fog and memory difficulties as well as your overall mood and ability to tolerate stress. Because good sleep is so essential to your health, it is worth doing all you can to maximise the quality and quantity of your sleep. Research shows the two most effective changes you can make are:

Keeping your bedroom cool – it is much easier to get to sleep and stay asleep if you are on the cooler side of comfortable rather than warm. A room temperature of around 18°C is recommended as ideal for a good night's sleep. You may find avoiding hot drinks before bed and having a fan in the room helps with any hot flushes or night sweats.

A good sleep routine – going to bed at the same time every night and waking up at the same time every morning improves not only the quantity of sleep but the quality, leading to a real difference in how your brain will function and how you feel during the day.

For more information on getting a better night's sleep, visit our blog at: <https://firstpsychology.blogspot.com>

Prioritising exercise

The majority of menopausal women are estimated to not be getting enough daily exercise. This is entirely understandable as energy, motivation and mood can be at an all time low during this time. However, regular exercise that raises your heart rate and impacts your joints is crucial to maintain bone, heart, and overall health.

Exercise can also improve your mood and confidence, help you de-stress, and give you more energy and motivation.

Spending time doing things you enjoy

With all the demands of family and professional life it can be difficult to prioritise those activities that you enjoy. However, spending time doing things you enjoy will have a beneficial effect on your symptoms and how you are feeling. Engaging in activities that don't place additional demands on you can help you relax, de-stress and improve your overall mood. Doing activities with a friend can also make this time even more enjoyable or help you to stick to your commitment.

Eating well and reducing alcohol and tobacco intake

Eating well has a multitude of benefits for your menopause symptoms and overall health. The right foods can help combat fatigue and give you more energy to engage in the activities you enjoy.



Looking after yourself can have a huge impact on the severity of perimenopausal and menopausal symptoms

As you age your body becomes more sensitive to alcohol because it holds less water to dilute it. Alcohol may help you relax in the short term, but it can have a negative effect on your mood and mental health in the long run.

For more information on eating well during menopause check out this link: <https://www.nutrition.org.uk/life-stages/women/menopause/healthy-eating-and-the-menopause>

Practising meditation or mindfulness

Meditation and mindfulness have been shown to improve symptoms associated with low mood and stress by lowering cortisol levels and relaxing your nervous system. Meditating for five or ten minutes a day; practising mindfulness while you are eating, cooking, walking or sitting; or just checking in with yourself and slowing down, breathing more deeply and being aware of your emotions and your surroundings can greatly improve your general wellbeing. There are some great apps for mindfulness and meditation or you can check out our booklet: <https://www.firstpsychology.co.uk/files/mindfulness-booklet.pdf>



Social connections are really important for maintaining good mental health and overall wellbeing

Social support

Seeing friends or family may be the last thing you feel like doing on some days, but social connections are really important for your mental health and overall wellbeing. Similarly, consider opening up to your colleagues, friends or family about your menopause experience so that you have some extra support to help you through. There may be other people in your office or in your social circle who are menopausal (or have menopausal partners or family members) and understand what you are going through. It's really helpful to feel understood and have this kind of support if you are having a bad day.

Relationship support

As symptoms of menopause can impact your sex life, your mood, and your self-esteem, it is not uncommon for relationship difficulties to arise with romantic partners. Communication can become strained and either partner may feel rejected or distant from one another. Accordingly, the most important thing is to keep lines of communication open so that you can support one another through this transition. For example:

- Share information with your partner so that they can better understand what is going on for you or what to expect
- Have open conversations with one another about what you both might need during this transition and what emotions this might bring up, e.g. sleeping in separate beds while you're experiencing night sweats, taking time out or spending more time alone when you feel overwhelmed, being flexible to change plans should your symptoms get

- in the way.
- Explore alternative ways of being intimate together that don't involve sex, e.g. massages, cuddles, etc. to maintain your physical connection
- Check in regularly to identify any difficulties before they become bigger problems.
- Take a look at our healthy relationships booklet here:
<https://www.firstpsychology.co.uk/files/relationships-booklet.pdf>

Psychological therapy

Going through perimenopause and menopause can result in a host of changes to how you feel about yourself, your mood, emotions, and levels of motivation. You may have experienced difficulties like these in the past or you may have never struggled with feeling anxious or depressed before but now find yourself worrying over things you wouldn't normally or feeling hopeless and unmotivated for the first time. Psychological therapy such as talking therapies, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), Compassion Focussed Therapy (CFT) and many others can help you manage the emotional ups and downs of menopause. These therapies work to help improve your mental health by helping you to: identify unhelpful thoughts and behaviours; better understand your emotions; and learn coping skills to deal with these in a healthy way. Therapy can help you with all kinds of difficulties including feelings of grief, anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, negative body image, relationship problems, stress, sleep difficulties, and much more. To find out more information about what therapy can help with, or to book an appointment with one of our practitioners, visit our website at www.firstpsychology.co.uk

Additional support and information

For more information on menopause:

- www.thebms.org.uk
- www.menopausesupport.co.uk
- www.themenopausecharity.org
- www.nhs.uk/conditions/menopause

For more information on managing mental health:

- First Psychology's blog at:
<https://firstpsychology.blogspot.com>
- [Understanding And Learning How To Be Self-Compassionate - A Workbook & Guide](#), pdf booklet
- [The CBT Connection - Your Guide To CBT](#), pdf booklet
- [Healthy Relationships - Surviving The Ups And Downs](#), pdf booklet

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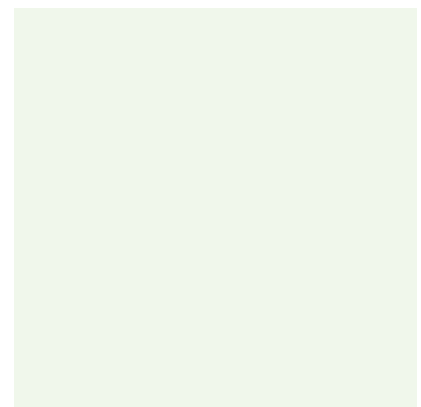
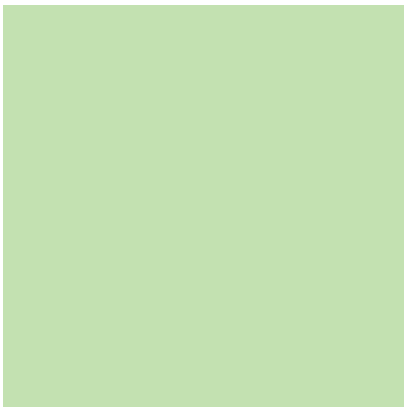
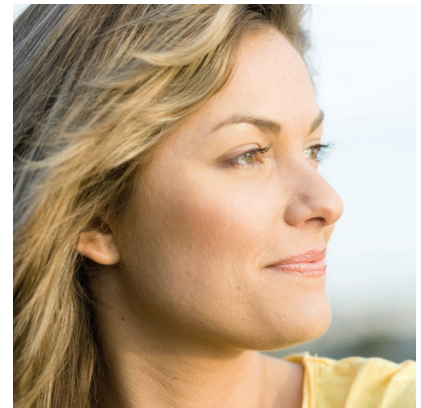
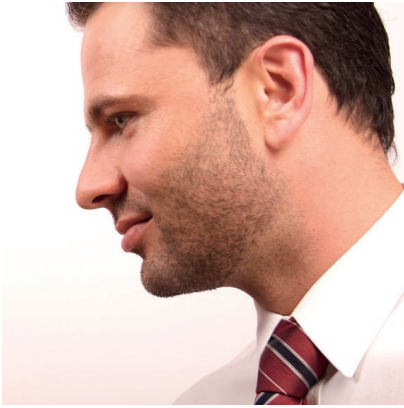


Our highly qualified and experienced team at First Psychology offers a variety of therapy services and works with people with a wide range of issues and problems.

We provide:

- Therapy and coaching services for individuals, couples, children, young people and families.
- Employee counselling, CBT & psychological therapies; promotion of wellbeing in the workplace; and rehabilitation and personal injury support.

All First Psychology practitioners have excellent qualifications and experience, so you can come to us knowing that you will see an experienced professional.



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