

Experiencing peri/
menopause at work:

WOMEN'S STORIES

The following accounts have emerged from over 1,500 women sharing their everyday experiences of menopause at work. Not only do the accounts give voice to women's experience, they also provide excellent insight into some of the hidden challenges of negotiating support to enable them to thrive at work.

As such, they offer a great way to begin understanding the plurality of experiences, and working towards a menopause-sensitive culture through providing powerful stories of real women.

To help organize these experiences, we present the stories in four sections with overarching themes:

- 'The unique experience of menopause': A variety of accounts to highlight the diversity of experiences of menopause
- 'Careering through menopause': How work and menopause have come together in women's lives
- 'Barriers and challenges to supporting menopausal transition': Some of the organizational and work-based negative experiences related to menopause
- 'Best practice from the workforce': Examples of what women felt worked for them

'THE UNIQUE EXPERIENCE OF MENOPAUSE'

When I went through menopause I became depressed for the first time in my life and so I had time off work and did take anti-depressants for 3 months. I went off them as the doctor wanted me to double the dosage and I was worried that I would not be able to function so went off them and stopped seeing the doctor. **Rita, 64**

I am conscious of being a little more scatty and forgetful, which I gather will come right and I am really looking forward to that. My sister takes HRT to resolve this, but I am unwilling as it is linked to problems for people like me with endometriosis. This is not an issue we can use to explain delays etc, and raising it would definitely put me in the too old category. **Alina, 50**

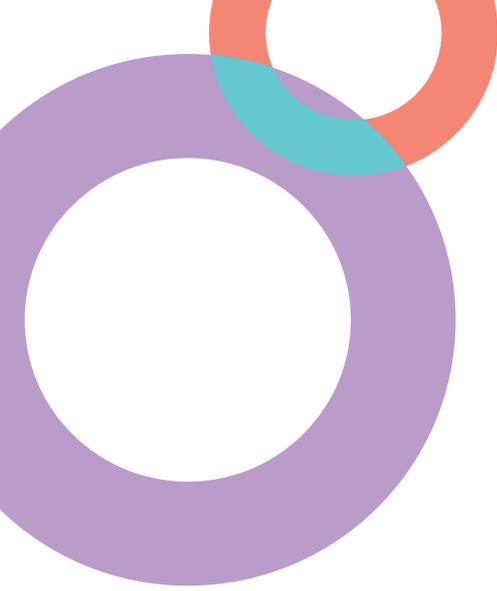
I have only had a few hot flushes over past 12 months and they have been extreme. All of a sudden have overwhelming need to vomit and need to run to bathroom to do so. After this, I feel a wave of heat radiating from inside to out, and have become quite flushed and sweaty. Not unlike morning sickness, then left with residual feeling of nausea and fatigue for a couple of hours. This experience has happened twice at work... Approximately 12

months ago I experienced several days of heart palpitations/pain in chest. ECG showed nothing and was told it was a panic attack which made me feel significantly foolish and not likely to ever present for medical advice again for these symptoms. **Tonya, 54**

My symptoms were extreme and I think they were, I believe they were brought on when my husband died. The shock of that evidently brought it on but it's a bit like childbirth, I mean it was unpleasant at the time but once you're over it, you're over it.

MAUD, 49

Dysmenorrhea (period pain) associated with endometriosis has been a constant problem impacting on my work experiences throughout my entire career. Endometriosis symptoms have been a more significant problem for me (rather than menopause). **Emmie, 53**



I suppose it's a physical change in a woman's body so I think men can probably go through it as well but it's mostly associated with women and obviously menstrual cycles stopping and physical changes, you know. Just the way your body metabolises bone densities, all those sorts of things. So a time for women to revisit how they live their life and look after themselves. Importantly, I think that menopause is actually quite a psychological step or change in people's lives and I suspect that, you know, it's about mid-life, I don't call them crises, I just think it's a real review period. **Cassie, 53**

I don't think I am menopausal... or am I in denial? **Phyra, 48**

I now suffer from very visible acne each monthly cycle, which I am very self-conscious about. It makes me anxious about presentations and meeting new people

MARCELA, 52

I have almost finished menopause, but hot flushes were a real problem for about 2 years. The heating at work is unreliable and can be extreme. Hot flushes added another layer of discomfort and I often find I am taking layers of clothing on and off during the day. I also experienced periods of sadness and lethargy which made working and conversing with people a real chore; this has now lifted and I am back to my old self, happy and active. **Amy, 54**

When menopause happens I will be trying very hard to ignore it and pretend it's not happening. I don't want to age and I see succumbing to menopause as a weakness. I don't feel any different at 44 to how I was in my early 30s so I won't let my body betray that life attitude. **Jhana, 44**

The stigma, for me that's huge, because it's like this unspoken thing and you have to suffer in silence if you're going through menopause. Menopause or menopausal women, it really is something that you don't share, you just, you know, you really do shut up and suffer in silence. And that's sad because every woman goes through it, it's inevitable, you can't delay it. We can't do anything about it and really the more we know about it, the more we share about it, the more accepted it is, or acceptance definitely, more accepted is possibly the easier the process. **Beth, 58**

'CAREERING THROUGH MENOPAUSE'

Menstrual changes are all that is occurring, but try explaining that to a department full of blokes (very nice blokes most of them, but blokes all the same, most of them unpartnered and childless). For the last two years, I have taken two days off a month but I don't have to do that if I have a period on a weekend. I have severely heavy periods (there is a name for this I've forgotten) currently under investigation. I have to stay at home when they occur. **Gemma, 41**

It is difficult for me to judge whether perimenopause is affecting my capacity to deal with a range of issues (depression, stress etc) because of other things going on in my life at the same time. I am reminded of a comment Kathy Lette made warning women about the perils of living with teenage children while going through menopause. It has been very, very challenging for me. Work has been a saving grace, but I had to take significant time off to care for my daughter, and by the time I returned everything had changed where I work. After about 6 months I am starting to fit back in. **Alexis, 43**

Very heavy periods are becoming problematic and I am worried that I won't be able to find enough time in a heavy work load to plan a hysterectomy

(elective). This really detracts from my quality of life and sometimes it gets me down. Also my mother died at an early age with cancer and I am worried about my longevity – so I feel an urgency to get on with my career and to succeed. **Joyce, 45**

Hot flushes are embarrassing especially when I am taking minutes at a meeting. My office environment is not air conditioned and this is also a problem. I have had to go home and change a couple of times due to heavy bleeding soiling my clothes. **Anna, 51**

Menopause does influence perceptions of my ability and my sense of having a career trajectory. I think the older a woman is, the less likely she is to be noticed and valued in an academic workplace.

EMILY, 60

I did not come into this job till I was 40 and I began experiencing menopause symptoms at age 45. I went on HRT at age 50 because the symptoms had become extreme and debilitating to the point I considered resignation from work. I am currently on one of my regular attempts to get off my HRT, 11 years after first starting, and my menopausal symptoms have yet again begun to return. They interfere with my work as the symptoms significantly affect my sleep and then my mood. Typically I would sleep in and just get into work late rather than take a day off. I have not taken a day off work due to symptoms that I can recall since having access to HRT. As my office has no cooling, I am not looking forward to the warm weather while I see if I can survive off my HRT. Hot rooms increase hot flushes and discomfort. **Leah, 61**

Pain and irregular heavy periods and headaches make it difficult to concentrate and focus at these times. If I have a presentation or workshop to run at these times I need to take strong painkillers which can make me feel a bit slow and removed from the group

but it is better than the pain. I have a busy demanding job and the mental gymnastics of the job is harder to do as I can't keep as much in my head anymore. I need to lie down from time to time during the day when I am like this and there is nowhere at work so I either lie down in the car or finish the day at home if I don't have any meetings scheduled. This is the first year in my working life that I have run out of "leave without a medical certificate". **Stella, 51**

Does menopause affect my work?: Not really, I just get hot and hate it! I would love to be younger again as I am tired of 30 year olds carrying on as though older women are invisible! **Lisa, 50**

I found symptoms such as hot flushes etc very difficult to deal with in a male dominated environment, so used HRT therapy to manage these symptoms. **Lorraine, 60**

Although at an age where menopause could be expected to be disruptive, this is not my current experience. However, I am always concerned about others' perceptions that menopause/age may be the cause of any fatigue or frustration or other behaviours I display, when in fact I would put these down to other factors unrelated to age. **Greta, 51**

Menopause has been easy for me. One positive is no menstrual cycle which is liberating and makes it easier at work.

PETRA, 55

I am post menopause but I was fairly lucky when I did have symptoms, I had more pain and inconvenience when menstruating. When I was having menopausal symptoms both my parents became ill and subsequently died so it was difficult at times coping at work. **Jessica, 61**

'BARRIERS AND CHALLENGES TO SUPPORTING MENOPAUSAL TRANSITION'

Being a part-timer I am expected to deal with any appointments in my own time. I was told that being full time has certain benefits such as Rostered Days Off. **Naomi, 48**

Menstrual changes as I approach menopause cause regular tiredness, moodiness and sometimes practical challenges because of heavy bleeding on some days (eg. I've had to leave long meetings after about an hour, to go to the toilet). It would be helpful if each of the toilets in my workplace had disposal bins for sanitary items. Earlier this year, I suffered extreme tiredness, palpitations and other symptoms that I put down to peri-menopause and too much work (I hadn't taken a proper break for well over a year). I didn't go to my GP because I was so busy. When I eventually did, for something quite different, she sent me off for a series of tests that discovered a very severe iron deficiency caused by heavy peri-menopausal bleeding. I was annoyed with myself for not having seen her earlier, but I think it was very much a case of 'soldiering on' at work and ignoring my own needs because of an unrelenting and high workload, and my feeling that I had something to prove at work – that is, that a fifty-two-year-old woman is as good as anybody else.

Cui, 52

Something about flexible work options and is that the answer to gender equality. Well clearly not all, but what we know is of course it's mainly women who use them, flexible work options, which most organisations now offer. But then women are almost punished in a way for using those options rather than do things. **Diana, 51**

Menopause... lack of sleep, discomfort in the workplace, a non-understanding male supervisor, and an open plan office which is more often over heated for colleagues who feel the cold more than I. The loss of confidence results in less inclination to attend social activities. **Bianca, 52**

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My periods are irregular and sometimes very heavy. The toilet facilities are poor at my work, which makes me feel uncomfortable being here during these times. **Michaela, 49**

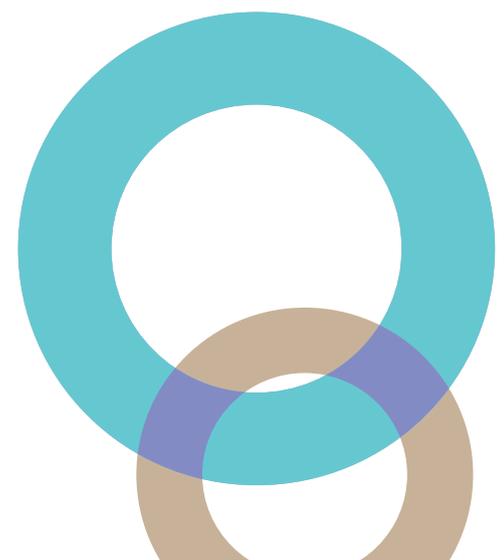
I feel so much better and I wish I'd started HRT a year ago. At work, my previous supervisor was good but was stretched over a number of large projects and I have been allocated a new supervisor, which I found out accidentally through a form-filling exercise. A combination of no structured

Heavy bleeding resulted in very low iron and intense fatigue as well as emotional upheaval due to hormonal changes has impacted my work and personal life. I find it difficult to get support or express the need for support at the workplace as gender related health issues such as this could be perceived as a weakness and could provide the basis for lack of promotion and ability to perform. I definitely feel older women are disadvantaged in the workplace.

ROMA, 54

leadership and supervision, combined with being a senior person working part time and family responsibilities, has meant menopause has been hard. I frequently feel like I'm doing everything half-well. I think my anxiety exacerbated by massive changes through menopause, has affected my capacity to organise myself and maintain a realistic assessment of my work performance, and has impeded my work. **Carlotta, 48**

The move to open plan and glass fronted offices is an absolute disaster for women in menopause. Actually, probably for women generally, eg. those needing to express milk (a colleague



always had to do this in the toilets! (only private place she could find), what if you need to search for tampons? Or get a change of clothes to cope with spotting? Offices with glass walls in full view of corridors is yet one more of those subtle things that adds to the discrimination against women in the workplace. A male architect or head of school would never think of it. I never really talked about it except with younger female colleagues. Scarves do the trick – on again and off again. **Garance, 58**

Menopausal hot flushes, sleeplessness and palpitations are affecting me greatly at work. I am often so very tired and can't concentrate easily sometimes. I don't think my line manager understands the extent of my fatigue/discomfort/exhaustion. It is embarrassing to talk about menopause to a man 13 years younger than myself. **Stella, 51**

I have arthritis of my knees and this impacts on my mobility. This has become more prevalent since the onset of menopause. The disabled access to buildings and between floors is a challenge. I have to change floors to get a cup of coffee... there is a lift but I am aware of the looks if I use it. I simply cannot join the walking group or take part in the 10,000 steps because I am a liability to a team score and I don't meet the targets. **Doris, 58**

'BEST PRACTICE FROM THE WORKFLOOR'

One office I worked in was always too cold (others in the office found it too warm and adjusted the temperature down). I have since moved and this environment is more comfortable. I am not sure if this is due to menopause – I have always felt the cold. I do have hot flushes but tend to dress in layers which I can remove if needed. I could not attribute any of my issues directly to menopause or if it's a combination of early menopause and post chemotherapy. Perceived competence? I think it's more likely that my supervisor is mindful that I am not under too much stress given my recent illness. She encourages and supports my part time status but doesn't enforce it – it's my choice. **Clara, 59**

In general staff aren't aware and men and women, of some of the flexible work practices that are available here

or don't think to ask. Often they'll talk to me about a particular problem and say I have you thought about flexible work practices and the professional staff too. They just don't think it's for them until they realise it's actually really easy to secure, whether that's that flexibility around carers leave or flexibility around something else. **Fiona, 62**

I think it's quite hard to sit still while all this, you know, the ants under the skin thing is going on. So just getting up and going for a walk and, you know, you can say it's an ergonomic health and safety whatever thing and, you know, you're not going to rip anyone off. You're obviously going to go for a walk for two minutes and that's fine. **Jennifer, 50**

Recognise and acknowledge that it will not always be this way for your employees. That is, just because someone is having some difficulty because of menopause. It would be affirming to know that the employer realises that this will not always be like this and it will change as symptoms subside (e.g. confusion) – that this is usually only temporary'.

SIENNA, 58

I have learnt to adapt to my bodily limitations and as long as I have supports in place (good ergonomic set up – other physical supports) my health has little impact on my work life. Work however has an impact on my health – the current environment is quite exhausting. **Scarlett, 58**

When I was 42, I developed breast cancer and had to have surgery, chemo, radiation etc and then I chose to have my ovaries removed a year later to increase my survival chances, so had some time off work then as well. I have to say that my fellow work staff were very, very supportive, and I was given the freedom to return to work when I felt able to. My work environment helped me to recover and that is why I have a positive attitude

to just getting up and going to work each day. I will never forget how sick I was and that at times I couldn't even lift my head off the pillow. It makes you thankful for everyday things. **Esme, 51**

It's best not to have a specific policy about menopause but to include menopause into that group of circumstances which supervisors should be aware of. **Janet, 54.**

I don't believe I have experienced (yet) any of the menopause signs (and I am grateful for this), so it doesn't affect me directly. However, it does affect me indirectly as I have witnessed not only the discomfort experienced by some of my colleagues (hot/cold work offices and meeting rooms) which obviously affected their capacity to concentrate. It is however difficult to find the balance between acknowledging that menopause may have an effect on the workplace and relationships at work and ostracizing women by making the unjustified call that menopause affects their competence. I am lucky enough to be part of a team composed mainly of women over 45. We can talk about these issues quite openly and there have not been any instances when competence was questioned. However this is not the case across the organisation, probably mostly due to ignorance. **Raeline, 44**

One of my colleagues here who was older than me said "oh that's a little fan on my desk" and I said "what's that for" and she said "oh it's for my hot flushes, I asked the workplace to provide it and they did". I think that little gesture that I came across when the organization bought a staff member a fan I was just like – I mean it's tiny, I mean it's probably like a fifteen dollar fan but it's actually significant in a way. **Harriet, age not disclosed**

Inquiries by managers and supervisors is good – no matter what their gender is, some women don't have symptoms and are not 'automatically' tuned into this, and an openness about inquiring and understanding of the impact. Also, joint problem solving if applicable with manager/supervisor and women. **Naimh, 54**

Ensure managers are encouraged to think of menopause (and other problems such as dysmenorrhea, endometriosis etc) are real physical problems and cannot be treated with a 'mind over matter' attitude. **Pauli, 42**