

FOUR BILLION REASONS

UNSUPPORTED MENOPAUSE SYMPTOMS CAN DECIMATE WOMEN'S ABILITY TO FUNCTION AT WORK AND REMAINS STUBBORNLY MISUNDERSTOOD. PRACTICAL MEASURES THAT CAN HELP THESE SYMPTOMS NEED TO BE DISCUSSED AND ACTIONED. BUT TALK TO MOST MANAGERS ABOUT THEIR UNDERSTANDING OF MENOPAUSE AND FEW WILL BE ABLE TO CITE ANYTHING BEYOND HOT FLUSHES. INDEED, WOMEN THEMSELVES ARE UNSURE.



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Most women start the journey into menopause totally unsupported. Menopause is officially defined as having had no period for over a year, meaning many women don't realise the years leading up to this - the perimenopause - is when they are most likely to need support. Because they are still menstruating, they often mistakenly assume they shouldn't talk to their GP until their periods stop and this means unnecessarily delaying access to treatment, leaving many to struggle alone: "I just don't feel like myself", is the comment women entering into this phase without realising it are most likely to say. Although everyone's journey is unique, common symptoms include, feelings of anxiety and depression, loss of confidence, memory issues, fatigue, mood swings, weight gain, hot flushes and sleep problems.

The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) is now lobbying for the menopause to be treated as a "core employee health issue". Among the recommendations are that hormone replacement therapy (HRT) prescriptions be made free in England because, for most women, menopause symptoms can be easily treated. Another recommendation is

a Government co-ordinated and employer-led campaign, to raise awareness and help tackle the taboo. This is to be welcomed because even when women know how best to support themselves, it's also essential that they feel supported by their organisations. This starts with their manager. Younger managers might have no comprehension of what it feels like to experience menopause symptoms. This means it can be helpful to encourage open and honest conversations between managers and those who have already gone through menopause.

Being open about such a personal topic can feel very uncomfortable for both the manager and employee. It can therefore be helpful for the woman to talk to a coach or mentor about what they're going through and how best to talk to their manager about it, in much the same way that women are given maternity transition coaching to support the impact of starting a family on working life. Once the employee has identified challenges they're struggling with in the workplace, they can then discuss practical ways to overcome this with their manager. For example, the chance to work more flexibly if they're feeling particularly fatigued.

Overarching all this should be clear policies for how to support women going through the menopause. These should cover a mission statement about how the employer intends to become a menopause-friendly workplace and an overview of the practical solutions in place to support individuals. The policy also needs to integrate with wider diversity and inclusion objectives and have success measures put in place. It's also important to clarify the role of HR and managers for supporting employees experiencing menopause symptoms. As well as explain the official pathways and communication channels women can use to discuss any reasonable adjustments to working conditions they might need, be this the introduction of a desk fan, opportunity to wear cooler clothing or work more flexibly. The more clarity employers can provide the better. Menopause doesn't have to be a taboo or shocking thing for anyone to experience, it's a natural life transition that half the population can expect to experience.

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