

## Emotional Health at Midlife and Menopause

Approximately 20 per cent of women experience severe menopause symptoms, 60 per cent transition with moderate symptoms and 20 per cent have minimal effects. A woman's experience of menopause will also be influenced by psycho-social factors, which may either worsen or improve the physical experience of menopause.

Many women say they are depressed, anxious and irritable because of menopause and wonder whether this is related to the hormonal changes of menopause or whether there is more to it than that.

We are now starting to understand just how much the experience of menopause is influenced by what else is happening in a woman's life at the same time as the physical changes. There are many psychological, social and cultural factors that can also influence our experience of menopause, and fortunately they are often areas we can change.

These may include:

- life experiences and the situations women find themselves in e.g. children leaving home
- personality
- previous mood problems
- roles
- attitude to ageing and menopause
- relationships with a partner
- family and friends
- sexual function
- body image
- social and cultural expectations

### Mood

The hormone changes of menopause can affect mood, but are currently not known to cause depression and anxiety. Mood swings, irritability and anxious feelings may be experienced at menopause and women in the perimenopausal stage (menopause transition years) often experience these more intensely. However, if you have depression or are suffering from severe anxiety then this is far more likely to be a result of other causes. Perhaps you have experienced a prior depression or anxiety or have a family history of depression or anxiety. There may be other stresses in your life that are contributing to your mood.

It is important that you consult with your health practitioner or a psychologist if you are experiencing any significant or persistent changes in mood. There are now Medicare rebates available for visits to a Psychologist for problems with depression and anxiety. Speak to your general practitioner for more information.

### *Mood and domino effects*

Often the physical symptoms experienced with menopause (like hot flushes) impact on sleep, which can make you feel tired and negatively affect motivation and mood. The physical changes associated with hot flushes can sometimes feel the same as symptoms of anxiety or panic attacks. It can be helpful to keep a 'mood and menopause diary' to track your symptoms, to distinguish between physical and emotional symptoms, and to understand the patterns between these symptoms. You can discuss this diary with your health practitioner.

### Midlife and ageing

Menopause is a time of transition - some women look forward to the next stage of their life, and others have negative feelings. The attitude you have toward this time of your life can influence your coping abilities, your emotional wellbeing and your experience of mood disorders. What is your attitude to ageing and menopause?

### Role (for example, friend, partner, mother, daughter, carer, volunteer, worker...)

Women who feel satisfied with their roles in life and believe them to be of value, have higher levels of wellbeing, feel better about their health and often have less intense menopausal symptoms. Having roles in your life that you feel good about helps you to feel valued and worthwhile. Think about your relationships and roles; what do you contribute to others? How do these roles contribute to your own life? What values do they reflect?

### Interpersonal relationships

*Partners:* Any relationship difficulties a woman may experience can interact negatively on her mood during menopause. Partner attitudes to menopause are also important and having an informed, supportive partner can help during this time. Help your partner access good objective information about menopause and discuss your unique experiences to help their understanding.

*Children:* Menopause means the end of fertility. Some women are happy about this, however for others it can be distressing. In our society today, many women who reach menopause are likely to have children of differing ages and stages, and up to 30 per cent of women who reach menopause have no children. If you don't have children, has menopause caused you to reflect on your circumstances? Do you need to talk this through with someone?

*Friends and social support:* If we have friends and people we trust and can turn to, we are less likely to be depressed and more likely to adapt positively to the changes of menopause. Social isolation, lack of social support and depression are significant risk factors that contribute to coronary heart disease. Do you have friends that are there for you when you need support? If not, perhaps you might like to think about joining, or starting a group, or taking an adult education class to meet some people. Sometimes we don't turn to our friends as we worry we might burden them, when really they may feel good knowing they can help and support us. Do you discuss your experience of menopause? Talking with other women offers an opportunity to share knowledge and helpful information, albeit no two experiences are entirely alike.

### **Sex and libido**

Sexual function can influence mood and add to the distress felt around the time of midlife and menopause. Libido (sexual interest and desire) and arousal are influenced by a range of factors, including menopause. Other factors, such as previous sexual experience, relationship status and satisfaction, attitude, self-esteem, body image, personality and mood can also influence how much a woman wants to have sex. Many women describe problems with painful sex and their libido at the time of menopause. If menopause has made sex painful, seek help from your general practitioner to address this problem. Are there other factors which may be impacting on your libido which you may also need to address? The good news is there is help available to treat many libido-related concerns. (See 'Libido' fact sheet for more information)

### **Body image**

Physical changes associated with menopause include changes in body shape, with weight shifting from the hips to the central part of the body, drier skin, decreased muscle tone, and hot flushes. Some women talk about losing control of the body they always thought they could control and rely on. Other women discuss how wonderful it is to get to an age and stage of their life where they don't have to spend so much time worrying about their body. The most important thing is to focus on the health of your body. What do you think and feel about your body at this time of your life? The benefits of regular physical activity can assist with body image, energy and mood. What activities can/do you engage in? If body image is a problem it may be helpful to discuss these concerns with your health practitioner.

### **Cultural influences**

Some cultures hold older women in high esteem and they are seen as wise and respected. Women in a western society often perceive that as they age they become invisible and their contributions and opinions are seen as less relevant. Are there particular beliefs that you think might be related to your social and cultural background that influence how you see your experience of menopause?

### **Summary**

Physical, psychological, social and cultural factors can all impact on the experience of menopause. Who you are, what your life experiences have been, and how you feel about your life will all influence the way you experience menopause. It is helpful to understand how you feel about the different areas of your life, along with the physical changes of menopause. Managing the physical symptoms of menopause may have a positive effect on your general health and wellbeing.

Menopause need not be a difficult time of your life. Some of the above influences may, or may not, affect you. Take action, seek help if you need to and ensure **you** are in control.

### **Where can I get more information?**

[www.jeanhailes.org.au](http://www.jeanhailes.org.au)

[www.managingmenopause.org.au](http://www.managingmenopause.org.au)

[www.menopause.org.au](http://www.menopause.org.au) – Australasian Menopause Society

[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

[www.psychology.org.au](http://www.psychology.org.au) – Australian Psychological Society (to find a psychologist in your area)

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This fact sheet is designed to be informative and educational. It is not intended to provide specific medical advice or replace advice from your health practitioner

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