

MENOPAUSE IN THE WORKPLACE: WHY DOES IT MATTER?

What would be the consequence of 12% of your most experienced, knowledgeable female employees resigning unexpectedly?

Research shows that this is the number of women we are losing from the workplace due to the inability to manage menopause symptoms at work.

This is why so many people are talking about menopause. But why now?

The global workplace is aging.

The over 50s group will become the largest age group demographic by 2030 according to a 2019 study by the ONS. It is estimated that **1.2 billion** women worldwide will be menopausal or postmenopausal by that year, and over 80% of these women are and will be in the workplace.

According to London Gynaecology Ltd at The Portland Hospital, **94%** of those assigned female at birth will experience some symptoms brought about by the menopause.

80% will suffer significant debilitating symptoms that may impact their work, their home lives, and their relationships.



Studies, including by Fertifa (2021), show that up to **42%** of women will seriously consider leaving the workplace due to the way their symptoms make them feel. In the UK alone, BUPA found that **almost one million** women had left a job because of symptoms of menopause, exposing UK businesses to the loss of experienced female talent and, longer term, a potential resourcing crisis.

It's been called the **silent career killer**.

What a waste of talent, development and potential. And perhaps one reason why achieving **gender-equity** in the boardroom is a struggle.

In addition to this, this life stage sees the highest rates of both **divorce** and **female suicide** – we don't believe this is a coincidence.

If those numbers aren't a sufficient enough incentive to take the subject seriously, then perhaps the tripling of successful **tribunal cases** citing menopause discrimination over the past three years might (HR Review 2022).

So, what exactly is it, and why does it have such an impact?

There are three phases of the menopause transition; perimenopause, menopause and post-menopause. These each bring a shifting of the core reproductive hormones; oestrogen, progesterone and testosterone. The average age to start this journey is 46 years, and it can take on average 4-10 years to transition through to post-menopause.

However, for some women this will start much earlier, or be quicker, or be longer. It may be natural or may be induced through surgical or medicinal intervention. There are no set rules as to how this will show up, meaning many women are unaware that they have started the transition until they are well into symptoms.

And the symptoms of menopause are many! As oestrogen alone has over 300 functions in the body, it is not surprising that, as it reduces, a female body responds with many different reactions. This, in conjunction with fluctuations in progesterone, testosterone and cortisol, produces a list of over 40 “common” symptoms.

And whilst the physical symptoms can be pretty miserable, **87%** of women leaders report that cognitive impairment (the “brain fog” we talk about) is the single most debilitating symptom Fertifa (2021).

Many of us have our very identities tied up with the work we do, so we don’t want to lose that part of ourselves. Also, many organisations are highly performance-led so there is often a fear of being judged and found wanting; being blocked from progression. Women are often in “fake it to make it” mode, convinced that if they mention menopause they will no longer be taken seriously (and this isn’t taking into account the impact beyond work, the impact on relationships both in and outside the home).

So, depending on the psychological safety within a woman’s immediate corporate environment and the level of fear around performance fluctuations, it is possible that leaders, line managers and HR teams will not “see” the root cause.

You may find increased sickness absence, flexible working applications or requests for coaching and development support in relation to loss of confidence, reduced focus, increased imposter syndrome or anxiety. Or even surprise requests for early retirement.

So, what can people and organisations do?



Firstly, be curious! Educate yourself and others. But be aware that this is still a taboo subject in Western culture; it can be even more so in cultures where women traditionally keep very private about personal matters.

In one-on-one conversations, use a supportive coaching approach. Help them think through what might help within the scope of their work. Explore what support they need to maximise their productivity at the times when symptoms are in full swing. In addition to leveraging company-wide policies such as those on flexible working, there may be support available from a health provider, and many companies are now setting out menopause guidelines, too.

From a coaching perspective, individual and small group coaching can be very impactful. This topic lends itself particularly well to virtual coaching as it allows the person being coached to be somewhere safe and comfortable where their confidentiality is assured.

And it’s important to help women to ground themselves in their talents, strengths and experience and explore how these can be directed towards navigating a successful path through their menopause experience. Encourage an experimental approach; support people to try things out and learn what works for them. And help them create a vision of what they would like to create both during and “after”.

With care, curiosity and careful conversation, women (and all of you who love, live and work with them) can see the steps they can take to survive and even thrive through this life stage, creating a positive impact on all those involved, on inclusion within our workplaces and on business performance.

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