

How to be middle-aged without going insane

Self confessed ‘Grumpy Old Woman’ and comedian Jenny Eclair talks car rage, mismatching underwear and the hobbies that saved her life as she struggled with her menopause. By Ailsa Colquhoun.

Comedian and novelist, Jenny Eclair speaks about the menopause not as an expert but as a woman who has experienced it, and who thinks it deserves to be aired.

“It’s never been a taboo subject for me,” says Jenny, who describes her decision to take Hormone Replacement Therapy as “that or Holloway,” due to the extreme rage – “car rage... danger to myself rage” – she experienced as a result of her hormone changes. Of the medication, she says: “It’s turned me into the woman I should always have been... but with the thickest hair and nails.”

For a woman who has made a living about sharing life experiences with audiences numbering into hundreds, it is hardly surprising that Jenny doesn’t find it difficult to share her own menopause experience. Of course, she can understand why others do. “There are still some very old-fashioned attitudes,” she says, citing a GP who referred to her vagina as her ‘downstairs.’ However, once you start to talk about the menopause you realize there is a very wide spectrum of experience, she says. “The most important thing to remember is that if you need help with your menopausal symptoms, make sure you get it.”

Jenny describes as her “lifesaver” hobbies such as art and embroidery, and spending time in or near water. She says: “It’s hard to be bad-tempered in water.” She has also taken a lot of pleasure from being able to do charitable work, such as supporting a prison charity.

Equally important, she believes, is to be able to surround herself with a good social support network. When asked about the upside of middle age, Jenny says that women become more supportive to each other: “We have stopped being in competition with each other, we don’t want that dream job or man anymore – even if they were still up for grabs.” She reflects that by middle age, there is shared experience of the ‘big life’ stuff, like parents dying, children growing up, the heartbreak

of downsizing or of not being able to downsize because the children won’t or can’t leave home. And, she says, there is shared sympathy with the “haunted-looking” middle-aged woman in the supermarket on late Christmas Eve or early Christmas Day, who’s clearly forgotten to buy the turkey...

For women of this “certain age,” Jenny’s latest show ‘How to Be A Middle Aged Woman (Without Going Insane)’ is not only entertaining, it’s a safe haven almost universally made up of women of the same certain age. Here, women can share their admiration for 56-year old Jenny who appears in publicity material for the show dressed only in bra and

mismatched knickers. Together they can enjoy Jenny’s characters such as Menopause Woman “who would fly around the world in her bra and pants with a pinny tied under her chin like a cloak,” or whose hot flushes can be put to good use by getting rid of those expensive patio heaters in pub gardens and employing middle-aged women to circulate around to heat things up.”

In the middle-aged woman’s world, the idea of being paid for that in Chardonnay tokens will always go down well.

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