



• Menopause is as important as any other occupational health issue.

Menopause at work – *let's talk about it*

Coping with menopausal symptoms at work can be tough and some women are, understandably, reluctant or even afraid to talk to their employer about it. Dr Louise Newson thinks it's time for a change.

As the average age of the menopause in the UK is 51 years, this is often an age when women have more senior posts and may have more stressful jobs that can sometimes be more difficult to juggle around family life, let alone cope with having menopausal symptoms too. It's also an age when many women are experiencing significant life events that are occurring outside of their work and careers. For example, problems with older children or ageing relatives.

Menopause is a natural condition that affects all women at some stage of their life. The vast majority of women, around 80%, have symptoms related to their menopause. Whilst the average age is 51 it's not just these women who are experiencing difficulties - around 1% of women under 40 years of age in the UK experience an early menopause.

So, with around 3.5 million women aged between 50 and 65 years currently in employment in the UK, women

now represent nearly a half of the UK labour force. That surely makes menopause mainstream and as important as any other occupational health issue.

Challenges

In addition to the classical symptoms of hot flushes and mood swings, menopausal symptoms can really affect a woman's confidence, concentration, energy and ability, which can negatively affect work performance.

Many people don't realize the hugely significant effect the psychological symptoms of the menopause can have. If women do not recognize that it is the menopause causing their symptoms, then they will not

"I became withdrawn, felt hopeless, worthless – I couldn't see a future. I couldn't bear any pressure; I had sleepless nights, palpitations, and huge anxiety. I couldn't even bear to be alone at home. I couldn't work..." Following a visit to her GP Diane began taking plant-based estrogen and the impact was positive: *"It was such a weight off my shoulders. I could begin to think about work again."*

**Diane Danzebrink, 50, talking to
The Telegraph online**

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Working through the menopause

- Many women find they are little prepared for the onset of the menopause and are even less equipped to manage its symptoms at work. They tend not to disclose their symptoms to their manager
- The majority of women feel they need further advice and support
- Workplaces and working practices are not designed with menopausal women in mind
- Heavy and painful periods, hot flushes, mood swings, fatigue and poor concentration can pose significant and embarrassing problems for some women, resulting in lowered confidence
- Women are often uncomfortable disclosing their symptoms and problems to managers, particularly if they are young or male.
- Where women have to take time off work to deal with their symptoms many do not disclose the real reasons for their absence
- Some women say they have to work extremely hard to overcome their perceived shortcomings due to their menopause
- Others consider working part-time, despite the concern about the impact on their career. Some even think about leaving employment altogether.

Source: UNISON's Health and Safety guide to the menopause.

talk about it and, more importantly, they will not ask for help. In addition, if their colleagues do not know about the menopause then it potentially makes it very hard for women to talk about their symptoms at work.

It's no surprise that around half of women have been reported as finding work difficult due to their symptoms of menopause. In addition, perhaps more worryingly, it has been estimated that around 10% of women actually stop work altogether because of their severe menopausal symptoms.

I am constantly astonished and amazed how little women (and men!) know about symptoms of the menopause and the associated health risks that include increased risk of cardiovascular disease and osteoporosis. So many women do not receive medical help even though around 1 in 4 women have severe symptoms, which can adversely affect their family, work and home lives.

Research has shown that the more often women reported experiencing menopause-related symptoms and the worse those symptoms became, the less engaged they felt at work, the less satisfied they were with their job, their intention to quit their job was greater and their commitment to their organization was lower.

I have seen numerous women over the years who have either stopped work or seriously considered stopping work as they have simply felt their ability to concentrate and do their job properly had severely diminished. All their decisions and feelings have been direct consequences of their menopausal symptoms.

Stop the silent treatment

Menopause is still a 'silent issue' in most companies and menopausal/peri-menopausal women represent a group whose working lives, experiences and aspirations are poorly understood by employers, national governments and even academic researchers. There is still a taboo around addressing menopausal issues in the workplace, which I really feel has to change. →

"If performance were affected by symptoms that could be attributed to a different medical condition, there would be far more acceptance and allowances made."



Baroness Ros Altmann, former Pensions Minister.

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