

Let's Get Real About Menopause

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It has been some time coming but, finally, the legislators seem to be taking the issue of menopause and the impact it has

on some women's professional lives seriously.

The Women and Equalities Committee (**WEC**) has asked for [submissions](#) from the public to help them understand the extent of discrimination faced by menopausal workers and how Government policy and workplace practices can better support those experiencing menopause.

[Research](#) conducted in 2019 by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (**CIPD**) laid bare the difficulties faced by menopausal women (usually aged between 45-55, although menopause can occur earlier or later) at work. The report highlighted that of those who experienced menopausal symptoms at work:

- Nearly two-thirds (65%) said they had trouble concentrating.
- More than half (58%) said they experienced more stress.
- More than half (52%) said they struggled to be patient with clients and colleagues.
- Only a quarter (25%) felt able to explain their symptoms and the reason for them to their manager. This was due to privacy concerns (45%), embarrassment (34%), and unsupportive management (32%).

This year, the CIPD, in partnership with Bupa, issued [guidance](#) for line managers on menopause at work. This contained a startling statistic – almost a million women have left the workforce due to menopause-related symptoms. Few would deny that this exit of talent is damaging to not only the women concerned, but the economy as a whole.

Children, elderly parents, and menopause – a difficult combination

[Research](#) shows that the more highly educated a woman is, the later she is likely to have children. In [London](#), for example, the rate of women giving birth for the first time over the age of 40 now outstrips those becoming mothers in their teenage

years. However, having children between the ages of 35 and 45 means that many women in professional sectors such as finance, engineering, law, and medicine hit perimenopause[\[1\]](#) just as their children are moving into the sometimes challenging teenage years and their ageing parents require more care. Unfortunately, to date, little research has been done on the impact of this 'triple whammy' on women's careers.

New research on menopause and workers in the financial services sector

A [study](#) examining the effects of perimenopause and menopause on women's economic participation in the financial services sector is being conducted by Standard Chartered Bank and Financial Services Skills Commission. The research is being carried out by the Fawcett Society, the UK's leading charity campaigning for gender equality and women's rights. The study aims to explore how perimenopause and menopause impacts women working in the financial sector and their ability to progress into senior roles, especially given that the opportunity to advance into those senior roles usually presents itself between the ages of 45-55 years.

The findings from the research will be published in Autumn 2021.

Supporting working women through the menopause transition

A 2016 paper[\[2\]](#) made the following recommendations to improve workplace conditions for peri- and postmenopausal workers:

- Raise awareness amongst the workforce
- Encourage disclosure of symptoms
- Temperature control
- Stress reduction
- Flexible work arrangements
- Access to water and toilets

These are relatively simple changes that employers can make to

support women managing symptoms such as hot flashes, exhaustion, heavy periods, anxiety, depression, and difficulty concentrating.

The argument for making menopause a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010

One solution for safeguarding women dealing with perimenopause and menopause symptoms is to make menopause a protected characteristic under the Equality Act 2010. Currently, women bringing a claim for menopause-related discrimination must do so under one of the existing protected characteristics, typically sex, age, or disability. This limitation has resulted in Employment Tribunal decisions being mixed. Furthermore, lumping a natural condition that 50 per cent of the population experience under age, sex, or disability reinforces stereotypes of the older woman being less competent and able. Making menopause a protected characteristic in its own right moves the term away from illness, disability, ageing, and 'female problems', none of which have anything to do with the natural hormone shift that brings on menopause.

Caroline Nokes MP, Chair of the WEC inquiry has [said](#) she is open minded about recommending that equality laws be changed to protect menopausal women if evidence received during the inquiry supports such a proposal.

Final words

There are significant gaps in our knowledge of how menopause affects working women and the inquiries and study mentioned above will help address this issue. In turn, Government policies can be adjusted to fit the reality of the modern workplace. Menopause at work needs to become a mainstream issue for employers to ensure organisations can retain the experience and talent provided by those aged over 40.

If you would like to discuss how the menopause is affecting you at work, or how your organisation can support staff though

the menopause, please contact Amanda Steadman (amandasteadman@bdbf.co.uk) or your usual BDBF contact.

[1] The transition period before menopause which can result in significant menopausal symptoms. Perimenopause can last a few months to a few years (sometimes up to a decade) before menopause officially occurs.

[2] GRIFFITHS. A., CEAUSU, I., DEPYPERE, H., LAMBRINOUDAKI. I., MUECK, A. PEREZ-LOPEZ, F.R., VAN DER SCHOUW, Y.T., SENTURK, L.M., SIMONCINI, T., STEVENSON, J.C., STUTE, P. and REES, M. (2016) EMAS recommendations for conditions in the workplace for menopausal women, Maturitas, Vol. 85, pp.79-81, ISSN 1873-411

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