Navigating Mood Changes During Menopause

by AFRA WILLMORE

Psychological Effects of Menopause

When I was young, I did not give much thought to the psychological effects of menopause. I just shrugged it off as just another stage of life. I was certainly not prepared for the feelings of grief and sadness that overwhelmed me when my doctor confirmed I was menopausal after performing a blood test measuring my follicle stimulating hormone (FSH) levels. I went on to feel a range of emotions as the time went on, including anger, anxiety and mood swings.

I was somewhat relieved to discover that I was not alone experiencing psychological issues during menopause. There are a number of reasons for this response, although not everyone experiences negative feelings when they realize the menopause is upon them.

The Effect of Hormones on Mood

Obviously hormones are very much at play during menopause, and as your hormones fluctuate, you can experience a rapidly changing array of emotions ranging from anxiety and panic to depression and irritability.

The hormone, estrogen, diminishes during peri-menopause, the time leading up to full menopause, which is defined as a full 12 months without menstruation. This can lead to feelings similar to those experienced with premenstrual syndrome (PMS) which can include moodiness or even rage, tiredness and tension, a lack of motivation, or difficulty concentrating.

Experiencing menopause and depression is a common symptom, and it is important to talk with your loved ones or a therapist about the role your depression is playing in your life.

Physical Symptoms of Menopause Can Trigger an Emotional Response

Fluctuating hormones can cause a host of physical symptoms which in turn can trigger psychological symptoms.

Take hot flashes for instance. On paper, they are just relatively short periods of feeling warmer than normal, maybe with a degree of perspiration. In fact, for many women, hot flashes can prove to be debilitating — leaving them feeling sweaty, dizzy, wrung out and embarrassed. They can be especially difficult to deal with at work or at social events when carefully chosen outfits and nicely styled hair can end up looking like both have been through a damp hedge backwards. This can lead to embarrassment, anxiety and, in the worst cases, can leave women reluctant to go out in case they are caught in a hot flash.

Menopausal hormones can also cause skin breakouts and greasy hair or conversely, dry skin and hair.

Estrogen is responsible for the tissue in your breasts being elastic – as it diminishes you might find breasts become droopy. They might also become very sore! These changes can cause a loss in body confidence which

extends to a loss of general confidence and can also affect mood.

Other changes during the menopause can leave women feeling less confident. Hormone changes can cause a reduction in the lining of the bladder causing loss of full control of the bladder or even full incontinence. Women may experience vaginal dryness which can impact intimate relationships, or they may have trouble sleeping, which can lead to exhaustion and a feeling of being unable to cope with day-to-day life.

Acknowledging the End of Fertility

Even if there are no troubling physical symptoms, many women struggle with accepting the start of menopause marking the end of their fertility.

Whether they made a conscious decision not to have children, were unable to conceive, or had an enormous family, menopause can create unexpected feelings of grief and loss, or a feeling that a vital element of “womanliness” is being taken from them.

Positive Psychological Responses to Menopause

Not everyone sees the start of the menopause years in a negative light. For some women who have suffered painful menstruation, or who have struggled with finding a suitable birth control method, the cessation of periods can be liberating.

Coping With Psychological Changes in Menopause

There are lots of ways of coping with negative or troubling psychological effects during menopause, even if you cannot pinpoint yourself what is causing them.

First of all, chat with your doctor. It may be that a course of hormone replacement therapy (HRT) can stabilize fluctuating hormones and reduce both physical and psychological symptoms until you are properly in menopause when they should disappear on their own.

It maybe that counseling could help. A trained expert can assist you in discovering why you feel the way you do and find ways for you to overcome any psychological issues.

Counseling might be combined with drug therapy. Don’t feel like you have failed if anti-depressants are suggested. You can no more help clinical depression than appendicitis and the sooner you can start treating it, the sooner you can get back to feeling yourself and living your life normally again.

Many women benefit from simple self-care. Avoid alcohol and caffeine which may make symptoms worse. Make sure you eat a healthy balanced diet and get regular exercise. Just going out for a walk can create mood-enhancing endorphins which can lift your mood. Walk with a friend and combine your exercise with a chat – "a trouble shared is a trouble halved," they say. They might also be able to motivate you on days you feel less motivated to go out. The exercise may also help with any menopause-related weight gain or changes in body shape and should also help with any sleep issues.

If at any point you feel so low you cannot cope with essential daily tasks, like eating or maintaining hygiene, or if you feel like you cannot go on, seek medical help immediately. Not all psychological symptoms are caused by hormones even if you are menopausal, and it is important you are assessed by a qualified doctor.