Stigma and Embarrassment

by ANGELA FINLAY

Menopause Stigma

A number of studies have shown that a variety of factors – both physical and psychological – contribute to each woman's unique attitude toward, and experience of, menopause. Not surprisingly, women with a wide support network, stable emotional health and no problems talking about their menopause challenges fare far better than others, but ongoing social stigma ensures that this is simply not the case for most women.

Popular misconceptions, together with sexist and ageist leanings, can make it difficult to face your feelings and move forward in the healthiest way possible. In order to break through the social constraints, you need to accept menopause for the natural process that it is, and then learn how to communicate with that new frame of mind.

Overcoming Stereotypes and Misconceptions

Menopause is a cultural belief as well as a physiological event. Often, women who are decades away from menopause treat it as a taboo or uncomfortable subject, and those who have already made the transition may minimalize the challenges involved. It is often considered a private matter, and in many cases, menopause symptoms are treated as problems that need fixing.

But the first step towards a better quality of life during and after menopause is recognition, not repair. Overcoming the big stereotypes can be a hurdle, but recognizing the reality of menopause is also your gateway to a happy and proactive future. Keep in mind:

- **Menopause is not the mark of old age –** Life expectancy continues to increase, and that means the broadly defined periods of "early", "middle" and "old" age must shift accordingly. Menopause may mean the end of your reproductive years, but with the average woman living late into her 70s and many living well into their 90s, it's certainly not the end of your life.In fact, more women are more active as they reach middle age, and are able to use the freedom that comes with menopause to actually increase their activities and prolong their youthful vigor. New hobbies, eye-opening travel, and undertaking exciting challenges can improve your quality of life and energy through menopause and beyond.
- **Menopause is not an illness –** Unfortunately, popular misconception dupes some women into believing that menopause is an unhealthy affliction. However, menopause has nothing to do with illness or infirmity: it's a natural phase of shifting hormones, and while there are some uncomfortable symptoms, they do not weaken your mind or body.The mental challenges are sometimes the most difficult to overcome, especially when you begin to experience symptoms. It's common to feel strange, anxious and even upset about facing the future in this "new" body, and that can lead to isolation and a lack of communication. But every women goes through this state of flux; the volatile feelings are only temporary, and the more permanent changes are perfectly healthy.

- **Menopause does not change your gender role or experience –** The loss of your fertility can be difficult to bear. Other women, and society in general, may make you feel that you have somehow lost an aspect

of your feminine persona, or even your value. Although you must deal with the psychological aspect of menopause in your own way, it's important that you acknowledge and continue to strengthen your sense of identity – as a woman, sister, mother, daughter, and any other way you see yourself.

- **Talking about menopause is helpful –** Menopause, like menstruation, is a historically taboo subject. Complaining about symptoms can be considered crude or impolite. You may feel like you'll be judged if you talk about what you're experiencing, or accused of fishing for sympathy. But times have changed! There's no reason to hide your symptoms, and communication is incredibly important: sharing feelings has a proven effect on mental health and stress levels, and will help keep depressive symptoms at bay.It's easier to share your feelings with other women who understand what you are experiencing, and it can be very therapeutic to listen to other women's stories, as well. Join a group (or set one up yourself) for menopausal women based around one of your interests. Alternatively, join an online forum or start blogging about your journey. You'll soon find new friends and enjoy bonding opportunities that will counter the isolation you've been feeling.

Next page: overcoming confusion and fear.

Overcoming Confusion and Fear

While many women are happy sharing a humorous quip about their hot flashes or sleep issues, far fewer feel comfortable talking about more intimate (but just as prevalent) symptoms. Even though millions of women face the trials and discomforts of menopause each year, this secrecy and fear of judgement often results in confusion and worry.

Until they're addressed, these commonly hidden symptoms can contribute the most to isolation, anxiety and generally a poorer quality of life during menopause include:

- **Fear of losing your mind –** Menopause affects your mind as well as your body, but while lapses in memory and difficulty concentrating can be frustrating, there's no need to suspect the onset of dementia. Hormonal fluctuations could be at the heart of your cognitive problems, or else the stress of your physical symptoms together with daily responsibilities can affect how you absorb information. In all probability, any memory, concentration or learning issue is completely temporary – you are not going crazy.
- **Concern with a fading sex life –** A decline in estrogen leads to thinning of the vaginal wall, less natural lubrication, and sometimes a weak libido. In fact, some women feel that their sexuality is ending along with their fertility, but that's not true: although hormones might play a small role, many factors can contribute to changes in sex drive, and a good number of those are within your control. Aim to improve your self-esteem, focus on the advantages of post-menopausal sex (no more birth control!), pay closer attention to your physical health, and allow yourself the opportunity to explore your desires.

- **Worry about therapy –** Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) was once heralded as the key to a smooth transition, and then demonized as a terrible health risk. The truth is, every woman is different, and each case should be treated as unique. HRT can be very safe and extremely helpful for some, but a poor choice for others. It's important to resist the urge to group yourself with every other menopausal woman, in terms of treatment and menopausal experience in general. You and your doctor will determine which resources will be beneficial to you as you move through menopause.

Menopause stigma is unjustified, and there's no reason to accept it as a given. Sure, the problems can't be erased overnight, but you can begin to change your own outlook right away. Align yourself with positive influences, and make self-respect and self-confidence top priorities as you move through menopause.

Focus on the positive aspects of menopause. You may just find that the best is yet to come.