

An Introduction to Menopause

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Let's talk about Amelia.

Amelia is a seasoned project manager, known for her precision and leadership. This past year, she started missing deadlines, she seemed distracted, and her confidence waned. Her colleagues noticed the change, but didn't know why it was happening.

Amelia was silently struggling with menopause, dealing with symptoms like fatigue and anxiety.

Without workplace support or understanding, she felt isolated and afraid to speak up.

One day, overwhelmed after a meeting, she confided in her manager. To her surprise, he responded with empathy, offering flexible working hours and initiating a menopause policy at work.

This change made a huge difference.

Amelia's performance improved, and she felt supported, no longer needing to hide her struggles. Her experience led to a more inclusive environment, benefiting not just her but the entire team.

This story highlights the importance of understanding and supporting colleagues through life changes like menopause and fostering a workplace where everyone feels valued and understood.

Today's topic affects many of our friends and colleagues, but it's one we very rarely talk about thanks to stigma and misunderstanding.

This guide will provide you with a better understanding of menopause and its impact on the workplace. We'll explore how we can all contribute to creating a supportive and inclusive environment for those who are struggling through this period of life.

By the end of this session, you'll understand:

- The stages and symptoms of menopause.
- The impact menopause can have on work performance and well-being.
- Practical strategies to support colleagues going through menopause, and

- How to foster a menopause-friendly workplace culture.

Menopause is more than just a personal issue; it's a workplace concern, too.

Menopause can significantly affect an employee's career trajectory and overall well-being [1]. With the right support, businesses can retain valuable talent and ensure all employees feel respected and supported.

Understanding Menopause

Let's start with the basics – what exactly is menopause? Menopause is a biological process that marks the end of an individual's menstrual cycles, typically occurring in their late 40s to early 50s.

The transition into menopause, known as perimenopause, can begin years earlier and bring a range of symptoms like hot flashes, night sweats, mood swings, and cognitive challenges such as memory lapses and difficulty concentrating. Some individuals experience irregular periods and episodes of heavy bleeding – known as flooding – at this time, too.

Common physical symptoms of menopause and perimenopause, as listed by the NHS, include:

- hot flashes, when you have sudden feelings of hot or cold in your face, neck and chest, which can make you dizzy
- difficulty sleeping, which may be a result of night sweats and make you feel tired and irritable during the day
- palpitations, when your heartbeats suddenly become more noticeable
- headaches and migraines that are worse than usual
- muscle aches and joint pains
- skin changes, including dry and itchy skin
- sensitive teeth, painful gums or other mouth problems

Menopause impacts everyone differently.

Some may experience mild symptoms, while others endure severe and disruptive effects. As noted in a recent article from Adora Health, the stigma surrounding menopause often leaves individuals feeling isolated and unsupported, which can intensify the psychological and emotional challenges they face [2].

The Impact of Menopause at Work

Menopause can have a profound impact on an individual's professional life.

According to Adora, 63% of women said menopause had a negative impact on their work and 59% of women hide their menopause symptoms at work.

Symptoms like fatigue, anxiety, and mood swings can affect concentration, productivity, and overall job performance.

In a workplace that lacks understanding or support, these challenges can lead to increased stress, reduced job satisfaction, and even the decision to leave the workforce earlier than planned.

According to a study published by Forbes, many people report feeling unsupported by their employers during menopause, which can lead to feelings of frustration and decreased engagement at work [3].

The emotional toll of managing menopause symptoms while maintaining professional responsibilities is significant, and it's crucial for employers to recognise and address this.

One practical step is to offer flexible working arrangements which can help employees manage symptoms like fatigue and sleep disturbances.

NHS Employers suggest providing access to quiet spaces, ensuring a comfortable working environment, and allowing time off for medical appointments as practical ways to support employees during menopause [4].

Supporting Colleagues Experiencing Symptoms

Support begins with education and awareness. Employers and colleagues should be educated about menopause, its symptoms, and how it can affect an individual's work life. This education can be delivered through training sessions or informational resources, helping to foster a culture of understanding and empathy.

According to Acas (the Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service), open communication is key [5]. Managers should be trained to have sensitive and supportive conversations with employees who may be experiencing menopause-related challenges.

This includes understanding the legal aspects, such as ensuring that employees are not discriminated against due to their symptoms and knowing what accommodations can be offered to help them continue working comfortably.

Practical adjustments can include altering the physical work environment to better suit those experiencing symptoms. For example, adjusting the office temperature, providing easy access to cold water, and offering flexibility in dress codes can make a significant difference. These small adjustments can help alleviate some of the physical discomforts associated with menopause.

Additionally, emotional support is crucial. Creating a supportive work environment where employees feel comfortable discussing their challenges without fear of stigma or judgment can make a world of difference. As the Adora Health team notes, promoting awareness and understanding across the organisation can help reduce the stigma associated with menopause, making it easier for employees to seek the support they need [2].

Creating a Menopause-Friendly Workplace

Building a menopause-friendly workplace requires more than just policy changes—it's about creating a culture of support and inclusivity.

According to the British Menopause Society, implementing a menopause policy that outlines the support available to employees can provide a clear framework for both employees and managers [6]. This policy should be regularly reviewed and communicated to ensure everyone is aware of the resources and accommodations available.

Training managers and HR professionals on menopause is another crucial step.

According to Bradley Schurman and Tamsen Fadal, this training should include how to approach conversations about menopause sensitively, how to offer accommodations, and how to ensure that menopause is included in the organisation's diversity and inclusion efforts [1].

Having a designated menopause champion or support group within the organisation can also be beneficial. These individuals or groups can provide a point of contact for employees seeking advice or support and can help raise awareness about menopause throughout the organisation.

As Acas suggests, these initiatives can help create a supportive network for employees experiencing menopause, reducing feelings of isolation and ensuring they have access to the resources they need [5].

Flexible working policies are also important.

Allowing employees to adjust their work hours or work from home can help them manage symptoms more effectively.

Additionally, it's important to ensure that any absence related to menopause is managed sensitively and fairly without penalising the employee.

In summary, menopause is a significant life stage that can profoundly affect an individual's work life.

It's essential for workplaces to be informed, compassionate, and proactive in offering support.

By implementing policies, making small but meaningful adjustments, and fostering an open dialogue, companies can not only help their employees thrive during this time but also retain valuable talent within their workforce.

If you're a leader, here's what you can do next:

- Review your current workplace policies to ensure they include support for menopause.
- Initiate training sessions for managers and team leaders on menopause awareness.
- Implement practical adjustments in the workplace, such as flexible working hours and comfortable working conditions, to better support those experiencing menopause.

Whether or not you're a leader in your organisation, you can encourage open conversations about menopause at work to reduce stigma and promote understanding. Take the time to do your own research, too.

Remember, supporting your colleagues through menopause is about more than just policy – it's about building a workplace culture where everyone feels valued and understood.

[1] How Companies Can Support Employees Experiencing Menopause, Bradley Schurman and Tamsen Fadal, HBR (2024)
<https://hbr.org/2024/01/how-companies-can-support-employees-experiencing-menopause>

[2] Mind the menopause gap, Adora Health (2024)
<https://www.adora.health/post/mind-the-menopause-gap-why-all-businesses-need-to-get-behind-the-new-british-standard-for-menopause>

[3] Menopause Impact On Women's Workplace Well-Being And Career Trajectory, Kalina Bryant, Forbes (2024)
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/kalinabryant/2024/05/03/menopause-impact-on-women-workplace-well-being-and-career-trajectory/>

[4] Guidance on menopause at work, NHS Employers (2020)
<https://www.nhsemployers.org/publications/guidance-menopause-work>

[5] Menopause at work – supporting staff, Acas (2022)
<https://www.acas.org.uk/menopause-at-work/supporting-staff-through-the-menopause>

[6] Menopause and the workplace guidance: what to consider, British Menopause Society (2022)
<https://thebms.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/07-BMS-TfC-Menopause-and-the-workplace-03B.pdf>