

My Menopause Journey

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At OSiT everyone giggles or shouts out Mad Woman Pill at 10.30 when my mobile phone alarm goes off! This has been a familiar refrain for the last 4 years. It has been a long journey.

I could not have been happier when Amelia Woolley said that she wanted to talk publicly about her menopause journey! I am 54 (Just! Don't start telling everyone though as I think I can still pass for 50!) and it has been a hard 5 years.

I have been working full time since I was 18. I had five months off with my now husband when I was 22 to go skiing, but since then only a couple of weeks holiday a year (I could never afford the time to take the full all 4 or 5 week allowance). This is the price of running our own business. I am not complaining I have loved the journey. You also cannot afford to be ill. If you feel under the weather you recognise it for what it is, a cold, tiredness, stress, etc. you know that you can keep going although perhaps not at your normal speed/energy level, but you don't stop.

Hindsight is a wonderful thing. We are all blessed with it and some people are very insightful using their "hindsight", sorry had to get that in.

I have never slept well, even as a child I would wake up several times a night. No reason that I was aware of, but I would always do a safety wee then go straight back to sleep. As an adult this continued, it was great when I had my son Mackenzie as it meant that I was used to broken sleep so really I didn't suffer from sleep deprivation as many mothers do. However, in late 2016 I started being very uncomfortable at night (I was 48). The night sweats had started!

My husband and I had wanted a second child after our son Mackenzie. I was an "old" mother at 35 when I had him. So when I was 39 we went to get some assistance and although I was given light intervention with monthly hormones we were not successful. Then at 40 I thought I was pregnant as my periods stopped suddenly, I spent a fortune on pregnancy tests for about six weeks. Sadly I wasn't. My periods didn't come back for 6 months. I as many women do put it down to external influences, my go to was always tiredness and the pressures of work. They eventually came back but were intermittent. I was 40. No one was talking about Menopause or Peri-Menopause, I knew what it was but nothing about it other than it happened when women were 50 and they sweated a lot!

I was one of the oldest in my friendship group so I wasn't seeing anyone suffering from it and although I knew my mother at 70 was still on HRT her visible symptoms were long past and so not a trigger for me.

Life continued. I still woke up several times a night, I still went to work, I occasionally thought about why my periods were intermittent but saw no reason to worry, my libido was

diminishing and I was slowly putting on weight. Nothing dramatic with my health was happening and I could put it all down to external factors.

Then in late 2017 it seemed to get worse month by month slowly but surely. I was 49. I spent months in denial then I started considering that I might be peri-menopausal. I still did nothing. Why would I? I have managed to get through life without being ill, I could cope with a few night sweats. My 50th year was approaching so I booked myself into a London gym and started training twice a week. I followed their advice to the letter but my weight gain only reversed a little, but I did get fitter and slightly happier! In 2018 life got really hard, the sleeping was getting worse and worse and I was at exhaustion point. I felt as if I was holding on to my world by my fingertips. My memory was deteriorating, I couldn't think clearly (brain fog), I lost concentration quickly, I didn't recognise who I was which I am sure made me slightly depressed. I was tearful much of the time and quick to overreact.

I have always been an over sharer! So started to share with my team at work my symptoms and how I felt. I have always believed that it is important to be oneself, good or bad, to be visible and relatable. I had also realised that I needed those around me to understand my challenges. If my team didn't understand how I was feeling they would not understand how / why I might be behaving differently to their expectations. They were incredible, supportive, understanding, they lightened my load with humour and through their reaction to me I was able to see myself and my situation better.

I started to share my journey with one or two older friends and what I learnt scared me. They were being prescribed anti-depressants! Why would you get anti-depressants for a hormonal imbalance? Yes they gave HRT patches but this was a plaster for all problems that women of a certain age were given! The Dr's believed that the symptoms could be treated without dealing specifically with each woman's individual case. I was not going to be put on anti-depressants. I kept talking to people. Eventually, someone suggested a female Dr in Berkshire, not expensive but who understood menopause. I took a morning off work and went.

She was incredible. She asked me to fill in a questionnaire two pages long which covered every symptom I had and some which I had not even related to menopause or if I am honest had considered to be anything more than what my body did! She explained with graphs and diagrams what was happening to my body and why. The relationship between libido, hormones such as insulin and adrenalin, headaches, alcohol, sleep, muscle pain, hands hurting! The list was endless.

I am just going to add in here a side note: my father was diagnosed with Type 2 Diabetes in 2018 and one evening at the dinner table as he was endlessly sipping his water bottle I asked him about his symptoms. We laughed as I had all of his symptoms as well, but of course mine couldn't be diabetes...

So my wonderful Dr prescribed me oestrogen, progesterone and glucobay from nothing but a questionnaire. It was apparent from the information the Dr had gathered that my oestrogen levels had been dropping for over 10 years. This had caused me to become insulin resistant. Also due to having been under stress for a long time and the drop in

oestrogen my cortisol levels were very high. Cortisol is the stress hormone which has a whole host of nasty symptoms. Here is a great article that explains the relationship between oestrogen, progesterone, insulin, cortisol etc. <https://www.positivepause.co.uk/all-blogs/why-does-cortisol-affect-women-in-midlife-7-easy-steps-to-balance-cortisol-in-menopause>.

After a while the improvements that I had seen started to wear off. By now I was speaking to everyone about Menopause, men, women, friends, business contacts! I declared my Menopausal madness as I called it continuously. I wasn't really interested in how people perceived me from this but it gave me back a small feeling of control. Through this "oversharing" I came across the concept of hormone mapping in 2019. This is done through blood tests and enables you to have personalised HRT treatment, i.e. to be given the hormones that you were missing/depleted of and in the right quantity. I have not looked back since.

I still wake up at night but not sweating! My mental fog has gone, my recall is better, I have my libido is back, I have more energy, I am not depressed, I can embrace life every day. I feel like me again, I am happy, I do not want to go to bed and not get out – ever. Oh and now that lockdown is over I am finally getting to grips with my weight.

I look back at those four years now and can see how badly I had become affected by perimenopause. I would not wish anybody else to go through what I did. I am still banging the drum with my friends to ensure that they do not "accept" how they feel as something they have to put up with and that they can get help. Sadly, what I find is that women feel that they are failing or being weak by having to ask for help and not being able to ride "middle age" through resilience and strength of character.

Women are incredible. They are resilient, and they have huge strength of character that enables them to get through so many challenges in life quietly and without fuss. But Menopause should not be a battle, you can feel better quickly and get yourself back.

Just make the call. Now is the time to visit your surgery, Menopause is moving up the agenda and you will be listened to and you will be taken seriously.