

The Menopause

Definition of menopause from NICE September 2022:

“Menopause is a biological stage in a woman’s life when menstruation stops permanently due to the loss of ovarian follicular activity. It occurs with the final menstrual period and is usually diagnosed clinically after 12 months of amenorrhoea [NICE, 2019].”

This is a rather wide subject to cover in just a few hundred words, but I just want to focus on a particular aspect of menopause: our attitude to menopause, here in the UK.

Us women will, and do sympathise with one another during perimenopausal, menopausal and postmenopausal times, agreeing how terrible it is and difficult etc, and rightly so in many cases. We may, or may not, experience different symptoms, not all at the same time, and not all in the same way, but we do know that pretty much life as we know it, changes in a variety of ways and we were not always prepared for this.

We also know the negative connotations of menopause; usually centred around age, being “dried up” (loathe that one), end of fertility, brain fog, or worse still just completely ignoring this major time in our lives. But I look at it as a time of celebration; us women should be celebrated. Menopause is a rite of passage and a time of empowerment.

And in many countries and communities around the world, women are celebrated at this prominent time in their lives, as they should be. Not dismissed or ignored but rejoiced for the wonderful beings that they are. In Japan it is called “kanreki” marking an era of time spanning 60 years of rebirth and renewal. In China, it’s a time of rebalancing the yin and yang energies. Women treat their symptoms with

a change in diet, qigong, tai chi, acupuncture and herbal remedies. Africa is rich in celebration and ceremony as women are treated with respect and reverence due to their wisdom and experience. This is a transformative and spiritual time when women around the world are applauded. Women reach the wise-woman status which is widely recognised in our indigenous cultures. But sadly, here in the “west”, we don’t even get priority for a doctor’s appointment, let alone get anyone to fully listen to us and help with our symptoms. It’s all so normal, no hushed conversations and no being penalised like women here in the UK who feel the only option they have is to leave their job! It’s this sense of community which I feel is the key here. If we help one another then that is a winner in all aspects. Acceptance, support and being able to shift out negatives to the positives. I know which community I would like to be in.

There’s a rather disappointing editorial in The Lancet, (<https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S0140-6736%2822%2901099-6>) which basically says that we need to change our attitude towards the menopause. Which I wholeheartedly agree with, but instead of focusing on the negatives we need to focus on the positives and treat the negatives. We shouldn’t just be given a pill and told to get on with it, what we should be given is the time, patience, understanding and informed choice on our options. Along with a little respect. Also, I like the idea of the Red Tent where women go to share these times and share their knowledge and experience. Surely, they are the ones who know this subject well and therefore are the most qualified? Handing down titbits of information and help on symptoms and how to deal with them. I am by no means against modern medicine, I have friends who are so grateful for having access to HRT etc, but it shouldn’t be the only option.

What are the positives? Well, on a practical level, no more periods and all that brings to the table. Hoo-bloody-ray! Also, there is an element of freedom, and

when I really sit with that thought and what this freedom actually feels like, I think of words like renewal, rejuvenation, renaissance and opportunity. Good, exciting and meaty words. Getting some power back. And having the chance to look back at the experiences of our peers; fertility issues, menstrual pain, birth, postnatal stuff, all of this being an often unsettling and at times quite traumatic journey, but it is what makes us women who we are. And all of that should be celebrated, and every single woman should be accounted for, respected and given that time and space to reflect on what has been happening to them in their minds and bodies! And too, thanking their bodies for being there and doing what they could or couldn't do throughout this journey. But we need to allow ourselves to be able to do just that. It shouldn't just be for the privileged few, it should be for every woman everywhere.

There has been an explosion of people talking about menopause and offering more and more holistic and traditional remedies over the past few years which is great, as it is slowly and surely empowering us women albeit mainly through the social media platform. We are not victims of menopause; we are coming to a new beginning, setting out on a new venture! If we shift our attitudes towards women in general, then we can bring about so much change. For example, women being able to take time off for any sort of menstrual issue, as a norm, women being given options and support from other women during "kanreki", education in schools so men have a modicum of real and true understanding of what goes on physiologically let alone emotionally, empowerment through talk – being able to say the word "period" without any shame or embarrassment. This list is endless but basically, we need to put our money where our mouths are and really support one another through the whole of our reproductive life, without misinformation, without prejudice and without shame and thereby making this the norm.