

Menopause: Moving on in Mind, Body, and Spirit

By Helen Edler, M.A., Marriage & Family Therapist Intern

When my children were little, I used to say that “the days were long, but the years flew by.” Now, as a woman in my fifties, it seems as though the decades have flown by. Life has changed; and while the changes have meant loss and redefinition, they have also brought wonderful opportunities for new beginnings, new ways to blossom, and great productivity.

Somewhere in our forties, nature begins to remind us that the rhythm of our life, a steady internal rhythm, is beginning to change. The strangeness of our cycle changing is just the beginning – equally disturbing is what the changes may symbolize. The transition from our forties to our fifties is complicated. Not only do our hormones fluctuate, so do our moods, body temperatures, and sleep patterns. We become concerned about cancer detection (forty means yearly mammograms), heart disease, joint problems, and thyroid issues. We focus on controlling our weight and our wrinkles; while taking care of aging parents, adolescent children, jobs, relationships, etc. No wonder we long to be thirty again.

If we believe that only a certain stage of life is good (being single, the reproductive years, or retirement, for example) we miss the opportunity to see what the current life stage has to offer. Yes, there may be changes in our bodies, our cycles, and our hormones, but they are only changes; they do not represent total physical or mental decline. Menopause does not mean mental pause or emotional pause. The changes taking place in our bodies signal to us that we have an important opportunity to rethink our values, restructure our lives, and get ready for another surge of growth.

Studies have shown that the attitude with which you embark upon this transition can have a tremendous impact on your experience of it. Negative attitudes held prior to menopause can be predictive of a more difficult time with physical symptoms, (such as catastrophic thoughts about hot flashes means a more intense experience of them). It has also been shown that the *absence of positive thoughts* has a greater negative impact on our health and well being than negative thoughts and attitudes. You can use your mind to move through the transition of menopause, here's how:

- Watch Your Thoughts: Try keeping a journal to cultivate positive thoughts and attitudes. Each day write down three things for which you are grateful. Hold these images in your mind for several minutes.

Notice your negative thoughts and try to counter them with a positive thought. For example: counter a thought about losing reproductive ability with the thought that not having a period means freedom from birth control worries and more spontaneous sex.

- Laughter: Use humor and laughter to bring you closer to people, to move you into a more positive mind-set, to stimulate your immune system, to enhance your memory, and to help you better cope with the stressors in your life. For example, when a hot flash occurs you can laugh about not needing to turn on the heat this winter.
- Be Mindfully Aware of the Moment: Staying aware and present in the current moment prevents you from worrying about the future (often creating anxiety) or dwelling on the past (causing regret or depression).
- Focus on Being Connected: Remember that menopause touches both mates in a midlife relationship – draw on each other for support. At this time women also need other women – friends who can share life experiences and wisdom. Social support is key to good health and can even help you live longer, happier life.
- Use Relaxation Techniques: Try Aromatherapy to generate symptomatic relief of emotional and physical problems. Lavender and jasmine are good for emotional stress and rose or peppermint are sometimes used to help with the symptoms of hot flashes.

Deep Breathing activates the major quieting nerve of the body – the vagus nerve. This helps to lower blood pressure, heart rate and respiration, which aids in reducing anxiety and overall stress.

- Education: Menopause is a natural part of life. Talk to your doctor about your symptoms. The more you learn about your body, the better prepared you will be to handle the transition and the outcome.

A positive mental attitude, coupled with good physical care can have a profound, positive effect on how you experience menopause. A healthy lifestyle now means a healthier future too. Here are some ways you can move through menopause:

- Be sure to see your doctor to learn more about how you can reduce your symptoms, as well as ways to maintain your health. Learn about the pros and cons of HRT and what is right for you.

- Diet can play a role in reducing menopause symptoms. Try to avoid caffeine, refined sugars, refined flour and grains, salt, nicotine, and alcohol (a recent study revealed a connection to alcohol intake and breast cancer). If you are concerned about your blood pressure or any other health issue, talk to your doctor to find out how your diet impacts your health.
- Exercise: Physical activity not only helps with weight control and osteoporosis, but helps to minimize and eliminate menopausal symptoms. Try yoga, aerobics, weight lifting or walking for 30 minutes four times a week.
- Sexual Activity: Sex can provide physical benefits for menopausal women. It is good exercise and helps hormonal levels, vaginal muscle tone and lubrication.
- Stop Smoking: It wasn't healthy for you when you were twenty and it is not healthy for you (and those around you) now.

We can use menopausal symptoms to go through the most important health transition of our lives, passing from the "fix it, it's broken" mentality to the "I can prevent it from breaking (or at least slow it down)" state of mind. We have choices, and the choices we make will determine not only how we move through menopause but the quality of the next thirty to forty years of our lives. The decades may fly by but we will be ready to move on with them.

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