

menopause at work®
ASIA PACIFIC

Working through Menopause

Women's Experience

Summary of themes emerging from interviews conducted by
Thea O'Connor with 50 Australian women

October 2018



The Interviews

During September and October 2018, workplace wellbeing advisor Thea O'Connor interviewed 50 Australian working women, regarding their experience of transitioning through menopause.

- Four women were self-employed, the remainder worked for an organisation.
- Average age was 54, ranging from 46 to 61.
- Although some women weren't exactly sure what stage they were in, nine women were clearly post-menopausal, the remainder in perimenopause.

Of the women interviewed only four said the symptoms they experienced did not cause any significant distress. Overall, research suggests that 60% of women will have mild symptoms for around 4 - 8 years. Twenty per cent of women will have no symptoms at all while another 20% will be severely affected, with symptoms continuing into their 60s or later..

Here are some of the key responses and themes that emerged from the interviews, with selected quotes to illustrate.

What words would you use to describe the experience of menopause?

Isolating
Embarrassing
Frustrating
Surprising
Shocking
Shame
A Struggle
Overwhelming
Secret , Hidden
Disappointment
Extremely unsettling
Self-Doubt
Bit nervous-making
Roller Coaster, Intense

Emotionally tumultuous
Confronting
Bit of a freak out
Ungovernable
Unpredictable
Uncontrollable
Uncomfortable
Unravelling
UnFair
Inconvenient
Annoying, pissed off at having to go through this
Irritating
Angry
Consuming

Intrusive
It's F*d , not fun
Interesting process
Reflection, Distillation Paring back
Transition
Radical Change
Rite of Passage
Significant change
Fascinated by it and welcomed it
Fruitful, solid
Confidence building
Nurturing
Deeper relationship with myself - that hasn't always been pleasant.

Isolating and **embarrassing** were the two most commonly used words

SECRECY, ISOLATION & STIGMA WERE INTERTWINED



Why didn't anyone tell me?!

I feel ripped off that no one prepared me for it. No one talked to me.

Why didn't anyone tell me? This is a change of life I was not prepared for at all. Before I had my period at 13, I was told some stuff, but no one sat me down to have the 'time of life' conversation - I'm disappointed I didn't have that. I'm 46 and I felt so unprepared and shocked when it happened.

Secrecy & Silence [in the workplace]

There is a sense of having to hide it, you can't tell people what is actually going on for you.

It felt secret and that I had to hide it. It's not acknowledged - we are only just starting to tackle mental health at work.

The silence - it's the worst thing especially when you get to the top of organisations where the percentages of women are low 80-20.

The work culture has no consideration of the cyclic nature of our health. Pregnancy is more accepted now, people understand you have leave for that. But menstrual cycles and the impact of that - there is a denial of that.

I had a few instances where I didn't feel fit for work because I hadn't slept and I was panicking about that - that I wasn't up for the job. It's the feeling that I am going to have to lie, but someone might notice and then I'll feel like a fraud.

Isolation

I felt lonely because it's not spoken about. You can have sick days for all sorts of thing, but saying you are going to have a day off because of menopause

I couldn't talk about it, or it'd be seen as a weakness, especially in a male dominated environment. I don't have a colleague at work who gets this - not in a leadership role .

It's not something that is discussed in a workplace, even though it has the most profound hormonal effect on you. Everyone talks about periods. No one talks about menopause.

There's no discussion about it - when I do mention it, people laugh but never stop and ask- what's that like for you? There is still a lack of dialogue on it, even though we are a female dominated workplace, we hardly talk about it, even amongst older women. This can leave you feeling disconnected, alienated, on the outskirts.

Even women aren't talking about it

I had female colleagues who were going through it at the same time so we could talk about it. In general though, women don't want to talk about it. I'm not sure why we don't - is it because if I do I am acknowledging I am in that stage where I will no longer be attractive as a woman? that it's all downhill from here?

I have worked with women leaders, colleagues, managers , and it's still not really acknowledged , which is odd.

We just don't talk about it - like we do about PMS or pregnancy.

When my mother dying I remember asking- how was menopause for you? She said 'Oh I was far too busy for all of that'. So I thought it can't have been a big deal , and that's how it would be for me.

The stigma

We need to take the stigma out of it, as we do with mental health, it's still a taboo topic.

There's an unconscious bias that women are out of control, hysterical. You don't have scratch the surface much to find that entrenched view that women turn into harridans.

There is an unconscious bias that menopause means you are going into the last stage of your career. There is a stigma that this signals the end. You are not as sharp, not at your career peak.

It taps into the broader issue of misogyny in your culture...

Once you go through menopause there is a perception in society that you have done your time, you are used up, not fertile, not young, so your value diminishes . Then you become marginalised.

You have this sense of not being seen by society as sexy any more. I have invested more into my women friends and colleagues more so than with men, because I feel more comfortable with them than with my place in world and how that has changed.

Fear of discrimination

I don't feel it's something I can talk about openly, without experiencing discrimination. Not being able to talk about it openly leaves me feeling a bit of a fraud. I'd rather be genuine about my experience.

It plays right into the gender stereo we are trying to move away from. Judaism doesn't help. 'She'll be more emotional when she has periods so she can't do XYZ' ... similarly - it's not that she is being assertive about something important, it's just that time of month for her.

This issue is so related to gender discrimination stereotype. It needs a place at the table - it's a gender equality issue.

We are going through a restructure and I worry I might not be able to get another job, not because of menopause, but because of my age. Age discrimination is real.

Worry about work performance

It creates anxiety for me, whether I can do the tasks at hand.

I'm a senior XX, I've been doing this for all my life, it was really hard to see it (menopause) affected my work so drastically.

I was more reactive to my working environment, more speaking my mind. I did have a fear of losing it and speaking out so strongly that others would think it unacceptable, and that there'd be repercussions.

Being sleep deprived had a cascading effect making stamina and concentration very difficult.

The impact on my brain distresses me the most, the effect on my memory, my capacity to recall feels as though it's diminished. I can be talking about something, then have to stop short. Hot flushes can freeze my brain - it stops working.

It affects my productivity (sleep, memory, emotional capacity to be invested in others) - that would be a problem if I didn't have a flexible work place.

It had such a profound effect it took me a while to develop coping mechanisms.

It made me doubt my ability, especially foggy brain. There are moments I want to be retired rather than try and work at same time level.

Anxiety can immobilise me - and my inner self talk can get out of control giving myself a hard time. There is self-doubt that I can't do it - it's the pace, the expectations, the load I have moments of wanting to get under the doona and stay there.

My biggest fear was that I'd be seen as an emotional mess that couldn't do my job.

Women don't want to talk about it because they are scared they would lose their job.

Embarrassment & jokes

I had hot flushes at work, and I thought everyone else could tell and that everyone was looking at me. I felt very self-conscious.

I felt patronised and embarrassed, being the butt of jokes. If you took your cardigan off 100 times a day, or had to adjust air conditioning, people went 'oh ho ho - middle aged women!'

If I was in a meeting when a hot flush happened, I would joke about the furnace. That was ok with women, but with men I felt awkward - I didn't want to feed negative stereotype of older women. Humour masks the discomfort.

Meanwhile ... it's performance as usual

We pretend it's not there, it's performance as usual.

(What was the hardest thing about menopause?)

- *Having to carry on regardless, keep doing your work no matter how severe the symptoms were. Mine was haemorrhaging.*
- *Trying to remain professional and keep your work face on when you are feeling crap.*

You can't take time off work because I don't get paid, - no sick leave, no long service .. so I have to push through.

When women are trying to deal with profound changes in their bodies, we are also trying to maintain a facade in the workplace of nothing to see, nothing to hear.

A time of profound change

We are not who we used to be, we need to allow space to get to know who we are again.

Looking back it was a gift that challenged me into change.

It's a time where we go through a fundamental change - if you are prepared to accept it and go with it, there are many advantages. You do have to modify things, you can't necessarily eat the same way, for example.

There is a kind of re-wiring. You are being asked to move into learning to be another way.

My capacity to compromise is at an all-time low.

It's about letting go of the mothering impulse.

A call within

It was a time when I needed to crystallise what I was doing and get clear about - what do I want to carry forward? what's important to me ?

I craved alone time. I most wanted to go to a deserted island and not interact.

I now have deeper relationship with myself and my body .. and a love for myself I have never experienced before.

It's been an invitation to grow more into my strengths..

The opportunity

It'd be beautiful for women to be offered a different understanding of menopause - that's it a time for us to come into eldership, to understand it rather than try to get rid of it, and work with it together to help us to come into this next stage of life.

To treat it as a gateway to the next stage of your life, a time for wisdom.

What would make the biggest positive difference?

Overwhelming, resoundingly, women said :

To normalise it! Talk about it. Bring it into the mainstream.

If we could normalise this life stage, and see it as utterly part of the cyclical nature of life, then women could feel much more empowered, more able to claim all parts of us.

It's a normal part of life, not a disease.

End the silence that surrounds a stage of life that half of humanity go through.

Reframe it!

The prevailing narrative of women and menopause is one of unhappiness that their bodies have changed. Women are desperate for a new paradigm.

Turn it into a recognised rite of passage that's celebrated and honoured as a life stage, not as a fragility.

We need lots of positive stories - they are hard to find.

Reclaim menopause as a powerful and positive process in women's lives.

Inter-generational exchange

Older women sharing with younger women, a go-to network where you can go for support.

Make good information and literature easier to find.

Not just cosmo articles, but clinical research.

In the workplace, women wanted...

Education for all staff

Including tools that make it easier to have conversations across genders and between employees and their managers.

Flexible working conditions

Where it's built into the system so that your workplace has a conversation with you about how it can support you if you are coming into that life stage.

Written policies about it to ensure you aren't discriminated against.

It could be included in WHS induction, because it is an employee wellbeing issue.

Recognition

Workplaces recognising this as an impactful rite of passage that affects 50 per cent of workers, with a structured response that supports women.

The workplace doesn't need to fix anything, just acknowledge this happens.

What that would it mean for you, if you had that kind of support?

It would mean the world, it would alleviate the stuff of being at work and feeling so uncomfortable. I love my job and the work I do, but sometimes I think I don't want to go into work because of how I am feeling.

I would have felt empowered, felt normal, that I'm experiencing something my workplace can make reasonable adjustments to, and therefore I could still be able to make a valuable contribution.

I would feel seen, witnessed, honoured, respected and valued.

I would feel supported, and that I could work longer.

It'd help me stop feeling like I'm not going mad.

It'd be easier to come to work and be all of me. I could let down my guard a bit. I'd have more capacity to be more comfortable and to reduce the pressure, which my workplace would gain from.

I would not have to go through this alone. I could be genuine about my experience rather than feel I had to hide it

I would feel like the system cared for me.

Without the very supportive workplace I do have, I'd resign.

My Response

The themes that came out of these interviews were so strong and consistent, and so pertinent to me personally and professionally, that after the interviews, I was left thinking and feeling:



It's time, now
for change.

(just like menopause itself!)



So... I designed and ran 2 pilots, based on the needs identified, resulting in the two programs below:



The Orca Effect

EMPOWERING WORKING WOMEN
THROUGH MENOPAUSE

**7-week interactive learning
program for 10 to 15 women
from different workplaces**

Creating a space where women can talk about menopause in a real and respectful way, adopt an empowering understanding of this life-stage while learning about the wellbeing practices that can best protect women's effectiveness at work.

"My perception of myself has been transformed. Initially as a 'mature' woman, I felt disempowerment, invisibility and a lack of validation. I have learnt to change my perception of myself and I have a growing confidence as an older woman who has much to offer."

- Program participant.

For more info, go to
www.thea.com.au/orcaeffect



menopause@work

TRAINING FOR MANAGERS

This blended E-learning program equips workplace managers and supervisors with the knowledge, **confidence** and tools to **support** female employees through the menopausal transition, should women wish this, in order to help women maintain their health and remain successful in their roles.

"What a wonderful training program this has been, informative, timeframe friendly with our busy schedules and engaging. I really achieved my goals to start the conversation and help staff."

- Program participant, 2020

For more info, go to
www.thea.com.au/managertraining