Menopause isn't the problem – the way we talk about it is

AUTHOR'S NOTES

Katie Day, menopause and midlife expert and author of Menopause is Really Strange, on the myths and discomfort around this life transition and why it doesn't 'signal the beginning of the end'

WE'VE managed to put people on the moon, develop artificial intelligence and carry tiny computers around in our pockets. Yet somehow, we're still spectacularly confused by something that happens to roughly half the global population.

Welcome to menopause!

That curious stage of life when women are still brilliant at whatever they put their mind to, while simultaneously dealing with a body and mind that may have decided to rewrite their own operating instructions.

And yet many are still uncomfortable to talk about it, be that the person experiencing this natural life transition, or the people around her.

I've been delivering training programmes in the equity, diversity and inclusion space for over 30 years, and in the menopause and midlife space for almost 15, and one thing has become abundantly clear: menopause isn't nearly as straightforward as we'd like it to be.

For starters, it isn't just about hot flushes. Although, admittedly, finding yourself resembling a human radiator during an important meeting isn't exactly a highlight.

There can be disrupted sleep, joint pain, anxiety, changes in mood, vaginal dryness, difficulties concentrating and a whole collection of symptoms that don't immediately shout "menopause".

Some women describe feeling as though they've lost their confidence, their sharpness or even their sense of self.

And the really frustrating part? They may have no idea why. I didn't.

I was amongst the one in four women who are on the "edge" for the majority of the menopausal transition. I had no idea it was the perimenopause and I thought I was losing my mind.

The science tells us that perimenopause, the time leading up to menopause, can begin years before periods finally stop.

During this time, reproductive hormone levels fluctuate, potentially affecting sleep, temperature regulation, mood and other bodily functions.

While the ovaries are the main source of oestrogen, a biological female is a walking oestrogen receptor. We have receptors throughout our bodies.

According to the British Menopause Society, around 80% of women experience menopausal symptoms, although their severity varies considerably.

However, we should not assume that every new symptom is down to hormone changes. It's important to get anything that is adversely affecting us properly investigated.

What we don't want to happen is something being missed because the assumption was made that "it must be the menopause".

What fascinates me, though, isn't just what's happening biologically. It's how we respond to it.

Why, in a society which celebrates longevity, are we still so uncomfortable with women getting older?

Menopause has somehow become shorthand for decline. As though women reach a certain age and suddenly lose their relevance, attractiveness or ability to contribute.

Really? Someone should probably tell the millions of women running businesses, leading organisations, raising families, caring for relatives and generally keeping the world turning.

The idea that menopause signals the beginning of the end is not only outdated, it's absurd. And potentially damaging.

Research by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development has shown that menopausal symptoms can affect women's confidence, concentration and working lives.

For some, the consequences extend to career decisions such as changing jobs or actually stopping work.

Think about that. We spend decades developing skills, knowledge and experience, only to risk losing talented women because we haven't quite mastered the art of understanding a natural biological transition. Surely we can do better.

Then there's the extraordinary menopause marketplace.

Open social media and you'll find an endless parade of products promising to balance your hormones, banish your symptoms and transform your life.

Apparently, all you need is the right supplement, a mysterious pill or something involving an exotic plant you've never heard of.

If only biology were that obliging.

The truth is considerably more nuanced, and far more interesting.

Evidence-based guidance from Nice recognises that hormone replacement therapy (HRT) can be effective for many menopausal symptoms, alongside other approaches, including menopause-specific cognitive behavioural therapy for certain difficulties.



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But there is no universal solution. What works beautifully for one woman may be unsuitable or ineffective for another.

That's why evidence matters. Not celebrity endorsements, influencers, frightening headlines or the latest 'miracle cure'.

And while we're at it, could we stop treating menopause as though it's a secret women's club that nobody else is allowed to understand?

Partners, colleagues, friends and family members all benefit from knowing what's happening. Menopause education isn't about making everyone an expert in endocrinology. It's about replacing assumptions with understanding.

Of course, experiences differ enormously. Some women have a relatively uneventful transition. Others face symptoms that significantly affect their health, relationships and quality of life.

Neither experience makes someone more or less of a woman. And neither should become the standard against which everyone else is judged.

I was delighted to be asked to write Menopause is Really Strange because, quite frankly, it is.

The biology is fascinating. The symptoms can be bewildering. And the sheer variety of experiences makes it impossible to package menopause into one neat, convenient story.

But here's what I believe – we need good science, evidence, sensible conversations, individual choice and an embedded sense of the ridiculous to help us cope with the absurd.

Because menopause isn't a malfunction, an expiry date or a reason to disappear quietly into the background.



> Katie Day, author of Menopause is Really Strange. Left, one of the pages from the book

It's a stage of life and can be the opposite if we want!

In Japan they refer to the menopause transition as The Second Spring. It is seen as the start of the new beginning. And it is!

I was a 61-year-old post-menopause woman when I went back to education and did a masters at the University of Wales,Trinity St David, graduating (with a distinction) in 2024.

The older I get, the more visible (and busier!) I become. I have been set free from the tyranny of my hormones (that relentless 28-day cycle of disruption), and have blossomed into the woman I was always meant to be.

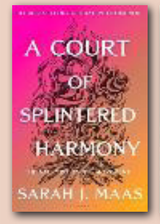
Who are you? What were those dreams you had as a young woman? Where have they gone? Can you dig them out, blow off the dust and re-examine them?

And perhaps the strangest thing about menopause isn't what happens to women's bodies. It's that, after all these years, we're still making such a fuss about talking about it.



■ **Menopause is Really Strange by Katie Day is out now, published by Jessica Kingsley Publishers.**

BOOK CHARTS

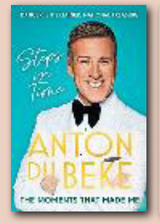




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