

Menopause – The Truth And The Surprise Ending



“Your boat is on a very choppy sea,” said Maryann knowingly. She is one of the select older and wiser women in my life, who got me through a turbulent period, back there.

I was recounting my story to her with my head in my hands. Life had suddenly become very confusing. Continuing the travel analogy, one minute I was cruising a marvelously lit highway in a 4×4. The next, without noticing, I had taken a wrong turn, I was bouncing down a dark dirt track in a banger.

“How did I get here,” I kept asking, “and,” (more to the point) “how can I get out? ” I was used to problem solving and multi-tasking with executive efficiency. As a journalist and broadcaster working in the fashion industry for over 30 years, while raising a family, running a business and campaigning for a variety of women’s issues in my daily practice, I had not signed up for this chaos. I quickly became anxious about what each new day would hold.

Every woman’s experience of the menopause is different. It’s a process of oestrogen and progesterone withdrawal and it will impact you in a unique way, because you are unique. Everyone I have spoken to laments the taboo nature of talking about what to expect, but perhaps we could all feel less ambivalent about

the forthcoming rite of passage if we knew menopause delivers a mind-blowing mid-life recalibration – one with a valuable message of growth and expansion.

For me it started with Titanic sinking feelings, which amplified the tension and discomfort of unresolved problems in my life. I was working hard in a career I loved but one minute I'd be up, the next I'd be wearing a cement straight-jacket hurtling to the bottom of a murky abyss accompanied by the voice of condemnation. "You really are finished," it would say.

Then there was the brain fug that convinced me I was going down with early dementia. Industry knowledge evaporated and I found myself unable to remember names, events and dates. My vocabulary shrank too. I would have to script myself to within an inch of my life to feign work-place competence. At home, both daughters would play ludicrous guessing games to get me to the end of my sentence and my youngest still reminds me of the day I forgot her name.

There were minimal physical affects however. I dutifully utilised insomnia to fit in extra work and I could tolerate the mild heat surges any day, but I know some women are driven to distraction by the intensity of night sweats and day-time hot flushes. I asked my mother and an older girl friend for insight. The words 'Plain Sailing' and 'out the other side in no time,' were bandied about. My GP said I sounded alright to her.

Meanwhile, I was medicating myself with generous amounts of Cabernet Sauvignon each evening. Anesthetising anxiety and panic attacks this way helped me limp on for a bit longer, clinging to the remnants of my previously ordered existence. Then I made an important decision. I stopped and stood still. "What do I need to understand?" I asked myself, having read enough to realise that female bodies are powerful intuitive barometers and mine was trying to tell me something. This is what I learned.

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The voice was right: I was finished. But an ending of the way I *had* been living would be a very good thing. Since leaving Uni I had put in very long hours building a career. As a dedicated parent and partner, I routinely put others first which meant racing through my life over-achieving and under-prioritising me. Exhausted and running on empty, letting go of my expectations of me would be the first positive move.

In menopause our body roars. All these years it has put up and shut up and now will not tolerate abuse or disrespect any longer. This commotion is simply a demand by your newly awake self for quality not quantity, for re-evaluation and re-balancing. Perhaps (when your time comes) you plan to put your hands over your ears? Think again, there is nothing so primal and immediate as your body's hormonal call to action.

I listened. I cut myself a break. As a result I'm no longer buckling under the stress of numerous projects running concurrently. I've made other changes too. I attend less time-wasting meetings, engage in much less unwaged work and collaborate more selectively. I'm thinking about the bigger picture as I celebrate my strengths and focus on the positives, while gracefully accepting my limitations... finally.

Now, for the first time, free of hands-on child-wrangling (the final child, birthed at 41, is 16) I'm in an intense relationship with myself. It's a joy, as the voice inside me grows stronger and more enquiring of new perspectives. I have grown my hair and grown out my colour. Shedding old ways and reframing people's perceptions of me, I left the People Pleaser behind. This has been an act of common sense.

"She's let herself go." A deliberately pejorative judgment reveals disapproval of maturing feminine appearance. The assertion that we could try harder to cling on to our youth supports every unrealistic beauty claim for anti-ageing balms and unguents and every marketing prompt for hair dye. I'm not

buying it. Let's get one thing straight: our gender has been groomed to self-objectify while beauty corporations grow rich and prosperous. In the process of consuming femininity as a set of unrealistic appearance goals, perhaps we have become blind to our internal exquisiteness and it's time to open our eyes.

I love fashion and self-styling and I have great fun with my image, but I don't play the patriarchal game of defining myself as decorative dressing in a man-made world. Maybe this has helped me to embrace the thrill and privilege of age with its intellectual and experiential gifts. I do believe that if we can stop focusing solely on exteriors and start embracing personhood, post-menopause becomes a position of status and composure.

For the record... We do not let ourselves go, just the flotsam and jetsam of an earlier existence.

The mirror becomes less important in the most fundamental way with the realisation that age does not equal atrophy and that we are not diminished by the passing of years. Instead we are intensified, our force amplified and our knowledge expanded. I'm not pretending life miraculously becomes uncomplicated and undemanding – challenges await every age and stage. Women, however, are great facilitators of others so in menopause we can and must reclaim our time and assets for ourselves. This is not selfish, this is smart.

The simple truth is that just like the adolescent surge of hormonal activity providing an exciting gateway to adult sexuality, menopause, (the process in reverse and in withdrawal) enables an additional and equally compelling portal into yet another selfhood. Step towards this doorway with confidence that once out the other side you will be renewed. Unlike me, you might prepare yourself mentally and physically beforehand by choosing less stress, more sleep, a healthy diet and supportive friends. You are not powerless, when you choose to surrender to something bigger than you.

Treat yourself with kindness and tolerance as the bio-chemical make-up of your body re-arranges itself. It will be an education so expect enlightenment.

[Post-menopause](#) needs renaming and reclaiming for what it truly is, a magnificent time of curiosity, creativity and rank. It's not surprising that some societies have been threatened by this natural female evolution to leader and mentor. In Pagan times of Goddess Worship, female tribal elders were respected and celebrated but with the introduction of Christianity came the brutal persecution of middle-aged women as witches and heretics. As feminist history explains, older women were simply channeling their menopausal force to intervene in an oppressive culture that undermined female wisdom and equality.

Hundreds of years later the quest for gender parity and fairness remains and growing old without self-reproach is one deliciously subversive act all women can embrace. Use everything the fashion and beauty worlds offer but bring these products into your life on your terms. There is no need for any woman to feel ambivalent, even fearful of ageing, in fact with the right physical and mental health supports, we can thrive. Having roused the ancient mystic, healer and tribal elder in me, I am on the journey towards Cronehood, and I love it.

Here are a few practical tips to get you through...

Getting physical and emotional support

I was introduced to bio-identical hormones and unlike the one-size fits all HRT from the NHS, BIH is a bespoke system that can be tailor-made for each woman. There is a cost but it was the best £500 I have spent. Dr. Lynette Yong read my blood test and prescribed DHEA. This hormone can be converted to whatever is needed by the body. My memory improved instantly. The progesterone cream I would later take would act as a calmer to alleviate anxiety and stress. I now pay a fraction of that to repeat my prescription every couple of months.

Systematic Kinesiology

Francesca Topolski uses muscle testing to tell which minerals the body is deficient in and can restore the body's balance with dynamic effects. My magnesium levels were low and my adrenal glands were stuck in fight or flight mode which in turn created insomnia (this would have also caused memory problems.) She helped me to make small changes with big impacts.

Counselling

Make it a post-menopausal woman and a wise old sage. Since menopause amplifies emotions, you will find unresolved issues become more urgent to look at. Be prepared to take responsibility for your own contribution to the areas in your life that aren't working and be ready to take action. My Maryann was recommended by a good friend – you need someone in your area who comes through the same channel. Ask for recommendations or look through a directory but check testimonials.

Reading

The Wisdom of Menopause by Dr. Christiane Northrup. This was my bible. Dr. Christiane gives advice on every stage your body will go through and how to alleviate the many symptoms. She cites medical studies in support of your femininity, intuition and power that will thrill you while combining spiritual and personal stories of herself and other women to help you get to calmer waters.

Bio Identical Hormones By Dr. Uzzi Reiss, will help you understand your symptoms and get involved in your meds!

The Crone – Women of Age, Wisdom and Power By Barbara G Walker, invaluable for your re-calibration – unlearn what you have learned.

Women's History of the World By Rosalind Miles. Celebrate women and their amazing grit, determination and ingenuity.

Fitness

Now is the time to begin Yoga or some other regular and calming activity. 20 minutes most mornings will create a new and focus headspace as well as a supple and strong body.

Clothes and fashion

I love dressing up more than ever. Quality and good design is key to promote modernity and sophistication. I love wearing clothes by emerging designers and I prioritise up-cycling and sustainability.

Beauty and skincare

Organic products like Liz Earl and Weleda keep my skin supple and perfume (my current favourite is Atkinsons 24 Old Bond Street) gives me a true lift.

Hair

Make sure you are working with a knowledgeable hairdresser to achieve your chosen natural tone. Matthew at Charles Worthington helped me over a period of years to grow out sections of coloured hair first and then create high and low lights around the crown to disguise change-over

Talk

Explain to your loved ones that you are evolving. My daughters understand the changes that have taken place and I'm happy they are now better prepared for their eventual menopause than I was. My husband was kind and considerate. Sharing my vulnerabilities and challenges strengthened my relationships and my honesty was appreciated.