

Self-Care — The Menopause: your stories

Three quarters of the teaching workforce are women*. Would you feel comfortable talking to your line manager about the impact of the menopause on your mental health and wellbeing?

If you're being affected by the peri-menopause, menopause, or anything else that's making your work day challenging, you can call our free and confidential helpline. Qualified counsellors are available 24 hours a day on **08000 562 561**.



Brain fog and sleep deprivation

Many women experience forgetfulness and difficulty concentrating and thinking clearly, often termed 'brain fog' during the menopause. Insomnia and sleep disturbance is another common symptom which can exacerbate the brain fog.

“Who has taken my memory and can I have it back please?”

Jenny, Teaching Assistant

Teaching assistant Jenny: “Who has taken my memory and can I have it back please? I was so on it all the time, never had to write stuff down and could be relied on to action something mentioned in passing during the frenetic chaos of the day. No longer; if I don't write it down, it won't happen. I've been open with colleagues and asked that they put a note on my desk or ping me an email if they want a guarantee I'll do something and luckily, they are all really supportive.”

For teacher Sophia the mental and cognitive impact of menopause was so much worse than the physical symptoms.

“I found myself unable to think of the right word for simple objects or emotions; we made a joke of it in class, but it was frustrating and embarrassing. I couldn't think clearly and found it hard to prioritise my never-ending to-do list, which led to a threat of capability from the headteacher.

“Like far too many teachers, my loyalty to my pupils and colleagues made me put work first when I should have prioritised self-care for all of our sakes. I finally broke down when trying to put my scarf on for playground duty. I couldn't remember how to tie it. I felt confused and disorientated. That was terrifying. I felt so frightened that I had developed symptoms of dementia. ‘Carrying on’ was no longer a priority. I had to step back and take care of myself.”

*<https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/workforce-and-business/workforce-diversity/school-teacher-workforce/latest#main-facts-and-figures>

Anxiety and low confidence

Pamela* was promoted to Head of Teaching and Learning and extremely focused when at 47 she began the perimenopause.

“I became increasingly anxious and overly self-reflective. This culminated in me doubting my ability to fulfil any part of my role and so I resigned from the management role asking to move back into what I felt at the time was the security of my teaching role.

“My anxiety did not abate and I had what can only be described as a breakdown in school. I pleaded with my doctor that “I just want me back” was met with a box of tissues and a very understanding ear. She reassured me I was having a difficult menopause and should begin HRT and after 11 days I was able to return to work.”

Unexpected and heavy periods

Teacher Sophia* had a nightmare whilst hosting a large multi-school event one evening: “I stood up between performers to introduce someone and realised blood was pouring down my leg. I had to clean myself up in the ladies’ loo enough to continue. At times like these, being a teacher is the worst job in the world, because you are expected to maintain a composed air of friendly control, under the glare of stage lights and the stares of hundreds of strangers.”



Further guidance

www.educationsupport.org.uk/media/iizekema/20-menopause-in-the-workplace-v2.pdf



If you are struggling with the menopause and your mental health and wellbeing is being negatively impacted, please call our free and confidential helpline on **08000 562 561**

“ A difficult subject for many women to discuss with a male line manager- maybe they are the ones who need educating and supporting in how to support staff experiencing the menopause. I am lucky that I work with female colleagues of a similar age that I can turn to.

Teaching Assistant



Have leaders and colleagues been supportive?

Pamela’s headteacher had a different experience of the menopause and was unsympathetic:

“My headteacher, although female and of similar age, has stated that she is having a very easy menopause and that it’s not difficult to manage. This does not make sharing concerns easy.

“I don’t discuss my symptoms with colleagues as I am generally perceived as the older, wiser teacher who others go to with their concerns and therefore don’t want to diminish that supportive role for them with my own anxieties.”

Sophie also felt unsupported by her headteacher but found colleagues more helpful:

“I’m a private person so I had said nothing at work, until one end-of-day meeting at which I arrived, mid-hot-flush and sat down, fanning myself distractedly. Across the table, the head said mockingly ‘Hot flush?’”

“I shared my symptoms with close colleagues, who were sympathetic and without their support I don’t know how I would have managed. But from the head, the expectation was that I would stoically ‘suck it up’ and soldier on. Not everyone understands.”

“Teaching is a physically, mentally and emotionally demanding job. Be kind to yourself. If I was to offer any advice, it would be to talk about menopause — it’s not a dirty secret. Confide in people you trust, let them help you and find ways to help yourself. It should not be dismissed or swept under the carpet and if we, as women in education, can’t enlighten others on how to manage it, who else will?”