



How to include menopause support in a whole school wellbeing strategy



The menopause is something every woman will go through in their lifetime. Think about how many women you have in your workforce. It will affect all of them! But it doesn't just affect them, the symptoms of the menopause can be so all encompassing that they are likely to have an effect on anyone that is working with, living with or a friend of someone going through it. And this needs discussing more. It will touch not just your staff but your pupils as well. The average age of the menopause is 51, but it can start as early as late 30s and carry on until their late 60s. I think it is fair to say that everyone in your school community will know someone who is going through the menopause at the moment!

Understanding menopause

It has been a taboo subject for so long, but it really should be seen as the natural thing that it is, the next stage in a woman's life. So you probably need to learn a bit more about the jargon and technicalities. The term menopause is meant to be used for women who have stopped ovulating and therefore have not had a period for a number of months, they have stopped being able to reproduce. Peri-menopause is the name given for the transition time when the hormones in women's bodies start changing as it gets ready to stop reproducing. This can last between 8-10 years and start as early as their late 30s. There are currently around 40 recognised symptoms of this stage. Common ones include anxiety, headaches, fatigue, memory loss and many that affect the sleep which makes matters worse. As it is still such a taboo subject many women do not realise that what they are experiencing is part of this process which can severely damage their self esteem.

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They are still worthy

Many women don't speak out about the issues they face whilst going through this time as they don't want to expose their insecurities and feel like they are not able to do their job properly. Think about the broken limb analogy. If a member of staff had a broken limb then time off would not be questioned, allowances would be made, hospital appointments facilitated with grace, and no judgment given. Women on the menopause journey deserve the same respect and understanding.

Education

Pupils

Menopause should now be part of secondary school curriculum, covered by the Physical Health and Mental Wellbeing section of the Relationships and Sex Education (RSE).

"the main changes which take place in males and females, and the implications for emotional and physical health."

It is important that topics like this are given across the pupil cohort, not just the girls so pupils grow up understanding what others around them are experiencing.

It may also be worth considering mentioning menopause and the stopping of periods when covering the subject of puberty to primary school pupils. It is an important part of the biology of women's bodies and I feel it is important point out that they will not be menstruating for their whole life.

"about menstrual wellbeing including the key facts about the menstrual cycle."

Staff

Education shouldn't be restricted to pupils though. As mentioned before, menopause is still a very taboo subject and most of your staff will not know much about it. The best way to break down stigmas is for your staff to be educated on both the biology of menopause and the emotional and mental factors that it presents. Normalising the menopause is hard to do without being dismissive of people's feelings and experiences, but helping people to understand that it is a normal thing that happens to everyone can go a long way to breaking down stigmas and making people feel a lot more comfortable talking about their experiences and therefore dealing with them better.

More help available on Twitter - #EdWellbeingGoals, #Teacher5aday #SaturdayEdChat @nourishworkplace



How to include menopause support in a whole school wellbeing strategy continued ...

Easy ways to help

There are many things schools can do to make women experiencing this a lot easier. They don't have to cost lots of money, they just require thought. The best thing to do it to ask your staff as your school environment is unique, consider a menopause working party or support group for your school or trust. But below are a few ideas to get you started.

Variable heating

Hot flushes are one of the most well known effects of the menopause. They can come out of no where and a hot stuffy classroom is not a pleasant place to be when one hits! Thankfully one thing the Covid pandemic has provided for us is free air flow and ventilation. It is important that this is available going forward too as it can really help menopausal women with their symptoms. Being able to easily open windows, have doors open, and turn down the heating are very easy things to check they are in place in all work areas. Not just classrooms, but offices and corridors too. If these are not possible, providing fans can help.

Time and facilities to make healthy choices

The menopause is a biological condition and healthy eating habits can go a long way to easing physical and mental symptoms. Although it is an individual's decision as to what they eat and drink during the day, this is heavily influenced by what facilities are available to them and the time they are given to do so. All staff should have access to things like a fridge and microwave to make it as easy as possible to make healthy eating choices. Their workday, timetable and workload should allow them to have a decent time for a proper break to ensure they have time to eat a healthy lunch and have a drink. Ask your staff what they do at lunchtime, are your systems and buildings allowing this?

Access to toilets

This seems like such a simple thing but so many education staff tell me they do not have access to toilets during the school day. Access can mean them being within proximity to their working space but also adequate time to go to the toilet.

This is vital as before menstruation stops it can often be incredibly heavy and women need to be able to change their sanitary products frequently. The urinary tract is also affected by the menopause and women need to go to the toilet far more frequently.

Many tell me they do not drink during the day as they cannot go to the toilet, this will have a direct impact on their physical health and mental capacity to concentrate and deal with every day stresses.

I recognise that it is not easy, or cheap to install new toilets around the school, but you can ensure that timetables allow staff to have a break. Having a culture of wellbeing within the school that takes into account everyone's needs should also encourage staff being helpful and understanding when it comes to covering a member of staff for them to use the toilet during the day.

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Flexible working

It is good practice to have a flexible working strategy for all staff but it can really benefit menopause support. Being able to take PPA at home, being flexible with time for doctors and hospital appointments are two very easy steps to take.

Going deeper with this, understanding that many women going through the menopause are spinning many plates; having a job, supporting their elderly parents, the workload of growing children and their demands on your time, all whilst dealing with major life changes. You can help by having flexible working strategies such as email policies that allow staff to work at times which suit them as that isn't always between the hours of 8am and 6pm.

Websites that can give you further support and guidance -

rockmymenopause.com, menopausesupport.co.uk, joweatherall.com,
cipd.co.uk/knowledge/culture/well-being/menopause, balance-menopause.com, themenopausecharity.org, womens-health-concern.org,
nhs.uk/conditions/menopause