

More support needed for women to beat menopause 'taboo' in the workplace

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Working through the menopause presents a major challenge for millions of women as they struggle to deal with symptoms, according to new research.

A study by The University of Nottingham found that the menopause is still treated as a 'taboo' subject in many workplaces – and that much more needs to be done to support women and help them cope with symptoms such as fatigue, poor concentration, hot flushes and depression.

Many women questioned for the study found they were not prepared for the arrival of the menopause, and nearly half had difficulties coping with symptoms at work. A similar number felt their job performance had been negatively affected, and nearly a fifth thought the menopause made managers and colleagues view them as less competent.

The menopause – part of the natural ageing process for women – occurs

between the ages of 45 and 55. In the UK the average age of menopause is 52. Of those people in the UK workforce aged over 50, forty-five percent are women – representing 3.5 million workers.

Associated symptoms can last from four to eight years, and include hot flushes, palpitations, night sweats and sleep disturbance, fatigue, poor concentration, irritability, mood disturbance, skin irritation and dryness. Women who took part in the study said the major impact of symptoms at work included tiredness, poor memory, feeling low/depressed, and decreased confidence.

Professor Amanda Griffiths conducted the research for the British [Occupational Health](#) Research Foundation. Findings are based on the views and personal experiences of more than 900 women in a range of sectors.

Professor Griffiths, of The University of Nottingham’s Institute of Work, Health and Organizations, said: “This study has made it clear that the menopause presents an occupational health issue for some women, and for a significant period of time.

“The years leading up to and after the menopause can be demanding and stressful for some women, and the majority of those who took part in this study felt they needed further advice and support. Our results showed that some women received considerable understanding and help from their colleagues and managers and it was greatly valued.

“However, such practices vary enormously. In many settings, there was very little awareness of the menopause as a potential occupational health issue – it was a ‘taboo’ topic. In such circumstances, women typically suffer in silence, dare not speak openly about their difficulties, and consequently cannot receive the understanding and support they need.

“Many of the participants in this research were embarrassed to disclose their problems or feared that their managers would be embarrassed if they raised the subject, particularly if those managers were younger than them or were male. Where women had taken time off work to deal with their symptoms, only half of them disclosed the real reason for absence to their line managers.”

Four overarching issues emerged from the research as areas for possible improvements at work:

- greater awareness of managers about the menopause as a possible occupational health issue for women
- increased flexibility of working hours and working arrangements
- better access to informal and formal sources of support
- improvements in workplace temperature and ventilation

Professor Griffiths stressed that it was important that women felt empowered to speak openly about their health issues and to ask for help. Employers can help in this process by communicating to their workforce that health-related problems such as the menopause are ‘normal’, she said.

Professor Griffiths added: “Organizations varied greatly in their willingness to be involved in this research. Whilst some immediately became engaged and saw its significance, others did not appear to consider this a topic worthy of serious consideration. Knowledge about the menopause was limited and there was often an apparent reluctance to probe a potentially sensitive area.

“However, it subsequently became clear when interviewing women that

the vast majority were delighted that this hitherto ‘taboo’ matter was being scientifically explored, and that information and guidance might become available for future generations of women.”

The Trades Union Congress (TUC) has today (March 8th) issued its own guidance on the menopause and work, informed by Professor Griffiths’ research.

Brendan Barber, General Secretary of the TUC, said: “We welcome the research published by the British Occupational Health Research Foundation. Despite the increasingly large number of older women in employment, the menopause is rarely seen as a workplace issue.

“There is no excuse for the silence, embarrassment, confusion and inaction around the menopause - something which all women go through. The health of [women](#) in later years depends very much on their health when they are working through the [menopause](#), and this report shows employers and unions can work together to do much more to protect them.”

More information: A summary ‘Guide for Managers’ based on the research can be found at: www.bohrf.org.uk/downloads/Workplace_Guide_for_Managers.pdf

Provided by University of Nottingham

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