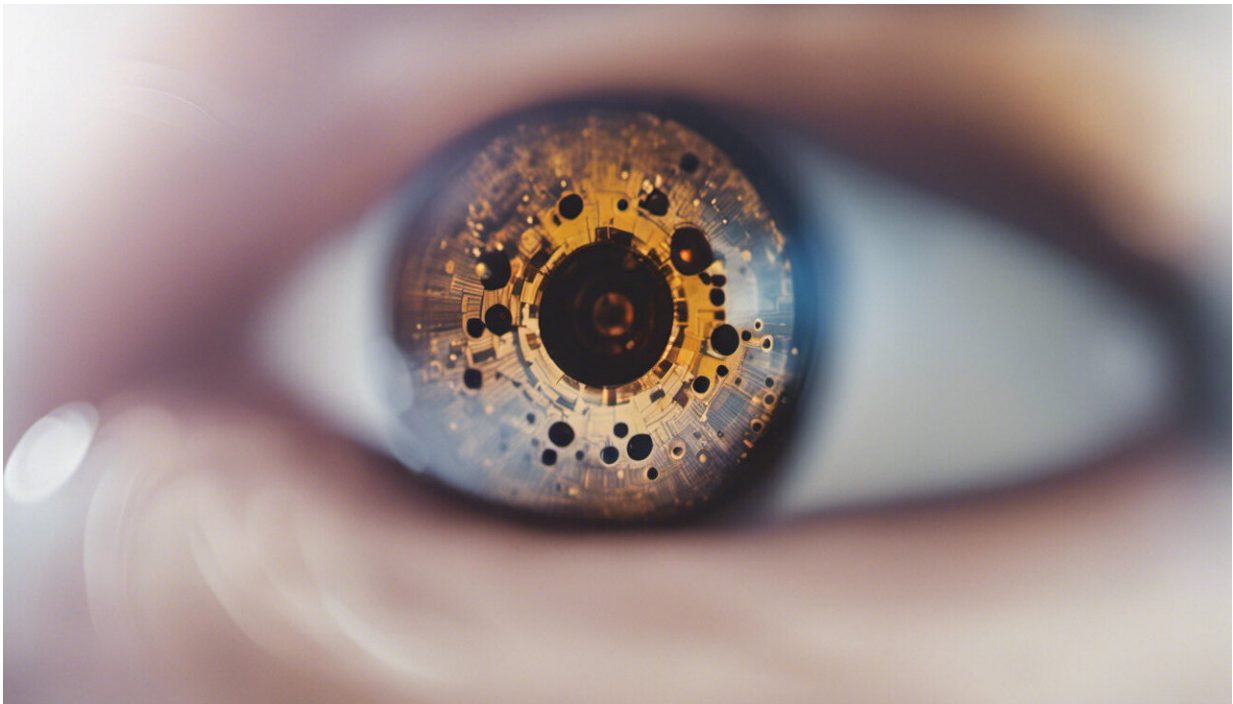


Why it's good to talk about women's health at work, according to research

September 14 2023, by Belinda Steffan



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

In the past couple of years, women's health and well-being in mid to later life has gone from being whispered about in the shadows to being the subject of [documentaries](#), [newspaper articles](#) and [breakfast TV discussions](#).

This "celebrity endorsement" of menopause is [normalizing and destigmatizing it](#) through increased awareness. It means we're talking about menopause more than ever before and it is also helping to [reduce the taboo nature](#) of menopause at work.

This is crucial since peri-menopause (leading up to menopause), menopause (the point at which one has not had a period for 12 months) and post-[menopause symptoms](#) can really change how women engage with work. Recent reports estimate 10% of women [leave paid work](#) and [14 million](#) working days are lost annually due to menopause symptoms.

My research into [supporting healthy aging at work](#) shows that when women have to [manage menopause symptoms](#) in the workplace, [informal social networks](#) are one of the most crucial ways to do so. This is the most direct way for women to feel supported in the workplace in terms of their broader health and well-being, but also during menopause specifically. I've found women often feel most supported by other women with a similar experience.

There is an ambiguity to women's health and well-being in mid to later life. In one [study of more than 1,000 women](#), 51% said they do not understand their menopause symptoms well enough to work out how to seek help. My research has also found that women quite often cannot untangle the symptoms of menopause from the effects of stress, interrupted sleep, anxiety, depression, aging and the general impact of midlife on the mind and body.

A workplace may also suffer from a culture of gendered ageism—discrimination against women and older women. This can prevent employees from entering into conversations around menopause. It could also drive a desire for less formality among the women who do want to have these conversations.

Informal social supports—chatting with colleagues or setting up informal groups to talk—are highly effective for women. But it does put the onus of maintaining health and well-being on to the woman herself rather than the organization, which ultimately gains from her productivity.

My research shows the need for organizations to explicitly offer menopause, health and well-being [support](#). The sustainability of support is also crucial when putting both informal social support and formal organizational support in place.

What should workplace social support look like?

Informal support could involve something like a lunchtime walk. This is a way to attract women to engage with a community of people at work with relevant experience. These can be advertised internally and require no formal workplace disclosure of menopause symptoms. Set at a regular time each month, these sessions can become a standard part of the working month. Word of mouth could also help to reach those who might be reluctant to join in a more formal activity.

On the other hand, formal organizational support could include awareness building around menopause, which can also build a sense of community. Workplace support, such as flexible working, is [a legal right](#), so women can reasonably expect their employer to provide resources to support awareness building. And this should extend to the workplace as a whole—menopause affects women but everyone should be aware and be able to talk about it.

For example, companies could offer webinars (50 minutes is often a good length, in my experience) featuring expert speakers discussing menopause or other health-related issues. This helps build evidence-based awareness. Webinars can be recorded so that people can watch in their own time, although live participation, particularly with a Q&A, is

desirable.

Of course, supporting well-being at work has been made all the more complex by post-COVID hybrid working practices. Indeed, my research has shown that the majority of women can manage menopause symptoms better at home, thanks to the "three Ts" of menopause support: time, temperature and toilets. If a menopausal woman has control over these aspects wherever she is working, it is likely to positively impact her overall experience of menopause.

Again, though, this puts the onus of managing health and well-being onto the person. The concern here is that structures that create an expectation that women cope better with symptoms through hybrid working run the risk of inadvertently reinforcing the taboo of menopause as something to be managed in the shadows.

Sustainable, individual support

Also, while organizations can and should develop health and well-being support initiatives in the workplace, it's important to remember that the experience of issues like menopause is highly individualized—women can experience many different kinds of symptoms, or sometimes none at all.

Successful and sustainable organizational support will rely on a range of factors including the industry (is it "masculinized"?) and whether the organizational culture is open to issues like health disclosure. Also, team culture must be supportive and line managers should ideally be approachable and knowledgeable.

Workplace support systems for [women's health](#) and well-being that reach each person are more likely to be sustainable. Organizations offering positive [menopause](#) stories, and senior, visible and credible role models

will take an important step forward for [women's](#) workplace health and well-being. Progress in this area relies on champions for change—not just on TV but in every [workplace](#).

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