

The Next Chapter



Women's Stories about Menopause

THE NEXT CHAPTER

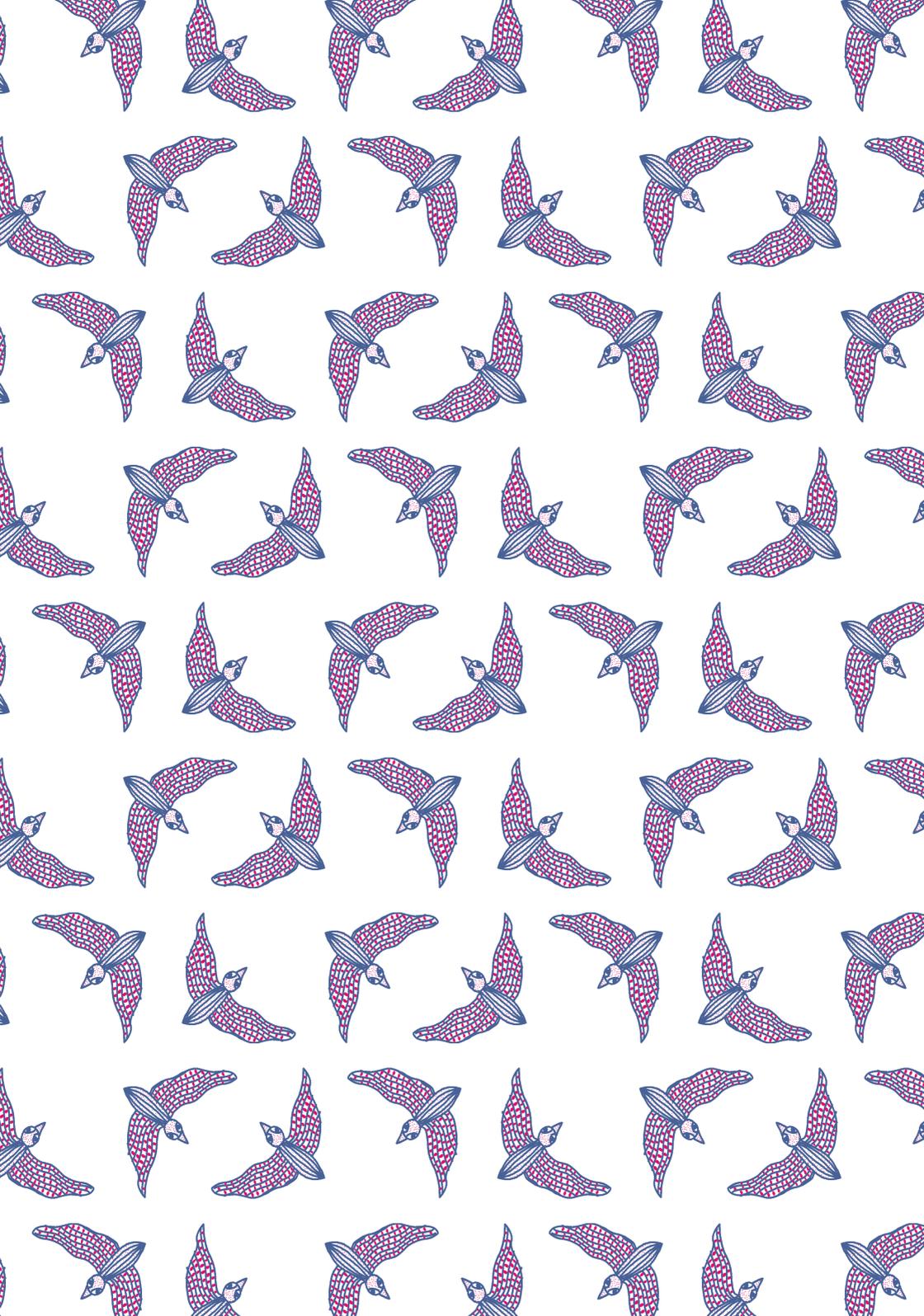
By 2025, the number of women who have experienced menopause is expected to rise to 1.1 billion worldwide. Women in the prime of their lives; women running homes, families, businesses and even countries.

Despite being a natural change in the lives of roughly half the population, the topic of menopause often remains shrouded in stigma and fear of judgment – around aging, attractiveness, fertility and even relevance in the workplace. Too many women suffer in silence – a silence that persists and continues from one generation to the next.

It's time to change the narrative around menopause from something to be dreaded to a profound opportunity for self-care, personal growth and a moment when life can be fulfilling.

The stories in this book are real-life accounts of menopausal transition from women in India, China, Brazil and Mexico.

From the bleak to the uplifting, each woman's experience is as unique as they are and shatters the silence around this long-misunderstood life stage.



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The collection of stories in this book has been initiated and funded by Abbott, the global healthcare company.

At Abbott, we believe that health is vital to every human being's ability to live a full life. And the first step toward leading a healthier life is knowledge. Yet there are some things we don't talk about when it comes to our health and bodies. Menopause is one of them. All women go through it at some stage in their lives, yet there is often little visibility given to the subject.

This book and the site www.WomenFirst.com/menopause/TheNextChapter seek to change this – to break through this silence, to drive conversations, to create understanding – by shining a light on authentic testimonials of menopause experiences from across four different countries.

The menopausal transition can be extremely challenging, impacting women and those around them. Abbott is working with healthcare professionals to change how we address women experiencing menopause and help empower them to understand this stage of life better. This includes the physical and mental changes they can experience, so that they, and their loved ones, can embrace what lies ahead.

The Next Chapter brings together unique stories that offer valuable insights into menopause. From the impact of hormonal changes on relationships and careers to the toll on health and self-esteem, each woman's unique story voices the hidden worries and surprising joys that can accompany this new stage in life.

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Women's Stories about Menopause

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www.WomenFirst.com/menopause/TheNextChapter



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Authenticity of the stories: The writing and publication of this book have been financed by Abbott, and the women featured in this collection were chosen independently of Abbott. Writers from Brazil, China, India and Mexico selected and interviewed women going through or having gone through menopause to document their stories in this book and bring them to life. Only first names of those who have lent their stories to this book have been included in order to allow them the ability to speak freely.

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To the women who courageously share their stories in this book:

*May your words inspire others to live their fullest lives
and embrace the next chapter.*



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INTRODUCTION

By 2025,¹ the number of women who have experienced menopause is expected to rise to 1.1 billion worldwide. Women in the prime of their lives; women running homes, families, businesses and even countries. Despite being a natural change in the lives of roughly half the population, the topic of menopause often remains shrouded in stigma and fear of judgment – around aging, attractiveness, fertility and even relevance in the workplace. Too many women suffer in silence – a silence that persists and continues from one generation to the next.

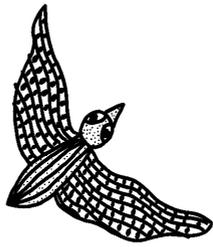
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The stories in this book are real-life accounts of menopausal transition from women in India, China, Brazil and Mexico. From the bleak to the uplifting, each woman's experience is as unique as they are and shatters the silence around this long-misunderstood life stage.

If you're currently going through menopause, or apprehensive about going through menopause, or know someone who is, we hope these pages will reassure you that you're not alone and empower you to seek the support you may need. Menopause should not be experienced in silence, so why not share *The Next Chapter* with the people close to you – it might even open a door to share your own experiences. Together, we can break the taboo around menopause, one story at a time.

1

Relationships



RELATIONSHIPS

Hormones govern everything, from our mood and energy levels to our confidence and libido. It's no wonder, then, that changes around menopause can affect the way we relate to others.

Often, our loved ones feel the tremors of this change before we do. Children might notice mood swings, partners can sense a dip in desire, and close friends notice an emotional shift.

Low mood and anxiety – both common symptoms of menopause – can set in so gradually that we don't always recognize the signs. At home, physical changes can make intimacy less appealing, which can become an issue. In the workplace, fatigue and a crushing loss of confidence can impact professional performance.

Too many women don't speak out about the changes they're experiencing, which creates isolation. Loved ones can struggle too – one survey has found that 38 percent of partners feel helpless when it comes to supporting their partners through menopause, leading to arguments in a third of couples.²

The women who share their stories in this chapter illustrate just how important it is to talk about the emotional impact of mid-life hormonal changes, so that all women experiencing menopause can ask for the support they may need.

JESSICA, 51

Mexico City, Mexico

If 51 percent of the world's population goes through menopause, why is it such a taboo? I think about this more and more. Who decided that it was uncomfortable to talk about a process that all women go through? Hopefully this silence will soon end.

At 43, I began to suffer from tinnitus.* Whoever has had it knows the hell it is; the incessant buzzing that stays with you day and night. This type of problem really tests a couple's limits: the person who has it can't stop complaining, and the other person gets fed up. Little did I know, these were my first menopausal symptoms. Then came insomnia, weight gain and impatience.

I went to countless doctors to help treat my tinnitus. I begged them to give me something to let me sleep better and calm my overwhelming anxiety. In none of my appointments did I feel like they actually treated me as an individual. I got the impression that for each woman who arrived with menopausal symptoms, the doctor had already decided what to tell her, like we were all part of some common denominator.

After an exhaustive search, I found a clinic that saved my life: a place where doctors with different specialties work together and combine modern and traditional medicine. That, and a group of English women on Facebook whom I luckily stumbled upon, were the only things that managed to help me. Reading other stories made me realize that I wasn't crazy, that there were other women

*Tinnitus is the perception of sound when no corresponding external sound is present.

who felt the same as me. I also realized how lagging Mexico is in this matter: in the United Kingdom, for example, there is momentum toward incorporating menopause into labor laws.³

Today, my symptoms have improved, and I would like to help other women know they are not alone. I opened a support group in Mexico so that we have something similar to the English group that helped me so much. I would love for us to form a tribe and stop menopause from being such a taboo.

PRISHA, 58

Bangalore, India

My symptoms began a few years ago, soon after my daughter returned home from graduating college. We weren't used to living in the same house anymore and I was moody and irritable, snapping at her the whole time.

My daughter said I wasn't myself and tried to talk to me about it. My periods had stopped, but I didn't make the connection until I eventually saw my doctor. Menopause – of course. The mood swings, the lack of sleep, the lack of energy – it all started to make sense.

Suddenly, I found myself grieving that I hadn't had more kids. After my husband left, I never wanted another man. I was feeling pretty happy alone – but then regrets started to creep in.

I eventually broached the subject of menopause with my daughter. It felt awkward at first, but she was completely unfazed. She'd had a feeling something was up and was really supportive.

She started helping out around the house, without me even asking, and we talked about things I'd never shared before. The precious time together made everything feel so much better. The depression gradually started to lift and my energy began to return. I stopped focusing on regrets and realized how blessed I am to have such a caring daughter. Our bond is stronger than ever, and I'm beginning to feel like myself again.

FERNANDA, 55

Real del Oro, Mexico

Three years ago, my mother died and at that moment my menstruation became irregular. Then it disappeared completely. Sometimes I think that the pain of losing her somehow caused my menopause.

My symptoms during perimenopause were few and did not last long. At first, I didn't know what was wrong with me. I remember I was at a supermarket where they turn the air conditioning very high, and I still felt unbearably hot. I started to sweat and asked my friends if they were also dying of the heat like me, but they looked at me like I was crazy. "It seems to me that menopause is knocking at your door," one of them told me. Indeed, it was. I started to have really bad night-sweats; I even had to change my clothes a few times during the night. But after six months, these hot flashes suddenly disappeared and I felt like myself again.

Despite the fact that I haven't menstruated for three years, my friends say that I'm pre-menopausal. "*Agárrate*," they say, or "hold on for dear life", because the other menopause is just around the corner. I believe them. My sister is 78 years old and her hot flashes are so strong that she can't even do her chores. Her mood swings are so severe that no one can stand her (although, to tell the truth, she has always been quite grumpy). We'll see if I get them too.

ALEXANDRINA, 51

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Men should be sensitive and supportive toward women going through menopause. Sadly, that's not always the case – particularly in my household. My husband, for example, thinks it's funny when I start to sweat. Usually, when we're watching TV, I'll throw off the blanket and begin to fan myself frantically. And he'll howl with laughter like he's enjoying every moment.

I usually retort by reminding him that he'll soon have symptoms of his own. Male menopause is totally a thing!

To be fair, the “brighter” side of his attitude toward my menopausal symptoms is that he hasn't been bothered by my mood swings or night sweats. Although I do sometimes wonder if his laughter is a way to mask feelings of disgust. I don't think so, but you never know.

It's been a year since my last period (one definite positive) and I haven't had any vaginal dryness. Lack of libido? Well, it wouldn't be fair just to blame menopause. I've been married for 25 years – after all this time together, I guess it's normal to experience a drop in sexual desire and activity. We've also raised a son – who, by the way, has been far more supportive than his father, regarding my menopausal issues. The millennial-man revolution? Credit to their mums!

CI RU, 48

Shanghai, China

It began with terrible headaches. I felt dizzy whenever I had my period. Then came the hot flashes and sweats. I can't wear too many clothes now, because I get really hot and my face turns red. All things considered, my symptoms aren't quite as bad as a few of my friends' – some of them soak right through their clothes!

We talk about these things among ourselves, but never with our families. I can't remember my mother ever mentioning menopause – she was always so busy that it probably never even crossed her mind. We indeed never discussed it.

As a little girl, I heard people saying that women would become unreasonable and hysterical when reaching a certain age, and I knew periods stopped around then. My flow got much lighter – but the rest all came as a surprise.

I have much less energy these days and get annoyed very easily, but I try to keep my emotions under control. To be honest, all I really want to do is rest.

I don't enjoy Chinese New Year parties anymore – I can't cope with the noise and bustle. And I get buzzing noises in my head when the TV is too loud. Temperature is a problem, too. I often feel I can't breathe in my relatives' homes – too hot and suffocating.

I'm definitely less sociable now. I don't see as much of my friends and rarely hang out with workmates. I'm more distant on the phone, too. I take longer to reply to messages and sometimes don't respond at all. I prefer my own company these days – maybe that's not such a bad thing.

ANA, 42

Oaxaca, Mexico

My mother never had a conversation with me about the relationship women should have with their own bodies. What she did teach me was that being attractive is fundamental to being a woman. For me, being a woman has always involved pain: menstruation, my first sexual relationship, giving birth, a couple of gynecological surgeries and, recently, menopause.

Three years ago, when I was 39, just one year after my divorce, my doctor found that I had fibroids and removed my womb and one ovary. Five months ago, I began to experience depression, tiredness, weight gain and insomnia. I didn't feel well at all. I was diagnosed with pre-menopause a few weeks ago and, incredible as it may seem, the news gave me some peace. I was relieved to know I wasn't crazy.

In my youth I was very sexually active – I've had more than multiple partners. Today, though, I don't resort to sex as a way to find intimacy. I want my menopause to dignify who I am. I remember the teachings of my Toltec* guru and Kabbalah** teacher: "Menopause is embracing the wise woman who emerges from you." I have relied on the Kabbalah in this process, and because of it I now understand that I exist for myself only and for no one else.

*Mesoamerican civilization that was located in central Mexico.

**Esoteric teachings that form the foundation of mystical religious interpretations within Judaism.

AARUSHI, 49

Mumbai, India

I've always been very affected by hormones. I used to have bad premenstrual symptoms such as cramps when I was younger. I had postpartum depression. So, when the frequency of my periods started to change, I was worried. I asked my gynecologist if it would affect my ability to get intimate, and she said, "You might notice vaginal changes and less eagerness to get intimate, but I can't say for sure, because everyone is different."

My husband and I have a very loving relationship and healthy intimacy, so it was important to me to know how this might be affected.

I'd definitely noticed some dryness, but the gynecologist recommended a treatment, which really helped.

There have certainly been times when I've lost interest in getting intimate, despite my husband's affection and patience. He is really understanding, though, and empathetic to my moods. We've built deep compatibility over the decades and menopause has only strengthened our relationship. I'm lucky, as I've seen a side of him that's even more compassionate.

AURELIA, 51

São Paulo, Brazil

I knew nothing about perimenopause until the news slapped me in the face. I was 37 years old, and, despite taking contraceptives for more than a decade, I had decided to get pregnant. My husband really wanted to have children, and we both agreed it was the right time to start a family. It felt like we were about to start a new chapter in our lives – and then the hot flashes began.

The doctor couldn't have been blunter. "The hormone tests show you're in menopause," she announced, looking up from her screen. "You can't have children."

I left the clinic devastated and never went back. I told my husband the news, adding that he was free to pursue his desire of becoming a father with another woman. I felt like I'd failed him.

I'm happy to say he didn't take me up on my offer, but that didn't mean our relationship was without issues. My forties were burdened with symptoms, including zero libido, which really shook our marital harmony. I also had hot flashes, night sweats, insomnia and irritability. It was a physical and emotional rollercoaster. Eventually, I went to see another gynecologist who prescribed me Menopausal Hormone Therapy.

As I began to feel more balanced, my husband and I started to consider adopting a child. Unfortunately, though, we ended up facing extensive and disheartening bureaucracy. I began to research in vitro fertilization and ended up consulting a specialist. To our surprise, he assured us I could have a baby with another woman's egg and my husband's sperm. I was thrilled with the possibility and

promptly agreed. The egg wouldn't be mine, but the child would be!

I joined a long waiting list for egg donation (which was shorter than the adoption one). When I turned 44 and was approaching the age limit, a donor came forward. My husband cried when the doctor called with the good news!

The pregnancy was wonderful and I gave birth to a beautiful boy. He is now a healthy and smart seven-year-old – while I'm a 51-year-old mom. Sometimes I look at him and wonder how incredible science is! I never would have imagined that I could do all of this during menopause. We are a small happy family – and our brand-new chapter is here at last.

XIMENA, 44

Mexico City, Mexico

My sex life is dead; dead as a doornail. I'm only 44, but I've already gone through menopause and I am not interested in sex. I have a wonderful husband who doesn't care for it either, which makes things so much easier. Menopause has left me with zero libido, and age has left him with erectile issues; so we've found ways to be intimate that do not involve intercourse. There is cuddling in bed, going out to eat, watching a movie, holding hands and talking. Sex isn't everything!

Having a family isn't everything either. My husband and I have decided not to have children. It was a decision we would have probably made even before I went through early menopause. I feel that we have made decisions that have been right for us and only us. We are happy and live a very full life.

JING WEN, 44

Guangzhou, China

I haven't told a soul that I'm going through menopause. I don't want people to think I'm getting old and can't run my business. Some days I'm so forgetful that my husband yells at me, saying I can't think properly.

My whole body is giving off warning signs, with aches and pains everywhere, particularly in my legs and back. I started to watch well-being videos and realized that my mood swings and insomnia are symptoms of menopause, not stress. I feel like my body is not balanced correctly, but I can't talk to a doctor.

Besides, my husband insists that stress is the problem, not hormones, and that treatments are just scams.

My anxiety and mood swings are now improving. My hot flashes are getting better during the day, and even at night, when I used to wake up drenched in sweat.

My husband refuses to talk about the changes I'm going through and the only person I can talk to is my son.

Sadly, menopause is still such a taboo. Raising public awareness might encourage more people to speak out. Then, maybe women like me could get the treatment we need.

LYNETTE, 74

Mexico City, Mexico

I can hardly remember menopause. I need to make an effort and go back to that time and that age. I don't have a faulty memory; I can remember everything my grandchildren tell me. It's just that menopause wasn't a breaking point in my life story.

If I try hard to think about it, the emotion that strikes me is feeling betrayed. Not by my body, but by the women around me. Not one of them ever talked about how bad they felt. It's like when you are a new mom and all the other moms around you say their babies slept through the night from day one, and you sit there in the wee hours of night with a crying baby, wondering what's wrong with you. Nothing is wrong with you. What's twisted is that not one of those women could admit how hard it was and all that they really did to carry on with their lives. Women always pretend to be fine. We don't hurt, we don't need help, and nothing can stop us.

SHU HUA, 53

Shanghai, China

I had never thought much about menopause. As I was growing up, it wasn't discussed openly among my grandmothers, aunts and mother. So, I didn't really know what to expect. In fact, I believed that my grumpy moods were caused by aching joints, and insomnia due to worrying about work and family issues.

When I found myself snapping at my husband and daughter over silly things, I assumed it was just because I was tired, from too little sleep. So, I took some traditional herbal remedies; teas and infusions helped for a while too.

It wasn't until the hot flashes began that I realized what was actually happening. A friend saw me getting all red and uncomfortable one day and asked if I was going through menopause. We talked about our symptoms, which were pretty much the same. I wondered why I had never seen her looking sweaty and irritable, and she told me that her doctor had put her on Menopausal Hormone Therapy (MHT).

By then, I was feeling miserable. I went to my friend's doctor and told him about my problems. He explained my symptoms were caused by a drop in my hormone levels and suggested that MHT could help.

Although my friend was doing well on MHT, I was quite nervous. I didn't expect much in the way of results, particularly as the doctor mentioned possible side-effects, like bloating and nausea. Thankfully, they're really mild in my case – a small price to pay for bringing peace and happiness back into my life.

MARIANA, 43

Mexico City, Mexico

I entered menopause very early, when I was 34. I'd just given birth to my third daughter and had trouble getting up to feed her at night. I felt a peculiar exhaustion that was different from the one I had with my first two children. That, and the hot flashes that followed, were the first indicators that something was changing in my body. Then came migraines, insomnia, weight gain, mood swings, memory problems and low libido. I went from being a bullet train to a slow, coal locomotive. I just wasn't myself anymore.

After having my first child, it took me many years to be able to get pregnant again. It was a hard process; I had endometriosis and premature ovarian failure. I underwent several procedures, including fertility treatments that helped me have two more children. I think all of this accelerated my menopause.

Due to concern about my risk of thrombosis (tendency to develop blood clots), no doctor dared to give me Menopausal Hormone Therapy. The symptoms of my menopause became unbearable, yet doctors would shrug their shoulders and send me on my way. I felt desperate and misunderstood. Luckily, nine months ago, I found a doctor who agreed to treat me. She told me that a lack of hormones from such an early age could cause heart problems and other issues that are equally dangerous or even worse than thrombosis. Today, I feel a little better. I recognize myself more and even feel some sparks of sexual desire.

In the mirror, I see that my 43-year-old body looks like my 70-year-old mom's. And I no longer find the energy to be the

mother I was with my eldest son, which fills me with guilt. But I do like to think about Woody Allen's line to Diane Keaton in *Manhattan Murder Mystery*: "Save a little craziness for menopause!"

Only with a tad of madness can I find the humor to be patient and laugh at myself. I'm like the little train in black-and-white cartoons: I'm moving forward, but it's harder to get started. "Put a little more coal in the locomotive," I tell my husband some nights.

HUI ZHONG, 46

Shenzhen, China

Sometimes I feel consumed by negative emotions. I nag my husband, get mad at my kids, and I'm irritated at work. These outbursts can sometimes last an hour. Of course, I apologize afterward and explain that it's menopause. But it's pushing my girls away, even though they do their best to be patient and not set me off.

Now, I'm trying to control my rage by writing down my feelings, getting them out on paper, instead of blasting the people in my life. It's not fair to them and makes me feel miserable.

MEI, 55

Nanjing, China

When my menopause began, soon after I turned 50, I honestly had no idea what to expect. Early on, I didn't realize it was causing my joint pains – I thought I was just getting older. Then the hot flashes arrived, but they were fairly mild.

I tried a mix of herbal remedies, infusing them to drink as tea. They definitely helped. However, as I moved into the second year of menopause, I started to get dreadful mood swings. My sour temperament was affecting both my husband and me psychologically, and it felt like my marriage was at stake.

I went to see a Western doctor, who told me about Menopausal Hormone Therapy (MHT). Although I had not heard much about it before, by then I was desperate and would have done absolutely anything to save my relationship. I left the doctor's office doubtfully clutching a prescription, wondering if it would make a difference.

I'm happy to say that it did – in fact, the results were amazing. In a matter of weeks, my hot flashes and joint pains vanished completely, and my mood became more stable. In fact, I recommended MHT treatment to a friend who was also going through menopause.

I feel like myself again. My marriage is back on track, and I'm much happier – as is my husband!

EMILIA, 64

Guanajuato, Mexico

I had a hysterectomy* at 36 and a decade later came sadness. It showed up without warning, while I was working at a hospital.

I was caring for someone dear to me, who required special assistance. I remember getting home, locking myself in my room and crying for hours. “I’m deeply sad about my patient,” I thought. But I also cried about my fish: how beautiful they looked in their tank. Anything was a reason to cry. Everything became overwhelming.

That’s how I knew it was menopause. Soon after came hot flashes, dreadful sweats and a bad mood. I wanted someone, anyone, to come to my house so that I could yell at them. I was angry and wanted to let it all out.

I started to remember conversations I had with my mother. Stories my older friends told me. It was like having an awakening, an internal shift, and I steered my thoughts toward a different direction. I programmed myself to endure whatever would come, without hurting my loved ones.

Menopause is a process one needs to overcome, but also to experiment with, to enjoy. That’s why I didn’t want to undergo any treatment, even now, when I have a thyroid condition and hot flashes are here for good. If I get too warm, I have my fans! I’ve bought them in every single color. I feel feminine and elegant.

*A hysterectomy is the surgical removal of the uterus.

If I get drenched in sweat, I enjoy taking a bath, changing clothes and feeling renewed.

I try to stay busy. It's how I keep gloom at bay. I sing, I take folk-dance lessons, I work out, I dress up or plan a trip.

Menopause has taught me a lot. To love myself the way I am, to enjoy what my body feels. Some may think that I am mad, and they might be right, but it's a joyful madness.

DIANA, 69

Brasilia, Brazil

At the peak of my menopause, the sweats became so bad that I had to change my clothes immediately, even in the middle of the night. My libido was also non-existent. This definitely affected my relationship, but, to be honest, things were already emotionally frayed, which didn't help my sex drive.

Our marriage eventually ended, but it wouldn't be fair to blame the hot flashes or the moods for its collapse. Things were already deteriorating before the symptoms began, but I guess they did help tip the relationship over the edge. When it did finally end, I was depressed.

I took a while to recover from the breakup, but as soon as the symptoms disappeared, a few months after my last period, I felt ready for a new beginning. Yes, it was a relief! Today, looking back at the way things happened, I understand it is just another phase of life and I guess it wasn't as bad as some people say, though it wasn't a walk in the park either. Menopause is a natural cycle, with ups and downs, just like menstruation.

I'm now 69 years old, feel very well and enjoy life. I'm interested in Buddhism, long walks, cooking, reading and studying. I have become less attached to relationships and to youth. I already felt my age before menopause, as I was the eldest working with a team of youngsters. You could say that I had my aging crisis at 40! These days I feel younger and more energized. In fact, I volunteer at a non-governmental organization that focuses on helping elderly people. It feels like there's no stopping me.

RIYA, 60

Kolkata, India

I have a group of six girlfriends. Some of us have known each other since school, while others have joined our gang over time. Some are wives of the boys we grew up with. They've been an immense support.

Yes, our symptoms have all been different, but none of them experienced the debilitating physical symptoms I did. Still, my friends got me when I was down and out. They understood why and where it was coming from. We're more or less the same age, so we also managed to help each other through it. On a bad day, I would meet one of them for coffee or tea to chat – it made a big difference.

I feel like menopause is something only women who have gone through it can truly understand. Many in my group had depression, some much worse than I did. We would share our methods of coping and sometimes just have a good old rant. Their support got me through.

MARIANA, 50

Puebla, Mexico

Three years ago, doctors found a fibroid in my womb. I had surgery in a public women's clinic in Puebla, where, because of my age, they decided it was better to remove the entire organ. The doctors told me that after the operation I would no longer experience periods or other symptoms.

Not even three months passed until my hot flashes began. Some days I woke up hot and dizzy at dawn. I knew friends who had already been through this, and they confirmed that these symptoms were indeed related to menopause.

In my family, menopause was never an open topic. I do remember my mom's hot flashes, but she didn't talk about it. I have four children, three of them are male, and I wouldn't dare tell them what I'm going through; I think they would feel so uncomfortable. Maybe my oldest daughter would listen to me, but she has never had the time to talk about it. I know that menopause is an uncomfortable subject, but I don't understand why. It definitely shouldn't be.

IVONNE, 60

Saltillo, Mexico

Lots of things happen to women and sometimes we don't even know why. I'm a nurse, which has helped a little. That's how I knew it was menopause when I was 50.

It began with irregular periods: two months on, one off. Then came hot flashes. I felt like I was burning, drenched in sweat! I lived in the tropical, seaside city of Zihuatanejo back then, so the weather wasn't helpful. I spent many a night glued to the A/C. By the time I went to bed, I was frozen, but felt no cold.

I didn't become irritable, like many of my friends did, but my libido dropped. I also experienced vaginal dryness. My gynecologist prescribed a supplement to ease my symptoms.

Far from creating more problems, this new stage helped reframe my relationship with my partner. We discovered all that united us, beyond sex. I love that things are different now. Before, we used to think life ended when menopause began. Women used to change the way they dressed and became matronly. Not now.

When our ovaries stop producing certain hormones it doesn't mean that we are in decline; it doesn't strip us of our feminine essence. I learned that when I was young. I had friends twice my age. Their full and active lives taught me that life doesn't end with menopause. It's not a time restricted to babysitting grandkids.

We sometimes look for any excuse to be unhappy. I didn't let menopause become one for me. I'm still working and I feel full of life, ready to begin new projects.

MEI HUI, 46

Beijing, China

My life is lonelier because I don't see my friends as much as I used to. With menopause, I'm scared about overreacting and upsetting them by losing my temper. So, I've withdrawn quite a lot and don't really reach out to them anymore, except for a couple of really close friends.

I've explained that I'm going through the change, and they've been really kind. I spend more time alone now, doing things that I find bring me peace instead of chatting with friends and family. I'm enjoying my solitude, with more time for hobbies and finding ways to calm my mind, such as listening to music.

Long ago, I talked briefly about menopause with my mother-in-law when she showed some symptoms. I was shocked when my father-in-law told me that men also go through a kind of menopause.

While I realize that I can't expect everyone to think and act the same way as me, this sometimes makes me mad, especially at work. If I think somebody is doing something wrong, I have to stop myself from telling them straight out. Instead, I've learned to take a moment to calm down and talk to them more politely, using a gentler tone.

There's an acceptance that comes with menopause – I no longer care about how other people perceive me. Also, I don't worry much about gossip and things that are none of my business. Shedding things that aren't related to me is almost a spiritual process. I'm much less stubborn too.

While I'm a natural problem-solver, I don't think menopause is a problem to be solved. On the contrary, while the natural hormonal changes that come with it can wreak havoc, if you manage to find a way to work around them, the experience can help you be stronger. It's a matter of regulating symptoms so that you can get through this phase as smoothly as possible.

Of course, it would help if people talked about it more. I don't know why they don't. It's an inevitable stage of life for all women, sooner or later, and nothing to be afraid of.

2

Aging and Beauty



AGING AND BEAUTY

Estrogen doesn't just affect our fertility – it shapes our bodies, the texture of our skin and the luster of our hair. Above all, it affects our self-confidence. As levels of this all-important hormone dwindle, the signs of aging become more apparent – our metabolism slows, our skin and hair alter, and how we see ourselves can change forever.

The physical symptoms that menopause brings can be challenging and are all too often accompanied by a painful stigma. There is a sense that no longer being fertile means that we are somehow less valuable in society's eyes, less attractive, less worthy of love.

As the women who share their stories in this chapter can attest, beauty goes beyond our physical reflection – residing not in the mirror but our own sense of worth. Together we can change the narrative, become our own positive role models, and look and feel great long after menopause.

Women live around a third of their lives in menopause – so let's embrace the freedom this life stage brings and liberate ourselves from society's narrow ideals of beauty.

REEVA, 53

Asansol, India

When I was younger, the idea I had of menopause meant flabby and old. To me, the word was synonymous with decay. I didn't like thinking about aging, as it upset me so much – and I certainly didn't want to talk about it!

I guess I believed that when you don't talk about something – illness, for example – it's like it doesn't exist. I also think that this avoidance has something to do with my own personality and the taboo that still surrounds menopause.

I believe in the manifestation of words. So, I avoid naming things that I want to avoid manifesting. I didn't have anything to say about menopause because I didn't feel the full range of symptoms, such as hot flashes or insomnia – the good old-fashioned ones that my female friends mostly complained about. I had heard many negative comments about menopause from them, which made me feel uncomfortable.

All of these negative comments made me worry so much. I was terrified by the sheer thought of these various symptoms: hot flashes, vaginal dryness, hair loss, hair thinning, insomnia and extreme tiredness. I think that subconsciously I wanted to ignore the fact that I was aging, although my body was showing it.

Ironically, over the last couple of years, I had already been in the perimenopausal stage. In my early fifties, when my periods started to become more and more irregular, I could no longer deny the fact that my age was catching up with me. Now, sometimes I feel like crying, and then suddenly get happy. While in the past

I didn't think much about things or experience a lot of anxiety, I have now become very moody, with rapid mood swings.

I become sad from one minute to the next. Also, I surprise myself, shouting at my husband or daughter. A part of me knows that it is wrong to do so, of course, and this triggers me to think about it and reflect on why I am doing this.

While my mood swings are significant now, before hitting menopause I was always steady. One doctor had told me that I would feel these things, but I have been denying it internally, thinking no, no, I am not that type of lady.

No one talks about menopause where I live, but I talk about it openly with my daughters. My husband doesn't understand me and thinks I use menopause as an excuse or that I am finding something else to blame.

He grew up with three brothers, so it's all new to him. I wish he could be more understanding, but he has a stressful job and very little patience. He once said to me, "It's only middle-age – men go through it too." What do I say to this? I live in a small town, so most male doctors think this way, too. A common belief is that it's all in women's minds. If I confide in anyone, it's my daughter – hopefully, things will be different for her generation.

I am 54 now and realize that menopause is not just about coping with physical discomfort and biological symptoms. It's also about how one feels going through it. Despite hurdles coming our way, we must learn to make the best of it and find a way to thrive.

BEATRIZ, 54

Fortaleza, Brazil

One day my heart started racing inexplicably. I was 48 and had never experienced anything like it before. I felt scared. I didn't know if this irregular heartbeat was anxiety about my son living abroad or a heart condition. I went to a cardiologist who suggested it could be a symptom of perimenopause.

The physical exams were clear and didn't show signs of any heart disease. My gynecologist also agreed that it could be due to menopause. I'm glad I found a doctor informed enough to link heart palpitations to menopause – they're a less common symptom than hot flashes or vaginal dryness.

The palpitations would happen out of the blue, but I learned to cope with them until they disappeared the following year. My periods became irregular around the same time – one day I would have a huge flow and the next, nothing.

My libido was also at an all-time low, despite having only been with my partner for three years. He was worried at first, but my honesty and openness about what I was going through really helped. He's slightly older than me, which probably makes him more understanding.

Despite the physical symptoms, I actually got off quite lightly – no mood swings or irritability at all. Definitely a good thing for our relationship. I didn't have hot flashes either – though I did often feel cold, cold, cold, cold, cold. This was so strange! Now, I notice that sometimes I sweat at night, especially after one or two glasses of wine. It bothers me a little, but I have learned to manage it.

Gradually, I found myself adjusting to the symptoms, working with my body and accepting the physical and mental changes.

There's so much prejudice around menopause, that we come to see it as something negative rather than what it is – an essential life phase like any other. I've tried to live well and embrace it.

MARIA, 59

Acapulco, Mexico

My menopause began with symptoms that gradually became noticeable: hot flashes, night-sweats, mood swings and headaches. I looked them up on the “Internet University” and learned that, indeed, I was going through menopausal transition. My symptoms soon became intolerable. The migraines were so bad that one time I was blinded in one eye and had to stay in the hospital for a few days. Not to mention the insomnia, low libido, depression and constant urinary infections that I got due to dryness. I lost a lot of weight, my taste buds changed, and I didn’t eat much. Being so skinny made me look older. In the mirror, I saw my cheeks and eyelids sag.

My libido is very low. When I do have intercourse with my husband, I need to take a medicine right after if I don’t want to end up with a urinary tract infection. It’s funny, but I always thought that my husband would become impotent before I did.

My doctor gave me Menopausal Hormone Therapy (MHT) for a while, and I felt much better. But after two years I had to stop due to other health considerations. It’s a shame this happened to me. My father was a gynecologist and used to say that MHT is wonderful, if it’s monitored by a doctor. It prevents a lot of suffering. When I stopped taking the treatment my migraines went away, but everything else came back. The doctor prescribed a new treatment for me, but I live in the coast of Oaxaca and we don’t have access to many medicines here. So, in the absence of treatment, my symptoms worsened. The insomnia that I’d

suffered (and still have) was such that I became dependent on anxiolytic medicines. I've tried to quit, I've been to psychologists and psychiatrists, but I haven't succeeded yet.

Sometimes I think I'm the only crazy person going through menopause this way. I feel like I'm doing something wrong. I would have loved to talk about this with my mother, to ask her how she managed, but we never did. Many women pretend it's nothing and manage somehow to keep up appearances, and perhaps that's why they don't talk about it. They fear being labelled as crazy menopausal women. I want to write a booklet about my experiences for my daughter. I hope it might help her when she goes through menopause. Perhaps my testimony can help someone else too.

KYRA, 52

Kolkata, India

I've always exercised a lot, even during my pregnancies, so I was fit and healthy when I entered menopause. But after a few months of my period stopping, a deep lethargy set in and I started to exercise less frequently. For some time, I just couldn't get up in the morning or sleep at night, and I began to put on weight. I had lost my mother and couldn't meet my daughter due to lockdown, so I felt very low. I suspect my depression was also linked to menopause, but I cannot blame one or the other. I just know I felt exhausted the whole time.

My intimate life became non-existent, which wasn't great, given that I'm single and would like to meet someone. The final straw came when I started having issues with prolapse as my uterus was descending. I decided to take up yoga again and try natural remedies. After some time, things got better.

I've managed to lose the extra pounds I had put on, and my energy levels are returning, although my intimate life is not what it used to be.

SIYA, 60

Chennai, India

For me, the first symptom was constipation. I'm a yoga teacher and start my classes early, around 7 a.m, but menopause left me so bloated that I'd have to get up at least two hours earlier to use the restrooms and get comfortable for class. Not great. I also started struggling to fall asleep but would have to get up and go to class anyway. In a way, it was work that kept me going.

Mood swings have been a problem. I became irritable and impatient. I didn't notice it until my kids pointed it out to me.

I also have to watch what I eat, as I bloat so easily. I know most women gain weight during menopause, but sometimes I don't recognize myself. I'll look in the mirror and say, "Oh, God, look at my face; it has lost all charm."

I hate seeing photos of myself. No one else can see the changes, but I can. I get irritated about my weight, my face, my thinning hair. Things are going downhill and, yes, it does bother me.

Despite all that, I'm lucky and feel blessed to have my classes – teaching yoga requires me to be physically active and gives me a sense of fulfilment.

LI JING, 52

Beijing, China

I didn't know much about menopause. It was never talked about in my family. Older friends had mentioned symptoms, but we preferred to talk about joyful things, so menopause was never our first-choice topic.

Sadly, not talking about the symptoms doesn't make them go away. The symptoms are real things I experience daily and they often get in the way of my lifestyle.

It started with terrible headaches. Initially, doctors said they were caused by an insufficient blood supply to my brain. But I knew they were linked to my menstrual cycle and, eventually, I realized it was menopause.

The headaches aren't the only symptom affecting my life. I've become quite forgetful, and I am more sensitive to loud sounds. I'm also exhausted a lot of the time. I don't sleep well at night – it's always too hot – so I find myself taking naps during the day.

Sometimes, I'm afraid to go shopping with friends because I feel so tired from walking. I also get hot flashes that can last more than an hour. It's embarrassing and stops me from wanting to go out. I usually just make excuses rather than tell people the truth.

I know things will be better once my menopause ends, but it feels hard right now. I wish I'd known what to expect, but menopause isn't something that people talk about.

I will definitely make sure my daughter is prepared when the time comes – and I'll be there to help her through it.

JOANA, 49

São Paulo, Brazil

After my last period, at age 49, sex became more of a problem than an enjoyable experience. I had a steady boyfriend at the time and was afraid I wouldn't be able to keep up with his libido. It worried me hugely because I cherished my sex life!

Although I knew something was different, I prayed that it was all in my head. Once or twice, I tried telling my boyfriend what I was experiencing, how menopause was affecting my body and mind, but he never seemed interested.

I guess I didn't want to face up to it either. I even bought vaginal cream instead of getting a proper medical prescription. The truth is, I didn't have a doctor I could open up to – and I still don't.

I'm not in a relationship anymore and haven't had sex for a year, so my vaginal symptoms aren't such an issue right now. I'd like to go back to having a balanced sex life again though. I'm always hopeful!

DANIELA, 60

Coatepec, Veracruz, Mexico

As a child, I learned that menopause means becoming unattractive and neurotic. “Menopausal old lady,” I heard people say when they considered a woman to be ugly and angry.

My practice as a psychologist helped me understand the body as a unity. So, working with energy and aiding my health with homeopathy has been very helpful to me. When menopause started, I understood that it is a natural process. Still, it caught me off-guard because my periods stopped when I was 47 and still felt quite young. I wasn’t expecting it, but I also didn’t want to make a big deal of it either. I felt good, so I just thought: no more worry about periods and pregnancy.

My period disappeared completely when I was 49. Later, by the time I was 56, I began to feel vaginal dryness, dry skin and low libido. In my early fifties I no longer ovulated but still felt a strong sexual appetite; I’d always been sexually active. It was great. Then menopause started and my libido went from 100 to nothing. It took such effort that I lost interest. I accepted the change. It’s been hard on my partner, but he has accepted it. It was difficult for me to understand, too. However, I didn’t feel depressed; with meditation and chi kung,* my energy is channeled into different areas of my being.

*Also known as qigong, qi gong, chi ’ung or chi gung, chi kung is a system of coordinated body-posture and movement, breathing and meditation used for the purposes of health, spirituality and martial-arts training.

What did hit me were hot flashes, which felt like being slapped by a water-heater. I remember once, when conducting a workshop, I suddenly felt drenched by my own sweat. Everything changed. I became a raisin: my muscle tone dropped. No matter how hard I exercised, I was flabby and tired. I became impatient.

Even so, I feel that yoga and chi kung have kept me agile and hydrated. I'm at my prime, I feel good about myself. I'm wise, confident and clear. These are beautiful compensations, and they help my practice as a psychologist. I lost, but I gained.

SAANVI, 47

New Delhi, India

My menopause has only just begun. Physically, it has been okay, given that I'm relatively healthy. The main issue for me has been a sense of regret.

I'm a successful lawyer and have always put my career first. I'm also single, which isn't common for women my age in India. Over the last 20-odd years, I've seen most female colleagues leave. It starts with a boyfriend, then a wedding, then babies come along, and it's time for the farewell party. Even when their partners are in the same profession, in most instances, the woman is the one giving up her career.

While I was happy with the choices I made, somewhere deep down I think I felt like I still had time – you hear about women having kids well into their forties now. Call it stupid, but it never occurred to me that I was running out of time.

When my periods started to change, I was filled with – I hate the word – regret. I've traveled the whole world and had amazing experiences. It feels silly to regret anything. I started seeing a therapist – grateful that I have access to such things – and she's helping.

There are times I wish I could take a break from work. For now, though, I'm reminding myself that these were my choices; and they were good choices – that a child or partner doesn't define you. I mean, I can still find a partner, and maybe also adopt. I am working on my mental space and giving myself room to understand this sense of loss. I like that word better than regret.

ALMA, 67

Sonora, Mexico

I was unaware of the moment when my menopause occurred. I felt nothing. No intense hot flashes or the need to cry. I think I can thank my genes for that. My mother and sisters shared the same splendid transition as I did.

If I'd had normal periods, I might have noticed the onset. But I didn't; my periods ended when one of my ovaries and uterus were removed. I was 40. I had an orange-sized fibroid, so there was no other choice.

I've sometimes wondered if I should have taken something for my menopause. But my gynecologist told me that if I felt fine, it wasn't necessary.

Sexual activity decreases over the years, but I think it has more to do with men's issues than women's. I may use a lubricant from time to time. Dryness happens to us all as we age.

Lack of energy? Not a concern for me. I travel with my friends once a year. It's our ritual. I'm also part of a yoga group. Crafts are my passion and I always have a new project. This year I painted Christmas ornaments. In 2021, I bought a polishing machine and redid the paint job in my bedroom all by myself.

MAFALDA, 50

São Paulo, Brazil

Imagine your body being compared to “a store that’s out of stock and about to close.” That’s how a gynecologist once described my perimenopausal symptoms.

I went to see him because the symptoms had been driving me crazy. I wanted professional help, but all I got was flippant metaphors. According to this doctor, I would just have to endure the turmoil. I felt outraged. No way! I knew there would be treatment available for my symptoms.

I researched everything I could about menopause. I watched every YouTube expert talking about the pros and cons of every kind of treatment from teas and herbal remedies (which didn’t work for me) to Menopausal Hormone Therapy (MHT). Eventually, I decided that I wanted to start MHT.

And then the pandemic struck. I was 48, having irregular periods and experiencing scorching hot flashes that woke me up in the middle of the night. My libido was at an all-time low and my emotions were all over the place. My husband kept asking what was wrong, and why I was always so upset. I tried to explain, but he just didn’t get it.

My sister and I had just started our own organic food delivery business at the time and being perimenopausal didn’t help. I started forgetting clients’ names and mixing up delivery dates. My sister would get so mad at me. She would ask, “What’s going on with you? Are you losing your mind?”

Of course, I was distraught and also worried about my health. Was it the first signs of menopause or something more serious? I also had COVID-19 twice, which hit me quite hard as a smoker.

Thankfully, I went to see a different gynecologist who was really helpful and understanding. She prescribed MHT but explained that I would need to stop smoking as it can increase any risks associated with MHT. It was all the motivation I needed to give up.

These days, I'm a proud non-smoker and my symptoms have almost disappeared. I'm getting better at making allowances for myself. I can't do some of the things I used to, such as handling heavy boxes of food for delivery, but that's OK. It's all part of the aging process. Meanwhile, my husband is still clueless about menopause!

ISHANI, 47

Mumbai, India

Nobody in India talks about how diet needs to change with menopause. I was merrily eating the way I used to – cheese, red wine – and wasn't aware that I needed to watch what I ate, take supplements and limit alcohol. Even smoking – so many friends continued to smoke, and I saw the effects in their skin.

We all know what a healthy diet is – greens, grains, good fats – but no one talks about its benefits for menopause. I found it so empowering. When everything else was out of my hands, nourishing my body gave me control, at least over something.

ISABELA, 61

Porto Alegre, Brazil

When I entered menopause at 49, I had many symptoms, such as hot flashes and insomnia. But the worst were the migraines. They were so bad that sometimes I fainted. Once, it happened at the gym and I had to be taken to hospital. It was scary! I didn't know it at the time, but migraines are in fact a menopausal symptom.

I began Menopausal Hormone Therapy (MHT) on my doctor's advice, but it made me feel worse. I was just about to stop taking it when a gynecologist suggested I try it in a different form. I was 52 at the time and had put on a lot of weight. To be fair, I've been fighting against obesity my whole life, but "middle-age spread" was the hardest blow of all.

This time, the MHT really helped; I've been on it for nine years. I have yearly tests to monitor my health, such as a mammogram, blood samples and pelvic scans. Apparently, my bone densitometry is similar to that of a woman in her thirties! Exercise probably helps. I walk about eight kilometers every day and do spin and jump classes when I can. And I don't feel tired at all!

MHT is obviously a personal choice. I have friends who've experienced all sorts of post-menopausal health issues like osteoporosis, who say they aren't interested in hormonal replacement. Another friend, who is recently divorced, said she is not bothering with MHT because she's not interested in sex anymore anyway. To me that's a reductive view – it's not just about sex, but quality of life. I'm just grateful that I found the right treatment for me.

CARLA, 51

Monterrey, Mexico

I recently went to a friend's 50th birthday party. We were a large group of women and most of us were going through menopause. We joked and wondered why we hadn't discussed it before; why each of us experienced it alone, finding treatments and remedies almost by chance.

The one experience that united us was when a friend had to have her womb removed. After the operation, she would feel embarrassed by her upper-lip sweat and tried to hide it with a fan. It made us laugh at the time; we didn't fully understand that we were all going to be there, sooner or later.

When my first symptoms started, at 45, I went through it alone. Ten years earlier I'd tried to get pregnant with no luck. A doctor saw that my fallopian tubes were twisted backward and my ovaries had stuck together. He diagnosed me with severe endometriosis, which had reached my intestines and pelvic wall. Before operating on me, he had to temporarily induce my menopause. Luckily, shortly after the procedure, I got pregnant and had my daughter.

I was never able to get pregnant again; my periods became sporadic and then stopped. At first, I didn't have many menopausal symptoms, but little by little they became more intense. I was prescribed natural pills and I thought I couldn't take Menopausal Hormone Therapy because I have uterine fibroids. Therefore, I have managed my insomnia, dryness and low libido as best I can.

At the party, I realized my friends and I were all going through similar things. We gave each other tips: “Did you know that maca root* is great for libido?”, “Have you tried these pills yet?” Phone numbers of different cosmetic treatments came and went. Cellulite? Go to this place. Wrinkles? This doctor is the best. Flaccidity? Say no more. It’s no secret that we love procedures in Monterrey. What a relief it is to talk about this together and laugh. This is a sisterhood that makes everything more manageable.

*Maca root grows in the Andes mountains in Peru and belongs to the mustard plant family.

URSULA, 54

Recife, Brazil

For me, menopause and the pandemic arrived around the same time. I'd been having symptoms for about three years – mainly insomnia and hot flashes – then my periods stopped altogether last year. During lockdown, I gained so much weight that it was hard not to feel down.

Natural health is important to me – I've practiced yoga for years – so I began to look into holistic ways to support my body. In the process, I found a yoga teacher specializing in Hormonal Yoga Therapy – a series of exercises designed to stimulate the hormone-producing glands and bring balance. I've added it into my routine of intuitive yoga and weights.

It's not always easy. There have been days when I felt so heavy and lethargic that I struggled to get off the couch – but I always feel energized after exercise. And it really benefits my mental health and self-esteem, too. It feels empowering to be taking control of the aging process and has helped me see things from a different perspective.

As women, we get so hung up on how aging changes our appearance. I wanted to break free from this cage and focus on the positives. That doesn't mean accepting the changes without question, but adapting or actively challenging how those changes might affect me.

My gynecologist has also been incredible – she is my first female doctor and specializes in hormonal health. More than anything, it has been great to have the opportunity to talk openly

with a professional woman about menopause and the challenges it brings.

Perhaps I'm being optimistic, but it feels like the worst is over with my menopausal discomfort.

3

Well-being



WELL-BEING

Fluctuating hormone levels can plunge the whole body into disorienting change. Hot flashes, night sweats, heavy and irregular periods, vaginal dryness and bladder infections are just a few of the physical changes that menopause can bring.

Too many women are blind-sided by these symptoms, suffering in silence for fear of being judged. No wonder nearly a quarter feel isolated during this challenging life stage.⁴ Many still believe that, because menopause is a natural life stage, it should not be discussed and there should be no complaints.

Not speaking out about our experiences compounds the problem – each generation of women mistakenly believes that the one before sailed through menopause without issue. It seems that one of the main reasons women from past generations didn't talk about menopause amongst themselves and to their daughters and granddaughters, is that they didn't feel comfortable enough around the topic, which still has social stigma around it.

This intergenerational silence makes the stories that follow all the more significant. It's time to shed the negative perceptions around menopause and open a dialogue around it – for women to share and bond over it; for them to find support and take control of their health.

In these stories, women share all the little ways menopause impacted their well-being and how they navigated these changes.

GABRIELA, 60

Mexico City, Mexico

I was 38, married to a charming man, a good friend; we had three adolescent children, a Labrador dog, and I had a demanding job as creative director at an ad agency. What could go wrong? Hormones taking me by surprise, that's what.

Ever since I got married, in 1986, I had taken contraceptive pills. I had light predictable periods, no pain, no cramping, no bloating. When my husband decided to have a vasectomy, I celebrated it. A few months after his procedure, I stopped taking the pill and I began to feel poorly.

My mood was on the floor; I had zero energy, irritability and no patience with my kids at all. I'd had very regular periods when I was on the pill. Then, without it, I didn't know when my period would start. When it came, it was just a few drops.

I spent nine months in that miserable state, without knowing why I felt so hot, why I sweated, had headaches and terrible mood swings. My period began to become irregular until it disappeared. I went to see a family doctor and he prescribed antidepressants.

I also went to a gynecologist and he called me into his office: "Post-menopause," he said. Post? So, it was over? I'd gone through it all *a pelo*, like we say in Mexico: cold turkey. He suggested Menopausal Hormone Therapy (MHT) and my life changed. I stopped taking antidepressants. I felt wonderful, my usual mood returned. I was myself again and I felt energized. I got my life back.

I've taken hormones all these years. I did try to stop taking them and use a gel instead, but my symptoms came back stronger. Ending MHT was not an option. I was told I needed to stop taking them by the time I'm 65. I still have some time to find a way to find balance without them.

PAOLINA, 58

Manaus, Brazil

When I was 44 years old, my periods started to become irregular. Although I didn't have other symptoms, I knew it was perimenopause.

I was very athletic, so my increasingly heavy periods were all the more unwelcome. I was a volleyball player until my fifties, but the last few years were challenging. There were times when my periods would be so heavy during a match, I'd go deathly pale and other players would say, "Wow! Is everything okay?"

By the time I turned 45, my periods were unbearable. I never knew what day the heavy bleeding would start, so I was always afraid of getting caught unprepared. I had so many accidents that I thought about permanently wearing red trousers until it was all over!

Eventually, it got so bad that I went to see a gynecologist. It was underwhelming as he kept muttering that everything was "normal." Normal? Maybe for him, but definitely not for me!

As my fifties approached, my periods became even more erratic: sometimes I would have nothing for three or four months, then two periods in one month. Finally, they stopped altogether when I turned 50.

Menopause was a mixed blessing. I was relieved that the hell of periods was over forever, but I also felt a surprising sense of loss regarding my fertility. My physical strength and cardiovascular fitness went down too. I took Menopausal Hormone Therapy for a while to help protect my heart and bones, but I'm not on it anymore. I'm now 58 and still very active.

MISHA, 61

Kolkata, India

When I didn't get my period for a bit, I immediately thought that I must be pregnant. I was 45 and my period had always been regular, so it seemed like the most logical explanation. What an irony – there I was in the pharmacy, buying a pregnancy test at the age of 45, with all my girlfriends waiting to hear. Of course, it turned out that I was going through menopause.

I wasn't sad or anything like it. In fact, I remember it being the happiest time of my life, as I was finally done with the whole mess of periods and whatnot. I had no symptoms, which was lucky. I can't even say I had mood swings. I guess I got off quite lightly!

ROCÍO, 36

Toluca, Mexico

I had my first child when I was 27 and it was the best thing that ever happened to me. I had always wanted another child but decided to wait until my partner and I found the right moment, both financially and professionally. At 30, one of my ovaries was removed due to cysts, but I knew I could still get pregnant. At 33, when I was ready to start trying again, I felt a pain in my abdomen that was so strong I could hardly speak.

My husband wasn't with me, so my sister-in-law took me to the public hospital, where I usually go. They immediately took me in for an emergency surgery: one of my fallopian tubes had rotated and was strangling my only ovary. Up until that point, it was not clear if they were going to be able to save it.

Halfway through the operation, the doctor woke me up to tell me that my ovary was necrotized and he had taken it out. He asked me (or rather convinced me) to remove my uterus as well, since he no longer saw the point of me keeping it if I didn't have ovaries. Half-awake and sore, I accepted.

When I woke up, I understood the weight of it all. My doctor had removed my entire reproductive system based on the idea that only two things can grow in the uterus: babies and cancer. It never occurred to me that I could get pregnant using in vitro fertilization. The doctor also failed to mention that as soon as the surgery was over, my menopause would start.

Overnight, my 30-year-old body changed into one nearing 50. I had terrible menopausal symptoms and no one to talk to.

I joined a support group but felt silly around women who were much older than me. My son wondered why he couldn't have a little brother; my husband became depressed and no one really acknowledged that. However, they did ask about my mental state.

I have always been treated by male doctors and think that, maybe, if they had experienced these things firsthand, they would have been more careful with their decisions and explanations. If the public health system cared about a woman's well-being, I'm sure we would be treated differently. Psychological therapy during menopause would be a must.

RENATA, 61

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

It was 2019, and I had been working at the same shop for more than 13 years, when I started to notice changes in my body. I wondered if I could be entering menopause but was unsure. My boss often complained about her symptoms, so I had an idea it might be that.

Initially, I didn't have hot flashes. When my period started to come every two months, I knew that my body was in transition. Indeed, after several irregular cycles, there was nothing.

I went to the doctor, and she recommended waiting to see if the irregular flow was, in fact, menopause. I didn't tell a soul. I guess I didn't want to admit that I was aging. And because I still hadn't experienced the full range of symptoms, like hot flashes and insomnia, I could fool myself a little bit longer.

I'm still not good at talking about it openly. Back then, admitting it to myself was difficult enough, so confiding in others was out of the question. I didn't want to share my fears of getting older and feeling less of a woman.

Meanwhile, my body shape was changing, my hair was falling out, my eyebrows were thinning. I didn't recognize myself in the mirror – it was horrible. All the jokes about women going through menopause just added to my sense of shame.

And then the mood swings started. One minute I was really angry, and the next apathetic. I felt like I was going crazy. It was frightening!

Losing my libido was a big worry. Little by little, sex became less pleasurable. My vagina felt dry and more sensitive, which put

me off. My boyfriend and I eventually broke up, so at least that is no longer an issue now.

I'm happy to say that the mood swings have subsided. These days, I feel more grounded and try to take care of myself. I'm considering signing up for therapy; it would definitely do me good to talk.

DONG JUN, 42

Guangzhou, China

I'd been undergoing chemotherapy for more than a year when my menopause symptoms began. I was only 35. It was very odd, because I used to feel cold all the time, and then suddenly I was always too hot. Even when I turned on the air conditioner, I kept on sweating. My period didn't come that month, and I was also having trouble sleeping. The hospital tests showed that my hormone levels were very low. This was expected, as I had been previously diagnosed with premature ovarian failure.

I often woke up at night soaked in sweat, sometimes five or six times a night. For me, insomnia was the worst symptom. The lack of sleep was really harmful to my health, making me less efficient at work too. Simple tasks became difficult – my mind was so sluggish that I'd suddenly go blank at work and make lots of mistakes.

Looking back, I was really moody too. I would explode, like a volcano! My libido was also a problem – sex started to feel like an effort. I also put on weight very easily, which made me feel terrible.

Thankfully, a combination of Chinese and Western medicines helped relieve my symptoms. Menopausal Hormone Therapy, in particular, seemed to ease my brain fog and help me think more clearly.

I try to focus on the positives – menopause is a new, and hopefully exciting, phase in my life.

YING, 46

Shanghai, China

I see menopause as a law of nature that we can't avoid. I look after myself, but I don't spend much on special foods or medicine. A little on essential oils, along with red bean and gelatin soup, which I eat for a few days before and after my period. I've been drinking more tea as well, a different kind every day. People say the antioxidants in tea are good for health.

I've noticed a few extra pounds on my waist, so I'm eating less rice. I'm also exercising every day, to help tone my body.

My energy has dropped steadily since I turned 30, and now that I'm in my mid-forties, there's less sex. I've also noticed some vaginal dryness, which is new, but I haven't done anything about it. Maybe it's a Chinese thing, but we don't really discuss this. Or maybe we don't care about it.

I definitely lose my temper with my husband far more frequently, since the onset of menopause. Little things irritate me more than they used to. I nag him, and that makes both of us unhappy. Although we talk about it afterward. I'm not sure he really understands.

I feel OK and try to keep a healthy mindset. Menopause is a natural journey, and each woman must find her own way, following her heart and living her life.

CAROLINA, 66

Mexico City, Mexico

It all began when I was 47. A few days before my period I felt a lack of energy and lower immunity. I came down with a cold each time my period started. I'd read plenty about the subject. I'm a psychoanalyst and it interested me both personally and professionally: I wanted to walk through it in the most natural way possible. A homeopath and an acupuncturist were an aid in my afflictions. One day I just stopped menstruating. One cycle I bled as usual, and the next period never came.

When I turned 50, I began to feel exhaustion. I would wake up in the night and feel pain in my legs and depression. Then came other symptoms: dry skin, presbyopia* and 10 extra kilos. It was photographs, not the mirror, that showed me an elderly, gray-haired, overweight woman. I worked through all these symptoms in my therapy sessions; they meant something more to me: my youth was coming to an end.

I never had a support network. My friends and I all took different routes through menopause: some chose Menopausal Hormone Therapy, others did nothing. My sister was six years older than me and her support was essential. She'd had an early menopause, which had moved her to read and study all about it. It was very helpful for me to understand that not all cultures placed so much value in youth and beauty as ours does.

*Presbyopia is a condition in which the eye lens refracts light in such a way that it does not focus properly on the retina, making it difficult to see objects in close-range. It can develop in middle-aged and older adults.

Hormones are veils protecting your emotions, your digestion and your health. When they disappear, everything becomes a little worse. With the onset of menopause, if I got a cold, it felt a little worse; if I had a stomach bug, it was worse than ever. And this is a path of no return. A turning point of all this was the support of my partner, who was ready to talk and accept my emotional and physical alterations. Our sexual life changed due to vaginal dryness and lower libido. I did fear him losing interest in me, but it was a passing thought because he understood this process as something that concerned us both.

My tai chi and chi kung** practices came as a gift to me. They gave me an unexpected openness and helped me reframe my sexual life and my understanding of intimacy.

**Also known as qigong, qi gong, chi 'ung or chi gung, chi kung is a system of coordinated body posture and movement, breathing and meditation used for the purposes of health, spirituality and martial-arts training.

ADITI, 48

Mumbai, India

My husband told me I had become very cranky. I had, but it wasn't for the reasons he thought. I wasn't happy with how I looked and felt, but I knew there was no point in confiding in him. He would just say, "Get on with your life." I felt so alone, and in my search for answers, I turned to Google and books.

My menopause started early in my forties, when other women my age said, "But babe, I still get my period." It seemed to me that, as far as nature is concerned, once you're done having babies, your primary duty in life is over. I was afraid of menopause. But then you realize that every woman goes through it.

Men have it really easy: they grow a beard to hide their jawline and buy a sports car. For us, it's so overwhelming. My skin was dry. I'd wake up in the night with my body burning. I was drinking a lot of red wine and that exacerbated my flashes. I'd wake at 3 a.m. as if a thermostat had switched on inside me. Weight gain was the other thing – I ate what I usually ate but still put on weight.

In India, no one knows anything about menopause. I finally met this amazing doctor, the gentlest human being, who specializes in hormones. He explained that when your body is not getting enough estrogen, it stores fat in an attempt to make more of the hormone. He recommended Menopausal Hormone Therapy to restore my levels of estrogen and progesterone and advised me to have regular pap smears and mammograms.

We also discussed atrophy, which was a big surprise (loosening of muscles). No one tells us this! I was scared it would happen overnight. He advised me to do more weight-bearing exercises to help keep my muscles and bones strong – a perfect incentive for working out.

Believe it or not, my body feels younger now than it did five years ago, even after exercising just with light weights. I've lost 9 or 10 kilos and feel better than ever.

SOFIA, 53

Recife, Brazil

Having gone through a divorce and moving into a lovely new flat, I was loving life. I enjoyed making new friends and felt hopeful about the future. Then I turned 50 and the hot flashes and insomnia began.

Aging is a funny thing. I'm fine with it, but there's no way I'd let it compromise my quality of life. I've always loved exercise – I do bodybuilding every day – and I'm careful with the food I eat. I usually look for healthier choices, and I am a fan of fitness, functional food, as well as vegetarian options.

During the pandemic, though, I started to feel tired and depressed. When the night sweats became more intense and frequent, I decided to seek information about menopause. I searched for natural solutions. I think I was more worried about the medicines than menopause itself!

I was at the peak of my anxiety when I discovered an excellent gynecologist who helped me combat my fear of Menopausal Hormone Therapy. She was a young but experienced doctor working toward demystifying menopausal symptoms and treatment. Her openness and manner in addressing the downs of this phase were incredible. She explained how modern medicine could control symptoms, which gave me the courage to see a specialist. I felt determined and wanted to do more than just control the symptoms – I wanted to improve my life as a whole.

I reported my symptoms to my doctor, who seemed to understand. After scans and blood tests, he prescribed estrogen.

I have been using it for the last five months and feel much better. Hot flashes? Gone. Insomnia? A little bit, but at least I'm not waking up boiling and sweaty. Depression? I would say some typical blues for a woman in her fifties. Libido? Well, this is a bit more complex. There are definite stirrings, but right now I'm enjoying living alone. My well-being is what matters most. I have no doubt I'll find the right relationship at some stage, and the rest will follow.

VICTORIA, 52

Belo Horizonte, Brazil

I was just 35 years old when I started to notice perimenopausal symptoms. I'd had endometriosis for years, and it was getting worse. Over the next 10 years or so, I ended up having three laparoscopic surgeries to remove inflamed tissue in my uterus and fallopian tubes. One of the surgeries left me with only one ovary.

During flare-ups the pain was unbearable, and as this was often triggered by my period, the doctor recommended that I have surgery to bring on clinical menopause. I had my final period after the last surgery.

Six months later, I felt an awful heat – I remember looking at people in the supermarket and thinking, “Why does everyone have so many layers on?” Meanwhile, I was boiling hot, wearing a T-shirt, shorts and flip-flops. I couldn't believe I was menopausal at 43!

Brain fog constantly forced me to stick loads of Post-it notes all over the house. I would forget even the most basic things. I often had fits of rage and would cry after my anger exploded.

I was exactly how my gynecologist told my husband a hormone-imbalanced woman would be: a raging monster! It upset me so much when the doctor described that woman. Thankfully, I haven't been her for the last seven years, and I can only thank Menopausal Hormone Therapy for that small miracle.

KAVYA, 60

Kolkata, India

Because I overthink things, what I badly need is meditation. I have always been restless, but since perimenopause began, my restlessness has worsened. Even if I want to pray, it doesn't last more than a minute, which upsets me.

One thing that's been therapeutic is music. I love music. I keep it on 24/7. And I walk a lot.

Menopause is a process we all experience, but it's also perceived as belonging to an "older" age group. There are people, though, like my gynecologist, who have told me: "This is the best phase of your life! You don't worry about getting pregnant. Your intimate life can still be wonderful. Your children are grown-up and gone, and you have no responsibilities. So, this is the best time to enjoy with your partner." Here's to a fresh start!

ESTER, 59

Colima, Mexico

There's one good thing about menopause: no period, no blood all over my bed sheets, no stains on clothes and no embarrassment that goes with these inconvenient stains.

Think of a traumatizing period-related experience: I've had it.

I had always had a very heavy period. I mean murder-scene heavy, ever since it started. One of my first periods came when I was at a birthday party, wearing white leggings and a flowery top. I even remember my pointy red shoes and the blood running down my legs right before it was time to hit the piñata. They had to call my mom; they thought I'd had some sort of horrific accident.

It is no wonder that the best part about menopause for me is the end of menstruation. I can swim any time; I can sleep naked whenever I want to. Never mind all the other symptoms – I can put up with them if it's the cost of not bleeding out once a month. When I was well into my forties my menstruation disappeared and I started long-distance running. Now I can run any day for as long as I can, without the risk of looking my worst.

DONG JUEN, 46

Shanghai, China

My cycles are so hard to manage now. Sometimes I have a period every couple of weeks, and then I can go for a month or more without anything. Either way, this bothers me and makes life difficult, as I always run to the bathroom to check my underwear.

The amount of blood varies each time. Sometimes it's just a few spots; sometimes the flow is so heavy that I worry about staining my clothes. I would be so embarrassed if people noticed. For me, this irregularity is one of the worst symptoms of perimenopause, alongside insomnia and low mood.

Sleep is becoming a problem, even though I go to bed when I'm tired. I really try to listen to my body and respond to its needs. Until last year, I used to sleep straight through the night. Now, there are some nights when I wake up anywhere between midnight and 3 a.m. and can't get back to sleep until dawn. Then, my alarm goes off, just as I'm dozing back to sleep! This can happen up to three times a week, and I then need an afternoon nap to catch up on sleep.

I'm trying aromatherapy to help me relax. I dab a little lavender essential oil under my pillow – it's supposed to be a natural sleep aid. I try other oils too, to boost my mood. Every little thing helps when you're going through a transformation like this.

NORAH, 60

Kolkata, India

For me, the most prominent symptom of menopause was frequent urinary tract infections (UTIs). I'd be in agony for days. Not only did sex become less pleasurable, the fear of UTIs killed the mood.

I met my husband when I was 16 – he was my first boyfriend – and we married at 20. I'd never been with anyone else before, and I adored him. Like any relationship, our intimate life evolved over the years. When the UTIs began, though, I lost all interest in getting intimate. This lack of interest in intimacy put a lot of pressure on my marriage.

I went to gynecologists and urologists. No prescription helped. My husband was supportive and could see my UTIs were an issue. I lost my mother to bladder cancer, so he understood the added anxiety. But there were also times when he felt that I wasn't making an effort and that we should at least give it a try. That definitely caused tension between us, but things are a bit better now.

I still worry about getting UTIs. For three days after intercourse, I drink water constantly, and I take medicines prescribed by my physician. I'm stressed like hell. I don't understand why no one has found a solution to this.

NORMA, 56

Zihuatanejo, Mexico

I regret not looking for a second opinion. When I was 48 and my periods became irregular, I went to a specialist right away. I had no hot flashes, no sleeping issues, no irritability. It made sense not to need any treatment.

A couple of years later, my menstruation stopped. With no other apparent symptoms, I thought my menopause was over. I continued with my life, work, symposiums, swimming.

About eight months ago my problems started. I got cramps in my legs when I swam and felt other discomforts related to weary cartilage. I also experienced dryness during sex with my partner.

I decided to change doctor, which I should have done earlier. The way I feel now is a result of not taking Menopausal Hormone Therapy sooner. I'm on it now and no longer feel cramps, and my challenges with dryness have improved.

The disadvantage of living in a small city is the lack of medical opinions. I trusted my initial diagnosis, as I'd felt no symptoms. If I could go back in time, I would pay more attention.

CRISTINA, 50

Curitiba, Brazil

My Grandma suffered a lot with perimenopausal symptoms – hot flashes and huge mood swings. I remember her complaining about them when I was a teenager. I was going through puberty at the time, just starting my periods as hers were coming to an end.

Grandma became incredibly depressed and withdrawn but was never treated. At that time, symptoms of menopause were considered as a normal part of aging. Women were considered as “disposable” once their reproductive life was over. Thinking has changed a lot since the 1960s – I think my generation puts less of an expiry date on women’s value. We are much more than our ovarian activity, and thankfully, we know that.

Nevertheless, I must admit that menopause surprised me! I’m 54 years old, and my perimenopause started three years ago. I’d just quit my long-term job as I wanted to start something new, then COVID-19 hit. Lockdown meant my dreams and plans had to be shelved, and then the symptoms began.

I experienced insomnia first, then hot flashes. Up until my last period, at 53, I felt consumed by heat, apathy and a total lack of focus. It wasn’t just physical symptoms – I felt emotionally weak too.

That being said, I don’t know if it would be fair to blame menopause for everything. My life was in turmoil: my son had left home, my husband and I were going through a house move, my parents were staying with us – and then I got COVID-19! But menopause definitely made everything worse.

The insomnia was really annoying – I had always been such a great sleeper. Now, if I fall asleep before midnight, I usually wake up at 3 a.m. and can't sleep again. The following day I feel useless, with brain fog and irritation all day long.

The pandemic may be coming to an end, but, sadly, I can't say the same about my symptoms. I'm seeing a doctor now and am about to have tests done. Depending on the results, I may consider taking Menopausal Hormone Therapy. Unlike Grandma, I won't just settle and live with symptoms that are preventing me from living life fully.

Instead, I plan to embrace aging – using menopause as an opportunity to focus on my mental health. Finding happiness in the small things helps.

PARI, 48

Mumbai, India

Menopause came out of nowhere for me. I wasn't really expecting it until my fifties. People commonly say that you usually follow your mother, and my mom had hers well after 50.

I remember preparing for a big project launch, and suddenly I started bleeding. It went on for 17 days. I wasn't scared, but it was odd. I was in the middle of planning my launch, so I didn't realize how long it had been. I use a period tracking app, and when I looked back I saw that it had been more than two weeks. I called my gynecologist, who confirmed that the process had started. She explained that there might be months during which I might not get my period and that it might slowly stop completely. After the 17-day "period," I didn't bleed for two months.

The months of transition that followed weren't easy, but my gynecologist was of great help, and with her advice, I was able to manage my symptoms and keep my life as normal as possible. In hindsight, I wish someone had told me more about menopause.

ROSANA, 47

Fortaleza, Brazil

I was 45 and was suffering from hot flashes, mood swings, irregular menstrual flow and insomnia. I also started to forget basic things, had brain fog and sudden sadness right after the flashes – it felt like a metaphysical sensation. I was still menstruating, but irregularly.

I'd had terrible anxiety in the past – panic attacks when I felt breathless and thought I would die. Medication and therapy had helped, but this felt very different.

I was confused when the doctor prescribed anxiolytics* for my symptoms. Although she recognized that I might be heading into menopause, the doctor said the anxiolytics would relieve the stress.

After three months, it became clear the treatment wasn't working and I came off the meds. Rather than just putting up with the symptoms, I decided to be proactive and learn more about menopause. I was able to identify that I had started to experience almost all the perimenopause symptoms, including irregular menstrual flow, from as early as 42 years old!

Educating myself has been very helpful. I just wish I'd known more before my body surprised me.

*Medications to treat anxiety.

FARIDA, 49

Mumbai, India

I believe in modern medicine, but there's also much to be said about ancient therapies.

When I went to see my gynecologist about menopause, she was very helpful and prescribed me medication to address my symptoms. But she also suggested yoga and meditation, which I appreciated.

She was a person who spoke to my heart because I've been practicing these things for years, and I really believe in them. She said: "It will make you calmer and help you deal with whatever comes." She told me to continue my yoga even if it was just five or ten minutes a day.

I'd never heard a doctor say this kind of thing to me before, even my orthopedic consultant. A few years ago, I was suffering from severe backache, as I was leading up to menopause, and my orthopedic doctor had recommended calcium, vitamin D3 and visiting a physiotherapist. When I went for physio, I found that it was yoga! I practice regularly now and it's helping to improve my mood.

SANDRA, 67

Tulancingo, Mexico

I'd prepared for menopause at least five years before I reached it.

I had two older sisters, and health is the family business. We are all homeopathic practitioners. I know my asymptomatic menopause is due to all the preparation I underwent; I had always kept it in mind. From the time of my earliest periods, my mother told me: "this is a process that will end around middle age, it's natural and we must respect it."

I've never taken any kind of hormones, but I did take homeopathic medicine well into my forties, as I intended to get my body ready for the change. I'd walked that path beside many patients and knew its needs and challenges.

My patients complained about hot flashes, a symptom that I had always known; I've had them since childhood. Lucky me, right? I'm used to them. It's just the way my body's wired. I get hot in a second, so I always carry a fan with me. You can find them scattered all over my house.

Preparation and information are everything. I'm living proof. Now, I'm happy I no longer menstruate and can have sex whenever I feel like it. I can swim and exercise without worrying about spotting, tampons, and the like. I feel free and in control of my body.

ALANI, 53

Kolkata, India

At 47, my periods were regular, but doctors found that I had a large growth in my uterus, and they would need to operate. My father had been unwell, so I had to delay doing anything about it. Eventually the fibroid grew to 2.5 kilos – the size of a baby.

My husband is a doctor, so we discussed it at length. He said I could wait until menopause and see if it shrinks, but we didn't know when that would happen. In the end, I decided not to wait. Apart from anything, it was pressing on my bladder, and I was going to the bathroom every 15 minutes.

When it came to the surgery, the doctors recommended a full hysterectomy.* I hated the idea of losing my ovaries. I consulted doctor friends in the U.K., and everyone said not to take the risk of keeping ovaries. Ovarian cancer is the most common cancer in women; and many family members on my father's side had cancer. Doctors couldn't understand why I didn't want my ovaries removed. I struggled to explain – but deep down, it felt as though a big part of my womanhood would be gone.

After the surgery, my intimate life flatlined, as my ovaries, which I had decided to keep, stopped producing the relevant hormones. I lost my sexuality at the age of 48. One of my acquaintances is a writer, and she told me menopause is wonderful, because you can enjoy intimacy without fear of pregnancy, and it takes on a whole new meaning. I'm still waiting for this positive phase to kick in.

*A hysterectomy is the surgical removal of the uterus.

SURYA, 60

Bangalore, India

I knew menopause was inevitable, but I don't think I understood what would happen to me.

You always hear about hot flashes, so that part wasn't a surprise. But there's so much more that no one mentions! For me, the most awkward thing was facial hair. I think it was worse because I was not warned, and none of my friends had experienced it.

It started with one hair or two, thick bristles sticking out of my chin – not fun at all. Menopause is hard enough as it is – it leaves you grappling with the loss of your femininity, not to mention your fertility – but the beard just felt cruel!

I often went to the salon for removal, which was painful and embarrassing. But the beauticians reassured me that this was normal and that many women experience it.

Thankfully, it's better now. I finally went to see my doctor and I'm now on medication. At last, I can laugh about the whole thing.

RITA, 49

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

For me, it wasn't the physical symptoms of menopause that bothered me most – I could deal with the insomnia and hot flashes. It was the emotional symptoms I really struggled with. Menopause hits at a time when life is changing; your parents are aging, your children are leaving home, and you can feel lost in the middle of it all. Suddenly, it becomes overwhelming.

I started smoking again, drank more than usual and rarely exercised. I wasn't happy about the way I looked. Menopause was playing havoc with my emotions, my energy levels, my moods – and my waistline!

I've always been a positive person. I believe that happiness is a matter of choice and try not to allow myself to be negative. How can I possibly complain, coming from such a privileged life?

But the emotional rollercoaster of menopause was overwhelming. I was drained of all energy, and absolutely nothing inspired me. It was like I was living in a cocoon of bleakness. Eventually, it all became too much, and I finally had to admit to myself that it's okay not to be okay. Tests showed I had also developed early signs of osteoporosis. I went to see my gynecologist, who prescribed anti-anxiety medication.

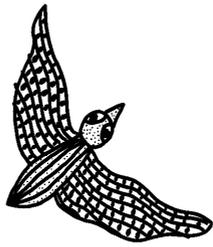
I have been taking the meds for three months now and can feel a difference. I feel more alive. I've been going to the gym too, and the endorphin boost really helps – I love it!

This medication–gym mix has contributed massively toward improving my mental health overall. Feeling fit is such a powerful thing!

It's like I finally have control over my body again.

4

Career



CAREER

The symptoms of menopause can make working life a challenge. Sleepless nights, low energy, brain fog and a lack of confidence can all affect performance in the workplace.

In one survey, 99 percent of women said they felt their work had suffered as a result of menopause symptoms.⁵ Too many women are passing up promotions, reducing their hours or giving up their jobs altogether because of menopause.⁶

By 2025, there will be 1.1 billion women in the world who have experienced menopause:⁷ women in the prime of their life, at the height of their careers, on whom society depends. This makes it all the more important that we start supporting them and empowering them to take charge of their lives now.

In this chapter, we hear from women who have struggled at work, and those who have found the courage to forge a new path, blazing a trail in the workplace long after their “productive” years are supposedly over. Here’s to bossing it on our own terms.

AYESHA, 59

Kannur, India

I always liked traveling, but culturally in India it's not something women do alone. It's just not done. The thing is, I never wanted to marry – so, some years ago, I decided to become a tour guide instead. There was a good company in our area and they really liked female guides. It's not unusual for a group of ladies to prefer a female guide. I led tours in my state and even went to international places.

But then menopause hit, and I started to feel exhausted. I was sleeping a lot and, as you can imagine, work was tricky. We led cruises, long walking trips, hikes and even forest night-stays, so it was too much. One morning while on a tour, I overslept and we missed the planned morning visit.

It became such a problem that I asked my boss to keep me in the office instead. Of course, I didn't mention menopause; I just said I have leg pains. I don't like sitting in the office and I'm not good with computers, but it's OK for now.

I'm hoping that once the worst of menopause is over, I will travel again – this time, by myself. One good thing about menopause? You care less about what others think.

BEATRIZ, 64

Coxcatlán, San Luis Potosí, Mexico

I never met my mother. My stepmom didn't tell me women bled once a month, for years, until it stops. So, I had a terrible fright when, at 14, I had blood all over my skirt. My schoolmates told me it would happen every month.

When I turned 16, I wanted to leave Coxcatlán and try to find work in Mexico City. My brother gave me a lecture: everyone who leaves for Mexico City comes back with children. "If you return like that: say goodbye to this town," he said. This stuck with me and all I did was work. Later, around 23, I had two daughters, and it was a decision I made with my husband.

I had mild periods, a couple of days long, no pain. Except for my very last one: it lasted for eight days. I had to skip work; I was anxious. My employer ended up taking me to a doctor who helped me. I was 48 and felt comfortable working without worrying about bleeding; I had always been irregular.

Months before my last period, I did feel hot and sweaty. I told my employer and she explained that I was reaching menopause. She took me to a homeopathic practitioner and he gave me some drops that made me feel better.

I had a mild menopause. I never felt depressed because I focused on my work. My face never filled with wrinkles and I don't feel old. I do feel pain in my arms and legs, from time to time. I sometimes have trouble sleeping. I tell my daughters that there's an advantage gained with menopause: I never think about bleeding or carrying pads around.

MARGARIDA, 69

Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

I know it sounds odd, but I really enjoyed having periods. They were part of being a woman. So, when they stopped, I felt upset. Even though they became a bit hellish toward the end.

The hot flashes were the worst – I had them from the age of 54 to 58, in all their unpleasant variations.

Usually, they'd happen at night. I'd wake up completely soaked with sweat and could never go back to sleep afterward. One symptom led to another – sweats to insomnia, insomnia to exhaustion, exhaustion to moodiness. A vicious cycle that affected my productivity – and sense of humor. But I never allowed myself to skip work due to these symptoms, no matter how bad they got.

I remember attending meetings and my clothes were sweaty to the point that everyone noticed. I felt so embarrassed and ashamed. All I could do was apologize and change (if I was lucky enough to have spare clothes). The flashes usually lasted about 20 long minutes.

Thankfully, the symptoms improved, and by the time I retired at 65, things were much better. It's good that people are starting to talk about menopause more now. Workplaces could definitely do more to support women. It's in everyone's interest to ensure that women can maintain their careers beyond middle age.

MISHTI, 58

Bangalore, India

I'm a single mother and have always been proud of supporting my daughter and myself. When my husband left me 30 years ago, I decided to start a clothing business. Everyone thought it was a terrible idea, but it soon became a success and business was booming.

Then, just before the pandemic, I started going through menopause. I felt tired all the time, but also filled with regret. I kept thinking about all my past choices. I had never wanted another husband, but suddenly I was thinking, "what if I had remarried, and had another baby?" I started to feel really down. My daughter helped me through it, but still the thoughts would come, and I would feel immense sadness.

Unfortunately, this change in my mood and energy levels coincided with the pandemic and my business was affected. I had been so proud to be able to put my daughter through college, but suddenly we were struggling financially. I was putting everything into my company, but I just felt so tired and low. Eventually, my daughter helped me. She knows marketing well and introduced me to social media.

Menopause really knocked my confidence and made me lose faith in myself, but I'm gradually getting it back. The business has slowly picked up. My daughter has been wonderful. I count my blessings now that the storm is over.

ANNA, 66

Merida, Mexico

I'm a native of Cintalapa with Zapotec ancestry.* I come from a town in Chiapas that, at the time of my birth, had a population of fewer than 25,000 people. My parents feared my going to high school because I had to move to a different town where young women “went and got pregnant.” But I didn't only finish high school and college; today I'm a renowned academic researcher with a PhD in Social Studies.

I started menopause at 43 and with it came exhaustion, leg pain and lower libido. I didn't take hormones, nor did I take any medication. All I remember is having taken an aromatic clove and cinnamon tea my family made for these purposes. I don't mind gray hair or facial lines, but I miss my good eyesight.

Being a student of gender relations and proud of my regional heritage (Zapotec), I think that who you are is associated to how you think and feel. Therefore, menopause was not a period of mourning to me; quite the contrary, my self-esteem grew. I have seen the same process when I work with women of indigenous communities, where youth is not an obsession: there are other priorities.

*The Zapotec are an indigenous people of Mexico, whose population is concentrated in the southern state of Oaxaca and neighboring states.

SAMAIRA, 62

New Delhi, India

As someone who taught teenage girls for years, it's actually hilarious that I didn't realize that my periods had stopped. You can't imagine how much period talk there is in the classroom: "Ma'am, I need a pad." "Ma'am, I need to skip sports today." "Ma'am, I have cramps." "Ma'am, I stained my skirt." It's nonstop! I think I was so preoccupied with their periods that I lost track of mine!

My flow got lighter and lighter. From the age of 40 onward, my periods lasted just three days or so, sometimes less. It took me at least six months to figure out what was going on. How embarrassing! I felt I didn't know my body at all. I was clearly not paying attention to it.

Another way of looking at it is that I must have had an easy menopause. There were uneasy things about it, yes, such as being surrounded by young women on the brink of starting their lives. So much promise ahead of them while many of my experiences were behind me! That was unsettling, some days. But in a way, isn't that beautiful too? I teach literature, so I feel there is poetry in all of this...the next chapter.

MARÍA, 54

Durango, Mexico

Menopause marked the start of the best sexual experiences of my life. I enjoyed them immensely. In the libido department, I've gone against everything they say about it dwindling or disappearing.

When I was 45, I had six-month-long periods and then nothing. I felt a little hot and cold at night and was a bit irritable, maybe. Despite these symptoms, I don't believe I had a bad experience. How could I have, with my sexual desire up to the roof?

I remember going to the gynecologist. He measured my hormone levels and told me my body was fine. I didn't need any treatment. I felt happy I could stop using contraceptives at last. I couldn't get pregnant anymore! I did try a lubricant gel, but it wasn't for me. The same happened with some pills I bought at a health store.

Back then I worked as a supervisor at a farm-zoo. I did everything. I was a tourist guide, I drove tractors, I cleaned. I never felt a lack of strength to continue with my work.

I have this ability to block a negative thing with a positive one. I think this really helped me have an easy process with menopause. I hold myself in high regard and enjoy everything that surrounds me. I see the beauty in everything, but it wasn't always like that before. Twenty-seven years ago, I was very negative. I felt ugly, deformed, even. But everything changed when I started taking salsa classes. They were my salvation.

ISHANI, 47

New Delhi, India

There are days when I feel triumphant to be thriving at work in my forties. And then there are days when I feel a deep sense of loneliness.

I've reached a senior position and earn well, but I still work in an all-male firm. As the only woman my age left standing, I feel like an outlier. There is certainly no one I can talk with about menopause. I'm surrounded by men all day. The ones my age, mostly, do not understand why I'm still here. They are scared, but I think they also pity me. Some of the younger ones are more open, while some are unbearably sure of themselves.

Being here alone, going through the emotions that come with menopause, depresses me. I don't feel I have anyone in the office to turn to and say, "I'm so tired today" or "my back hurts." Similarly, I don't have anyone at work to confide in to discuss life choices relating to career versus family.

I see the younger guys all marrying women who will put aside their careers for them. I wonder if they'll be understanding when their wives go through menopause. I don't have a partner, but I'm proud that I've had a fulfilling career. I guess I just wish there were more women like me in the workplace, so that I wouldn't feel quite so alone. Perhaps I'm just ahead of my time. I hope the future will be different.

ROSALIA, 44

Mexico City, Mexico

You would think that I, of all people – a gynecologic oncologist – should have recognized my own menopausal symptoms when they started. But when I was 37 and they first started appearing, I actually mistook them for pregnancy. I had dedicated many of my reproductive years to my career, and when I began to think about having children and stopped taking my contraceptive pills, I noticed symptoms that had been masked by the pill's hormones.

I began to have hot flashes, night sweats, insomnia, anxiety, tiredness, lack of libido and stamina, brain fog and poor decision-making capabilities. This really affected me, because in my line of work, decision-making is literally a matter of life and death. After some tests I understood what was happening to me and decided to take Menopausal Hormone Therapy (MHT). I didn't want only to control my symptoms; I also did it for my health.

There is a lot of misinformation on the subject of MHT, and it's important to talk about it, as I believe we should have enough factual information so we can make informed decisions about our health. When it comes to MHT there are safe ways to administer it. Doctors have to take into account many things, like the person's comorbidities, family history and age. It is something that should be individualized to fit the specific person it is meant to help.

Today I feel wonderful. I view menopause through a multidisciplinary lens where my diet, sleep schedule, exercise regime and habits influence my well-being and overall health.

I love my work, and don't feel like not having children takes anything away from my quality of life.

As a woman in a position of power, I think there is still more to be done in making our work environment menstruation- and menopause-friendly. I hope to review our own guidelines at work and make an already great place even better.

IRMA, 61

Chihuahua, Mexico

Freedom, at last. I can't call it anything else. My periods were marked by intense bleeding. I had to wear two pads! When that stopped, it was great. It's liberating to be able to go swimming any day, or to plan a vacation without worrying about your menstrual calendar.

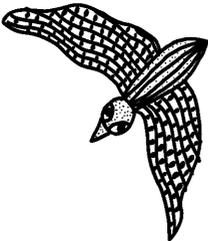
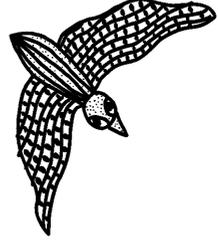
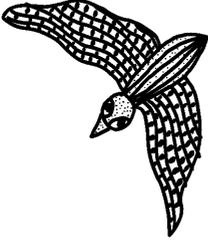
I'm thankful it all happened prematurely. I was 42 when I had a hysterectomy.* My doctor removed my uterus and both ovaries. Months later, the symptoms of menopause began.

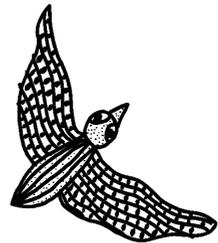
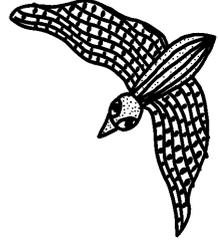
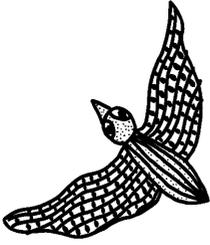
I felt horribly hot. My sweat trickled down as if someone had dumped a bucket of water on my head. I didn't think twice and took Menopausal Hormone Therapy. It was fantastic. My hot flashes disappeared.

I've always been very active. I felt lighter without my periods. Free to work nights at a hospital, to teach at a university in the morning, to help doctors with surgical procedures in the evenings. When hot flashes came, I talked to my co-workers about them and never felt awkward about it.

*A hysterectomy is the surgical removal of the uterus.







GLOSSARY

Anxiolytics – Medications to treat anxiety.

Chi kung – Also known as qigong, qi gong, chi 'ung or chi gung, chi kung is a system of coordinated body-posture and movement, breathing and meditation used for the purposes of health, spirituality and martial-arts training.

Hysterectomy – A hysterectomy is a surgical procedure to remove the womb (uterus). You'll no longer be able to get pregnant after the operation. If you have not already gone through the menopause, you'll no longer have periods, regardless of your age.

Maca root – Maca root grows in the Andes mountains in Peru and belongs to the mustard plant family.

MHT – Menopausal Hormone Therapy (also known as Hormone Replacement Therapy or HRT) covers a range of hormonal treatments that can reduce menopausal symptoms.

Presbyopia – Presbyopia is a condition in which the eye lens refracts light in such a way that it does not focus properly on the retina, making it difficult to see objects in close-range. It can develop in middle-aged and older adults.

UTI – A urinary tract infection (UTI) is an infection in any part of your urinary system: your kidneys, ureters, bladder and urethra.

Tinnitus – Tinnitus is when you experience ringing or other noises in one or both of your ears. It can occur after menopause.

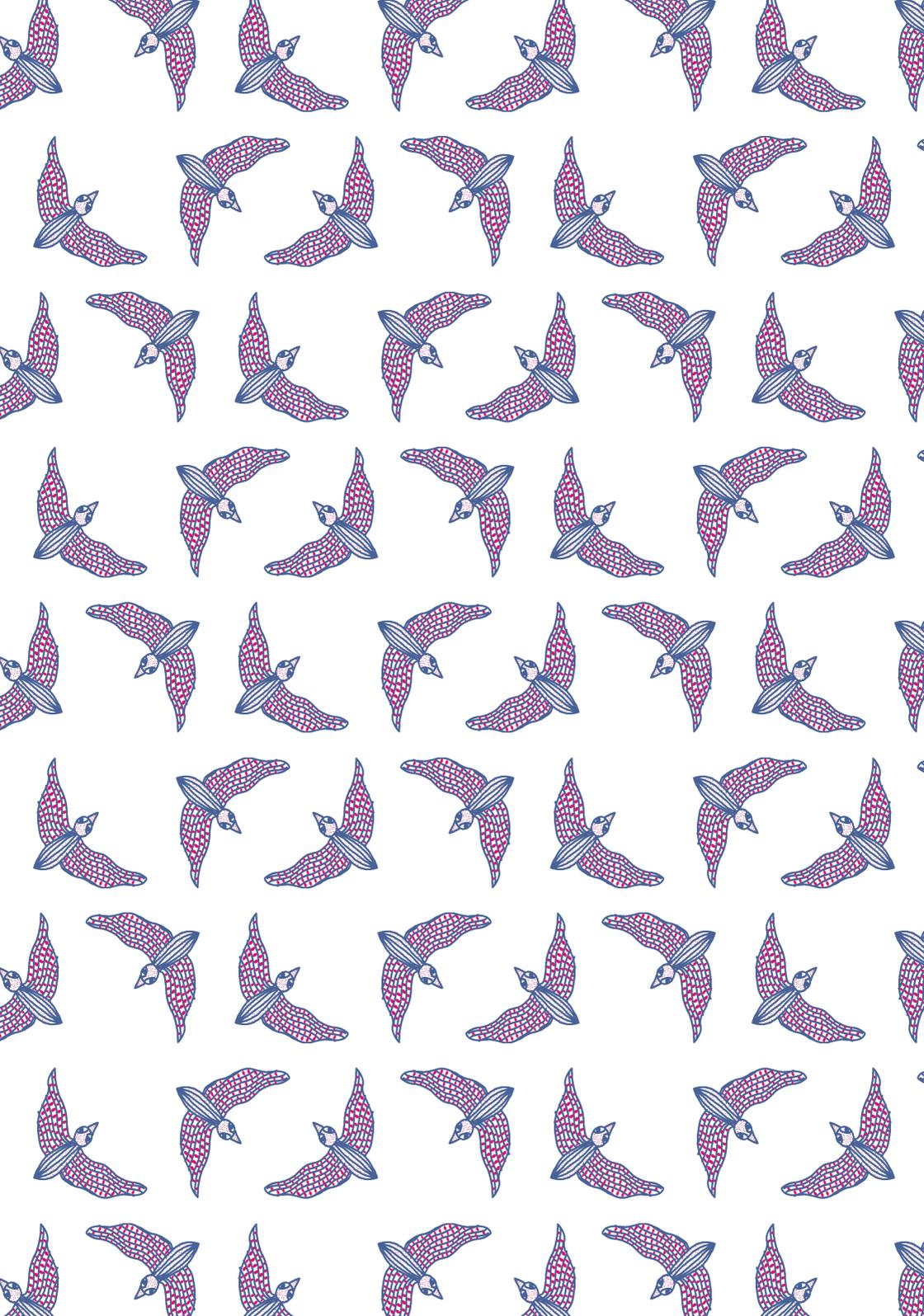
The Zapotec – The Zapotec are an indigenous people of Mexico, whose population is concentrated in the southern state of Oaxaca and neighboring states.

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THE NEXT CHAPTER

...My friends got me when I was down and out...
On a bad day, I would meet one of them for coffee
or tea to chat – it made a big difference...

Riya, 60, Kolkata, India

...If 51 percent of the world's population goes through
menopause, why is it such a taboo? I think about this
more and more. Who decided that it was uncomfortable
to talk about a process that all women go through?
Hopefully this silence will soon end...

Jessica, 51, Mexico City, Mexico

...There's so much prejudice around menopause,
that we come to see it as something negative rather
than what it is – an essential life phase like any
other. I've tried to live well and embrace it...

Beatriz, 54, Fortaleza, Brazil

...I wish I'd known what to expect, but menopause
isn't something that people talk about. I will definitely
make sure my daughter is prepared when the time
comes – and I'll be there to help her through it...

Li Jing, 52, Beijing, China