

Perimenopause and Menopause with Fay Durrant

Speaker Key:

VO	Presenter
CB	Chantal Boyle
PS	Paul Shriever
FD	Fay Durrant

PR

Welcome to the Sunflower Conversations, where we explore the Hidden Disabilities Sunflower, and its role in supporting people with hidden disabilities.

CB

Welcome to the Sunflower Conversations. Today, I am joined by Paul Shriever, my colleague. How are you doing, Paul?

PS

Very well, Chantal. How's it going? All right?

CB

Yes, really good, thank you. And this topic today that we're going to discuss is particularly dear to my heart at the moment, in my phase of life, we're going to be joined by Fay Durrant, who is a wellbeing and menopause coach, and she joins us today to specifically talk about perimenopause and menopause. So, welcome, Fay.

FD

Thank you.

CB

This is particularly close to my heart at my time of life, so I'm really pleased that we're going to have the opportunity to talk about this today.

PS

My wife has also gone through it, and it's impacted all of the people around her, in one way or another. And so, it is also of great interest to me. And what I do not want to do for one moment, and I'll probably edit this out, is to step on anyone's toes. This is about you guys, so I just want to...

00:01:40

FD

But it's really great that you do want to know, because I think if more men actually did take an interest, then things would be a lot better understood, a lot better researched, and probably less relationships would break down.

PS

Thanks ever so much, guys, both of you, for just allowing me to be included in this chat, first of all. What have you been up to, Chantal? What's been happening? Are you all right?

CB

Yes. I'm all right now. I have been really, really emotional, crying at anything and everything. And I had a bit of disappointment last week, because I was waiting to try and get some HRT, and I was told that I needed to have some investigations. So, that meant that the HRT was going to be put on hold, until these investigations had been carried out. And the waiting list seemed to be quite a long time, and I'd already been on the waiting list for a long time already to get to this point.

00:02:40

So, a friend of mine is an acupuncturist, and she invited me to go and have a session with her, and I've never had it before. And for me, it's been amazing. I feel so grounded now. And it makes me realise how all over the place my emotions have been. During the needles, have you ever had acupuncture, Paul?

FD

Yes.

PS

Have you, Fay?

CB

Have you had it, Paul?

PS

No, I haven't. My daughter has, and she has it regularly, and she raves about how good it is.

CB

I know that we're not medical advisors here, I'm just talking about my personal experience, but what I just wanted to share with you, because when the treatment started, after about a few minutes, it wasn't long, the emotions came bubbling up, and I really started crying, so much so, I had to call her back in the room to be with me. And then after the treatment, when it all finished, I felt really floaty.

And then I left floating, down the road, and I thought, this is very nice. And then I had the afternoon, met up with a friend, and then as the afternoon progressed, I started to feel worse, and worse, and worse. And I thought, I'm going to have to call her, because something's not right, I feel terrible, the emotions started coming up again.

00:04:15

And then in the evening, early evening, this was literally brought on by somebody inviting me

round, I lost my mind. I really started crying, proper howling crying. And after that, I just felt so much better. I felt so much better. And I still feel, I keep counting the days, because this was Saturday, and today is Tuesday, I think, no Wednesday...

PS

Wednesday.

CB

Wednesday, yes.

FD

You're as bad as me, I never know what day it is.

CB

So, I that this isn't going to be forever, and I know that other things need to happen, but it is so nice to feel grounded and calm. So, that was my weekend, and it's been a very nice experience to have, and to actually be back in tune and remember what it's like to actually feel quite grounded and calm. Because actually, on reflection, I don't think I've been calm for years now.

FD

I think that's a lot of it. A lot of our symptoms during menopause are related to the fact that we just don't release things, we don't express things enough, particularly in England. And we suppress it all, and put up that veneer that everything's fine. And sometimes, it's good to just let it all out. I'm very lucky where I live, I live in the middle of nowhere, quite isolated, so if I want to just go and scream into the woods, I can. But most people don't have that option.

00:05:55

CB

I know that we're going to come on to this, as we go through our chat, but self-care, and what things you can do to manage what we're going through, but I think generally, in life, in this country, we are very much told to keep our voices down, and not emit sound, unless it's something of positivity. And actually, it's a natural bodily response to sigh, to whaaa sometimes. And if we're not doing that, it's all compounded in our bodies.

FD

And even just crying, just the act of crying, is a release, and it releases a lot of tension and pressure in us. It's frowned upon in a lot of places, still, but I think it's quite necessary.

CB

Thanks for joining us, Fay. Fay is a wellbeing and menopause coach, and has been working in this sphere for a long time. And also, she has the added benefit of being able to bring her own lived experience of perimenopause. So, Fay, thanks for coming today, and I think we should really just start off with what is perimenopause and menopause, and what is the difference between the two?

FD

Okay. So, everybody's heard about menopause by now, I should imagine, and menopause is actually just one day, which surprises a lot of people. The actual menopause is the day that you haven't had a period for a year, well, when you haven't had a period for a year, that's it, you've done your menopause. That is the day. What most people think of as menopause is perimenopause, which can be up to ten years prior to that day.

00:07:53

So, most of the women who are saying, we're going through the menopause, they're actually going through perimenopause, which is the build up to that day. And once you haven't had a period for a year, you're officially postmenopausal. Some people do carry on having symptoms, postmenopausal, but they don't have the regular periods.

So, that's less common, your symptoms normally get a lot less, once you're postmenopausal. So, there's perimenopause, menopause, and post-menopause, it's just the three different stages.

CB

Okay. So, the menopause is that day, that's the big day, when...

FD

Yes. And the average age of that, for women in the UK anyway, is 51. I'm already past that average. Still not quite there yet.

CB

So, you're still perimenopausal. I'm perimenopausal, as well. And what has your experience been like in the run up to this?

FD

I think, for the first few years, I just didn't have a clue what was going on, which is very common. I hear that with a lot of people that I work with. And a lot of people are also a bit in denial about it. I think the association of being in the menopause transition means a lot of things to a lot of people. It's associated with getting older, we're feeling less valuable as a person. So, people don't want to think that they're going through that.

00:09:32

I remember speaking to my sister, when I started doing all my menopause training, and she's only a couple of years younger than me, and she was just in complete denial. No, I don't need to. I was, like, come and do some training with me. I'm doing this course, you can do it for free. No, no, no, I don't need that, I don't need that. And then about six months later, she was, like, maybe I do. Maybe I do need that, actually.

It's slightly different, because I live most of the time in Spain, it's slightly different in Spain. I think there is a lot more fear of being an old woman, still, in Spain, where you're very categorised into you're this woman, you this woman, you're an old woman. And so, it's almost a taboo subject to say to somebody, you're menopausal, because that means you're saying that they're past their best. At least we're getting over that in England.

CB

Yes. It's the fertility, isn't it?

FD

If you're no longer able to produce children, then you're not of any use to society, I think. Which is crazy in 2023, when a lot of people are choosing not to have children anyway. Obviously, we know that women's worth isn't just determined by their birthing capabilities. So, there's a lot of denial about it. There's a lot of not wanting to accept just the ageing process, I think. That's a whole different subject about the ageing discrimination that women face a lot more than men.

00:11:13

But really, I think there's just not been enough education, and there's not enough knowledge about what are perimenopausal symptoms. So, everybody knows about hot flushes. They're the famous symptom. But I've never knowingly had a hot flush. I've had a few times where I've thought, I'm a bit hot. Maybe it's a hot flush, but I also live in Spain, where it gets very hot.

CB

Yes. So, it's hard to know.

FD

It's hard to know. Quite a lot of my clients have never had a hot flush, so that's definitely not the only symptom. I have a list that I send to people called the List of Joy, and I think it's got over a hundred different symptoms, we've got several for every letter of the alphabet. I do an alphabet list.

CB

That's interesting.

FD

And there's such a wide variety of symptoms, anything from, and there are a lot of mental health symptoms, and I'll come back to that, because that's been my main thing, really, mental health symptoms, and that links into the ADHD kind of thing, as well. But anything from achy joints, which is quite a common one, quite a well-known one, but dry everything, dry skin, dry mouth, needing to drink more water, brittle nails, brittle hair, hair loss. God, there are so many different...

CB

I actually said to Paul this morning, before we started this, my hair's gone funny, shall I tie it back?

FD

One of my first symptoms was I got patches of alopecia. I had no idea that that was anything to do with menopause, and my doctor obviously didn't, as well, because I was quite concerned about it, and I was speaking to her, and she was, like, no, that doesn't mean you're in menopause. And I was [inaudible]. I don't think I was having hot flushes at the time, actually.

00:13:17

I think I've mentioned this to you before, Chantal, I had a real winter duvet, and I was getting sweaty at night. And then my daughter came to stay, and she was, like, no, Mum, I think it's just the duvet, because I'm getting sweaty at night, as well. But I thought I was having hot flushes, so I said to the doctor, I'm having hot flashes, I'm losing all my hair, and she was, like, no, it can't possibly be the menopause. But I was definitely in the age range.

CB

And then you don't feel validated, do you?

FD No.

And you go away, thinking, okay, I'm not really sure what's happening to me, then.

FD

And a lot of women get told they're just depressed, and put on antidepressants, which isn't usually the best thing.

CB No.

FD

There are so many things. I don't know if you do show notes or anything, but I'm happy to put a link to where people can look at this list.

CB

Yes. I think that would be absolutely fantastic, and super helpful. Because the mouth, the dry mouth, a lot of people don't realise that. And if there are a hundred on there, I've started to track mine, and after we spoke last, and I started to track mine. And already, it's, like, oh, my gosh, there's this, and there's this, and there's this.

00:14:39

FD

Yes. A lot of things that people are talking about more, like brain fog is a huge one, insomnia, so many things that could be perimenopause, but could also be something else, so it's very, very difficult to really know, until you start tracking. And when you start tracking, if you see the patterns that run in cycles, then it's easier to go, well, that must be perimenopausal, then, because it always happens...

CB

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PS

Fay, do you think this is something, because what seems to blow my mind, and it runs, I think, across multiple conditions now, but it seems to me this has been going since the dawn of time. But I was talking to my wife, we're in our mid-50s, and she was talking about her Mum, and said that back then, just as little as a generation ago, you just got on with it, which seems staggering. And I think it's so good that actually, even the very fact that we are chatting about it now, for me, is something.

FD

I have a slightly different take on that, and I think a generation ago, like your Mum's Mum, my Granny, almost that age range, really, my Granny, I remember speaking to her about it a long time ago, and she said, oh, no, dear, I don't think we had that in my day.

00:16:30

PS

It's incredible, isn't it? And that's what I think I just want to...

FD

But, the life that they led was so completely different to the life that we lead in every single way. She did work, my Granny, but part time. There was a lot a lot less stress. Obviously, there was stress for some people, but that there just wasn't the pressure on midlife women that there is now. Most women going through menopause, a lot of them have still got young children, because they're having children a lot later.

I consider myself incredibly lucky, but most people thought I was crazy, because I had my children very young. But now, at this age, I'm, like, well, who's the crazy one now? Because all my friends have got teenage children. I could not imagine having a teenage child, and going through... So, you're both in this hormonal chaos.

CB

Yes. That is the predicament I find myself in.

FD It makes me feel a bit panicky, just thinking about it.

CB

Yes. Well, that's the predicament I'm in because I'm struggling to hang on to normality in my mind, and my children, because it is an actual fact, isn't it, that the neural pathways change in teenagers and they unlearn everything, and then it all has to be relearnt.

00:17:55

FD

Yes. They're redeveloping those things.

CB

So, I'm probably not the best parent, at the moment, because my reaction to what they are like...

FD

I can't imagine how I would have coped with my teenage daughters, if had been perimenopausal.

CB

It's very challenging. So, just going back... And the other thing I wanted to say on what you were saying there is that it has to be said that some women don't experience anything. They seem to sail through it. But back when you were talking about your grandparents, they never

spoke about personal issues. Mental health was never spoken about.

FD

No. I'm sure there's an element of both, they didn't speak about it, but also, I just think that the amount of stress that we are under, men and women, at this time of life, it does seem to be worse for women, because they still do the majority of the childcare. I'm talking average stereotypical things here, not everybody, but they do the majority of the childcare.

And they normally are the ones who are arranging the care for the elderly parents, as well. So, you're stuck in that sandwich, stress sandwich, care for your elderly parents, and your children, and work, and run your house...

00:19:19

PS

And English, which means you're repressed anyway, right?

FD

Yes. And then there's the cost of living rises on top of everything else. It's just that. It would be too pressure for anybody. Whereas in the 1950s, you were unlikely to be working, you had the responsibility of the family, things were a lot more affordable, things were a lot less stressful. We weren't up all night, watching Netflix. We got to bed at a sensible time.

Life was a very different thing. We ate a much healthier, less processed diet. I'm very big on lifestyle factors. I'm not against HRT by any means, but a lot of the time, HRT, people think of it as a silver bullet that's just going to cure everything, and if you're not addressing the stresses in your life and the lifestyle changes that you can make, it's unlikely to work as well as you would like it to.

CB

Yes. I've heard this a lot,

FD

And it can also be quite a stress, getting the right combination and finding the right dose. And so, it's not like you're going to get prescribed HRT, and magically, everything's going to be fine. But there were some studies done a while ago, which became very famous and put everybody off HRT, because they said that it was linked to a rise in breast cancer rates and things.

But the actual studies were really not well done, and there have been a lot more studies since then, which show that that's not true, for the majority of women, that's not true. If you have a high risk of breast cancer anyway, there is a risk. But for the normal woman, who doesn't have a high risk of breast cancer, it doesn't increase your risk. But all the subsequent studies didn't get the media attention that [overtalking].

00:21:12

CB That's right. They just picked out that headline, didn't they?

FD

Yes. So, even doctors, until very recently, still remember that don't take HRT study, and

have been very reluctant to prescribe it. Since all the Davina shows, we've had the Davina effect in England, where she spoke a lot about the benefits of HRT, and people started demanding it more, and getting more informed about it, and doctors did get more informed about it, as well.

CB

Suicide in women, you know the... That's [overtalking].

FD

Suicide in women, the highest figures are during menopause age. I don't know the actual figures, how many women are doing it, but the highest rate of suicide in women is at that age. Whereas in men, it's much younger, young men [overtalking].

CB

And you would hear of women, Granny's age, taking to their beds and things like that. So, it has been affecting women for [overtalking].

FD

Definitely. My Granny said that she didn't have it, but my Mum says she remembers her, my Granny wasn't one for lying down and not doing anything, but she said that around that age, she remembers her just lying in the garden being sweaty and [unclear]. So, she definitely did have it.

00:22:29

CB

Can we come back to the experience that you have had a struggle with, with your mental health?

FD

Yes, definitely. My first symptoms, other than alopecia, which I didn't know was anything to do with perimenopause, was anxiety and panic attacks, which I did have when I was a teenager, but not too bad. It was just, like, I'd get the bus, instead of get the Tube. I couldn't get on the Tube, it gave me a panic, whereas that was all right, I'd just get a bus.

CB

Could you explain, for people that have never had a panic attack, what it feels like?

CB

It's different for everybody. I'm lucky, I didn't get the super severe panic attacks, where I couldn't breathe, but for some people, it can feel like you're having a heart attack. You get so panicked, you can't breathe, you're hyperventilating severely. Mine was more like definitely, I could feel my heart rate rising, so you can really feel the heart going.

An inability to think clearly. Panic about completely illogical things, and sometimes, you don't even know what you're panicking about. I'm not good in supermarkets, they seem to set me off a bit.

CB

I think, when we spoke, you said that you just left your shopping.

FD Yes. I've abandoned my trolley a few times. I've just got halfway around the supermarket, and gone, I can't do this anymore. I just had to go. And I just thought I was going crazy, because I hadn't had that since I was a teenager.

00:24:04

CB

Which would have been hormone related then, as well, wouldn't it?

FD

Definitely. So, I spoke to the doctor, and they were, like, well, you don't really want to take beta blockers, do you? And I was, like, no, I don't really want to take beta blockers. And that was what they offered me, and I didn't want to take that. So, that was that, there was no more discussion. There was nothing like, oh, this could be menopause related. So, yes, panic attacks, and just a rise in anxiety, which kept me awake at night.

Mostly, for me, I'd be okay during the day, but when I got into bed, no matter how tired I was, I've never had a problem sleeping, but I'd just lie there, mildly panicking about things, and not being able to sleep. And a lot of the time, it was nothing in particular that I was panicking about.

PS

I think it's worse at night, isn't it? When you're on your own, and your brain just starts turning, doesn't it, and you can't switch off? It's very difficult. I've been there.

FD

And certainly, a few years ago, none of these symptoms were being spoken about. So, now they are getting more spoken about, and they are being more widely recognised as perimenopausal things, but still not enough, I don't think. It's the physical symptoms that seem to get more publicity than the mental health ones.

00:25:31

CB

I'd be interested to know, and I'm not asking you this question, but I would be interested to know whether there's a link between what age you start menstruating to how long you've got, what period of time you have, if that's a thing. Because I think, on reflection, that I have probably been in perimenopause for about ten years now. But as you say, these things that happen, they're not linked to anything specifically.

We didn't know about perimenopause, then, either, and the only thing that I was very aware of was these sweats. Well, I was having sweaty nights, but what I believed it to be was you had to change all of your sheets. So, I wasn't having to change all of my sheets, but I would need to take my pyjama top. So, I wasn't sure whether that was it.

And then I had a period of time where my joints were so stiff, my ankles and my hips, when I'd wake up in the morning. I was, like, wow, I really feel like an old woman, crikey. What else? More recently, my emotions do bounce about like a tennis ball, they really do. And I've

been quite ragey recently, poor family. And on Saturday, when I woke up in the morning, before I'd been for the acupuncture, my mouth was on fire. The inside of my lip, my gums.

FD

Yes. Things like that, that you just wouldn't associate as a symptom.

CB

And I've been looking at my teeth, and I'm thinking, I think my gums are receding, because it all affects your bones, doesn't it? [Overtalking] off of oestrogen?

00:27:25

FD

Yes. That's another one that isn't spoken about, and personally, for me, that's a really important one, because my Mum, she's never been diagnosed, but she's definitely very osteoporotic. I've always had a problem with bone strength and bone health. I hate to bitch about the NHS, because I value it immensely, and I think they're amazing, but it's so bad, when it comes to women's health, in particular.

And osteoporosis, 60% of women post-menopause will be diagnosed with osteoporosis. That's a huge amount of women, yet there's so little education about that. I was diagnosed as osteopenic, which is the precursor to osteoporosis, in my late 30s, and I've been given no follow-up. If I wasn't working in this area, if I didn't know a lot about it anyway, I wouldn't have had another scan.

So, I had one in my late 30s that said I was osteopenic, but the doctor didn't give me any lifestyle programme to prevent me from becoming osteoporotic. And I had to request, myself, to have a bone scan ten years later. I was, like, do you think we ought to check again?

CB

And the thing is, with the bones, do you think, and I don't know if you've had this checked, but with regards to oestrogen, do you think that maybe if you had been given supplementary oestrogen boosts, that would help?

FD

It does help.

00:29:02

CB

Because I know that they recommend us to take HRT, just for bone and brain health.

FD

Yes. So, it does help, definitely. I've gone down the lifestyle route, and I've been doing a lot of weights, and I have a very active lifestyle anyway, and I've tried to do it through nutrition, and I haven't broken anything for the past ten years, which is a record.

CB

Well done. And long may it continue.

FD

It was every few months before, I'd be breaking something.

CB

Because the trauma to your body, having that happen, and then having to then heal from it, it's harsh.

FD

Yes. But people also don't associate that with receding gums. And it is very associated with it, because you've got the bone inside your gums, and if that's receding, then your actual gums are going to be receding. And then things like a lot of people want to have implants, you can't have implants, if your bones are receding, because they won't work.

And unfortunately, I had a big dental thing a couple of years ago, and they didn't ask me about my bone health at all, which I think they probably should have done, so I had a lot of implants put in, and none of them took.

CB

And that's expensive and painful.

FD

Yes, it was very expensive. Several thousand pounds.

CB

Very painful.

00:30:26

FD

And I'm not good at the dentist, so it was a very traumatic thing for me, and then they didn't take. But had they asked me about my bone health, obviously, I would have said.

CB

It's so bizarre, isn't it? They are the people that we go to for support to do with our health, and I think we need to say thank you to Davina, and the other well-known celebrities, who have really pushed forward the campaign for women's health, so that we are now talking about it more, and we are taking it upon ourselves to do research, record podcasts, get the knowledge out there, so that women can make a bit more of an informed choice about how they want to manage their health.

900,000 women left work in 2021 because of menopause symptoms. So, the impact to the economy alone.

FD

I heard that the government, recently, is having a campaign to try and get women of that age back into the workplace. The only thing I've heard about that is that they're going to send them a letter, saying, why don't you go back to work?

CB

That's great.

FD

And maybe we need to address the issues that are preventing women from going back to work, or making them leave work in the first place.

00:31:56

CB

Well, one symptom, actually, that I wanted to talk about, and we're obviously talking about mental health impacts and physical impacts, but one impact, which is very physical, and women probably do feel very self-conscious about it, is flooding that can occur. Women can, not all women, but can have terrible, terrible flooding around the time of their period.

And I've had people tell me that there's a smell, they feel that they smell. And so, all of that is going to make you very reclusive, isn't it? And being able to manage your work, and being in public spaces, when you're going through that on a monthly basis, that is hard.

FD

I had one client, poor lady, who just bled for about two and a half years, pretty much nonstop. And sometimes, it was very, very, very heavy. She couldn't leave the house, pretty much, for a lot of the time, and she was getting incredibly physically weak. She was so anaemic. It was obviously menopause related, but again, that was never even mentioned to her by her doctors.

CB

Paul, you are married, and you have had a Mum, and what have you, so you're around women's hormones a lot. As I said, it can affect your work, it affects relationships. Is there anything that you want to share with us about your observations of what it can be like?

PS

I think all I want to say is that I genuinely have no idea about what you guys are going through. I can read about it, and I think awareness is massively important in understanding it. And also, just to say that it does really impact everyone around whoever that individual is, and it clearly has done. And that's just something that I think is worth very much mentioning, as someone...

00:34:22

My wife went perimenopausal very early on. She was only in her 40s, and it just fundamentally changed everything. I just want to say it changed our relationship, it fundamentally changed things, and still is, it's still very much there, and the fallout from that. And it's about compromise. All relationships, I think, are anyway, it's about meeting in the middle and about balance, and actually, it's really interesting, personally, here, for just to sit and listen to you guys, and understand.

Because it's about understanding. I think I'm of that age, as well, where I'm still trying to... 20, 30 years ago, it was perceived, and I'm trying to articulate myself now, in a slightly different way. And I think a lot of things are. And this is much broader than just menopause, I just want to say. I think it's about anything, through from autism, and how people, I think, back in the day, and this is what I touched on earlier, would say, oh, they've got a bit of a

behavioural problem.

And I think that has changed. I think it's really good that it's changed, because you can hone in, and say, well, this is actually a condition, and it's this. And actually, you need to be mindful of this, and these are some of the symptoms, and this is what we can do to help improve that. And so, I think that's the thing that I get from this. And obviously, understanding it is so important. It's important that I understand that.

00:36:03

CB

Yes. I think being able to talk about how you're feeling is really important. Up until recently, young girls weren't talking about periods, so it's women's health all the way through. It's something, like, why are you talking about that? Eugh, we don't want to think about blood. Why... Oh, don't do that.

FD

It's dirty. It's not nice.

CB

God, why are you saying that? I'm not going to get sanitary towels or tampons, eugh.

FD

Gosh, yes, asking your boyfriend to get you some sanitary towels, no way.

CB

And actually, it is part of life, and it is important to be able to talk about these things.

PS

100%.

CB

So, Paul and I talk about how I am feeling with my ups and downs, and it's really nice to be able to talk about that in a workspace and in a work environment, and I feel comfortable to do that. But conversely, sometimes, I'm not articulating to my family how I feel. Sometimes, it's easier to talk to somebody on the outside.

FD

I think it's harder with your family, because with families and partners, it can be a whole different level.

PS

Agreed.

CB What's the divorce rate and the breakup rate in that age group?

00:37:19

FD Oh, gosh, really high. But I think men do, again, there's not enough research on this, but the menopause is what women go through, and I think a lot of men do go through, it's

called andropause, so it's not as well-known as menopause, but men have hormonal changes, as well. Not as dramatic as women. Men still produce testosterone, but they don't produce as much testosterone.

And for some men, it really, really does go down. And I think I told you, Chantal, before, unfortunately, my relationship broke up. I think it was a combination of the lockdown and perimenopause, but I also think he was probably going through andropause, because we've been separated for quite some time now, and he's still not back to himself. I think he thought that leaving me, because I was the problem, leaving me would cure everything. It really hasn't.

CB

But he's going through some changes, as well.

FD

He's definitely through some changes. Definitely. Definitely. And I think a lot of men, that does happen for, but we always used to term it as a midlife crisis.

CB

That's exactly right.

FD

Men didn't have a menopause, they had a midlife crisis.

CB

Yes. So, men had a midlife crisis, and women were going through the change.

00:38:40

PS

Exactly. And also, guys, this idea about it being a taboo subject, that extends to mental health, doesn't it? And only recently, that's become something that's a little bit more acceptable to speak about, but they're all so intrinsically linked. Of course they are, because it's you, isn't it? So, if everything's surging around, and you have issues with your hormones, that's going to impact your head.

FD

Gosh, hormones run our bodies. We talk about hormones, like they're a women's thing. Everybody, every living person, is controlled by their hormones. And it's not just the reproductive hormones, they control everything.

CB

Yes. That's such an important point to raise.

FD

And so, everything affects, if we do one thing with one hormone, that has a knock on effect on all the other hormones. So, our stress levels is something I talk about a lot.

CB

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FD

And I touched on this earlier with the menopause symptoms being less for a lot of women in the 1950s, because their stress levels were a lot lower. Cortisol is not thought of as a menopausal hormone, but it's massively important. And controlling our cortisol becomes more important during menopause, because where we produce our cortisol is in the adrenal glands, and they become more important during menopause.

00:40:21

We need them to be functioning better during menopause, because our ovaries stop functioning, so we need our adrenals functioning more, because that's where some of the oestrogen is going to be produced, the oestrogen we do have. But if our adrenals are already completely exhausted producing cortisol all the time, because we're so stressed, they're not going to manage to produce the oestrogen, so we're going to have a worst time.

CB

This is excellent. And just to clarify that cortisol is the body's reaction to being stressed, so it's the fight and flight, when your body is in that. So, as you said at the beginning of our chat, the stressful lives, having to make these quick decisions, money worries.

FD

For me, the stress issue is the elephant in the room that not enough people are talking about and dealing with. But it's one of the first things that I work on with people, just finding ways to reduce their stress levels, which is hard. It is hard in modern life.

PS

Fay, do you find yourself behaving, or are you conscious of how, do you have mood swings? Because I know that Chantal has talked about this, and just from experience, in terms of does it fluctuate hugely?

FD

Gosh, yes.

PS

And are you aware of that? And is it something where you're thinking, oh, my God?

00:41:50

FD

Very much. Very much so. And I've designed my life, over the past few years, to have as little stress as possible. But obviously, everybody has some stress, and we cannot control the world around us. I've chosen to move away from a very, very busy life in the city, and I now live completely the opposite extreme, I live completely in nature, up a mountain.

But because of that, I earn a lot less money than I used to, so that's an added stress. I have things, like I live in a very wild place, where there are some very big, scary animals that

could pop by, so that's a completely different stress.

CB

I don't think I could cope with that.

FD

I don't know, it's less scary than going for a walk late at night in London, I think.

CB

That's a good point. Fair enough.

PS

There are some big, scary animals in London, believe me.

FD

I'd rather take my chances with a wolf.

CB

We've just mentioned ADHD and perimenopausal women, and I know you've done a little bit of investigation into this. What have you found?

FD

I never even considered the fact that I could be ADHD, I think until the pandemic hit. I think there had been a few times before that where I was, like, oh, that sounds a bit like me, but I've never really taken it very seriously. And then when the pandemic hit, all of my coping mechanisms, the life I had created, my work life and everything, it really worked for me.

00:43:41

And then when the pandemic hit, and that all was destroyed overnight, then suddenly, I was, like, my God, all of these ADHD symptoms are me. And most of these autism symptoms, it was just everything. But at the same time, well, a lot of them could also be perimenopausal symptoms. And there's so much crossover, so I've never been officially diagnosed with ADHD or autism. I've had all the pre-assessments.

My doctor was, like, well, you tick all of the boxes. I'll send you for an assessment, if you like, but it's a four year waiting list, and what's the point, really, if you're not going to take the medication? And I definitely don't want to take the ADHD medication for quite personal reasons. There are a lot of symptoms that could be one or the other, or again, they could be stress responses. Pretty much the whole world is still recovering from the pandemic, and the stress that that caused.

It could be that, that is causing all these ADHD symptoms. There is so much more that we need to learn, and there's so little research into menopause generally, but that is improving, but into ADHD and menopause, so there's even less research, especially because all the ADHD research has been done on men and boys. So, we know a lot about how it presents for them, but not so much about how it presents for women, and it is different.

00:45:23

And particularly, in menopause, a lot of people, if they have got a diagnosis, a lot of people feel that their symptoms become worse. Or other people start to notice symptoms that they didn't notice before. So, they're the group that are, like, well, is it ADHD, or is it perimenopause?

CB

Yes. I would say that that sounds very similar to my experience, as well. Everything's become exacerbated, and I did actually speak to the doctor about it, similar to you, in that these are the things that I'm experiencing, and this is where my mind goes to and how I deal with certain situations, my approach to work and how I work. And I'm not sure if it's perimenopause, or whether it's ADHD.

I'm just not sure. I don't know what is going on. But again, she was, like, well, you will have to be seen privately. It's a very difficult one. And as you said, ADHD presents so differently in women. Sometimes, I feel like it's so tiring. it's so tiring having this brain, because you try to do something, and you get so distracted, and then you forget what you were doing.

I can spend ages, flicking around screens on my computer, trying to remember why I'm trying to flick the screen, and what was it I was actually trying to look for in the first place.

FD

That's a classic thing. How many tabs have you got open?

CB

Yes. My family get my phone, and they're, like, you need to shut all of these down. So, I don't know. I haven't been given HRT yet. As I mentioned, I'm waiting for some investigations. But I am hoping that it will bring some positive change. But also, I'm hoping for my brain health and my bones, as we've just mentioned. I think that we have to end on the self-care treatments. And I would ask you to take that away, please, Fay.

00:47:39

FD

Well, basically, it's different for everybody, because what stresses people out and what relaxes people is very, very different. Mine are more the traditional. I like going for walks, I like doing yoga, I like swimming. These are all fairly traditional self-care things, I think. But I've got clients who hate all that. They really don't get into that at all, so there's no point in trying to make them do that. It will just be more stress for them.

So, one of my clients is an amazing nail artist, but she doesn't do it professionally anymore, she just does it for fun, and she'll spend four hours doing her nails, she paints these amazing pictures on them, and she's totally focused on that.

CB

Mindfulness.

FD

Yes, it's like proper mindfulness. But if you said to someone, I'm mindfully painting my nails, they'd just think you're bonkers. But crochet and knitting is a good thing, gardening, anything that brings you a little bit of joy is perfect. So, that's one of the big things that I work on with

people, just trying to find pockets throughout the day, where you do things that actually bring you a little bit of joy and can help you switch your brain off a bit.

00:48:59

And even if it's just ten minutes. Ideal, if it can be longer, but just a ten minute mindful break is better than nothing. What I hate to do is stress people out by giving them a long list of these are all the things that you must include into your day. Because the most common thing for women of this age is that we don't have time to squeeze anything more into our day.

CB

And movement, very important.

FD

Movement, if you can, very important, but I've got some clients who were fairly immobile, so then it's just doing what you can with your mobility. Some people might not be able to go for a walk, but they might be able to do some stretching, so that's going to help. Because I've worked with a lot of ageing populations, I've actually got some very old, very frail people that I can adapt movement to suit almost anybody.

There's a lot you can do, even if you are immobile. I do bed yoga with some people, which is great. And they can't actually get out of bed, some of these people, but we can just do stuff in bed. Breathwork is a huge thing.

CB

Can you explain for people who might not know what breathwork is?

FD

There's a lot of talk about breath work at the moment, but most of the breath work that's being spoken about is the Wim Hof breathing, that's become very famous, and a lot of his techniques are very fast paced. That can produce more anxiety. So, the breath work that I do is completely the opposite to that style of breathing. It's basically calming the nervous system.

00:50:48

So, it's more the kind of thing that you would do in a calming yoga session. One of the most simple techniques that I teach to everybody is breathing in, maybe for four, if you can manage that...

CB

Through your nose or your mouth?

FD

And breathing out. So, I do it through my nose, but if you can do it through your nose, and out through your mouth, good. If you have to do it in and out through your mouth, that's how we start. So, ideally, nose breathing is better than mouth breathing, but for a lot of people, that's hard, as well. But the basic technique is just breathing in for four, breathing out for six.

Now, if you breathe out for longer, and you do that repeatedly, that sends a really powerful message to your whole nervous system that you're safe, that you're calm, that you're not in a

stressful situation. Because when you're in a stressful situation, your breath speeds up normally. If you're running away from a tiger, you're going to breathe a bit faster, and you can't take those deep breaths. So, it's getting back to the primal body.

Because we haven't developed, our bodies haven't changed in thousands of years, even though the world around us has completely changed. So, all of these stresses that we're experiencing now, we didn't have before. We just had big stresses, and then our body would have time to recover. Now we're just constantly being stressed. So, throughout the day, that is one thing that everybody can do, just take a deep breath in.

00:52:22

CB

How often would you say that you need to do that?

FD

Any time you get really stressed, do a few of those.

CB

This is so good. I've heard about breath work, I watched people on Instagram in the pandemic, trying to help myself, but I didn't realise what was happening. So, that's been really helpful, how you've explained that it's just telling your body, everything's fine, you can be cool and calm.

FD

Yes. It's just sending a really powerful signal. So, if you can do that four in, six out, ten times, perfect. Everybody that I've done it with notices some difference after that. If you can't do it ten times to start with, just you do what you can. I use that to help me sleep at night, as well.

CB

Well, do you know what? There is so much more that I wanted to talk about, and we can do this again.

FD

I'd love to.

CB This has been so helpful to me, hopefully, it's been helpful to you, Paul.

PS

It's been really helpful, Fay and Chantal, both of you. I've learnt quite a lot today.

FD

Thank you for being interested. We need more men. I know a colleague, well colleague, someone I know from social media, but she works in the same area, she's just written a book for men about how to deal with menopausal women.

PS

Amazing. I'd love some reference to that.

00:53:55

CB

Let's put the link to that.

FD

I haven't got a link, but I'll ask her if I can get one, and I'll send that to you, as well. Because I think we need more [overtalking].

CB

Definitely. Knowledge is power. And the more we can understand about one another, we can then be able to put that supportive arm around each other, can't we?

FD

Exactly.

CB

Regardless of your sex. It's just about understanding what people are going through. And as Paul said earlier on, it's everything that we do here, at Hidden Disabilities Sunflower, anyway. And it really is non-visible. So, thank you very much. If you're interested in any of the advice discussed in this podcast, please follow up with your GP or healthcare practitioner.

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PR

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