

WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT MENOPAUSE

Real Stories from Women's Lived Experiences



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We Need to Talk About Menopause

We Need to Talk about Menopause uses engaging storytelling and sharp analysis to explore the lived experiences of women going through menopause, breaking the silence around a topic that is often considered taboo. Written by a team of psychologists and anthropologists, it aims to provide support, understanding, and visibility for women navigating this major life transition and to reframe menopause as a time of transformation rather than deficiency.

Through the stories of 60 different women, this book explores the physical and emotional toll of menopause, the impacts it can have on work and personal lives, and how these women navigated relationships, aging, and body image in a world that often stigmatizes this transition. This book shares personal stories about intrusive symptoms, feelings of isolation, and the struggle to talk openly about menopause. It encourages women and their families to start honest conversations, learn from each other, and recognize menopause as a unique and transformative experience.

It is valuable reading for those going through the menopause transition, their partners, and families, as well as for medical professionals, to hear the stories that don't often make it to their consultations. Amplifying these voices fosters a collective understanding of menopause as a natural, multifaceted experience.

The authors have created a dedicated website to complement this book, offering a wealth of resources and support for women navigating menopause. Visit <https://carleton.ca/conversations-about-menopause/> to explore additional insights, tools, and guidance.

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To all the women who shared their stories with us.



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Preface

Why write a book about menopause? Quite simply, we're writing a book about menopause to start a conversation, to encourage women to talk about their own experiences by reading about the experiences of others. This book is an attempt to situate our conversations within our current understanding of the world of menopause—its history, how menopause intersects with body image and aging, how it's depicted in the media and discussed at work—and how women navigate this new world upon entering perimenopause.

There are four authors in this book who have approached the research from our own perspectives, which has added many layers to our own conversations. Anne is a developmental psychologist who has researched development in the areas of transition, when teens become adults, when high school students become university students, and now, when women are in the menopausal transition. Anne is the driving force behind this book and brought the team together. Janet is an organizational psychologist whose research has focused on work, stress, and health. She is also interested in life transitions when people transition into the workforce or in mid-career, and it was a natural fit to consider how the menopausal transition affects women and their work. Emma is an anthropologist, exploring the role of trees in our society and also Anne's daughter. As the research was in development, Anne and Emma had many long and fruitful conversations that kept on going. Finally, Chichi, a recent Anthropology grad, joined the group as a research assistant while completing her research on Nigerian women in the diaspora. It didn't take long for Chichi to become a full-fledged part of the research and writing team.

Let us tell you some of our experiences and how they have shaped our conversations about menopause.

Anne: I didn't really know that much about menopause until I read Jen Gunter's book *The Menopause Manifesto* in 2021. At that time, I was a post-menopausal woman who had never had a really in-depth conversation about menopause (how I was feeling, what I was thinking, what was changing with my body) with anyone. Certainly not with my General Practitioner (GP), who only wanted to know if I was still menstruating each year at my physical, not even with any of the specialists I visited about what I later came to realize

were symptoms related to my menopausal transition. I would have brief chats with friends about hot flashes or sleep problems, but nothing more than that. And clearly, my husband knew I wasn't sleeping and that I was worried about my belly fat, or that I wasn't very interested in sex anymore, but we didn't talk about it either.

At the time, my biggest concern was ongoing urinary issues, symptoms that were akin to a urinary tract infection, but with no infection. I went through numerous courses of antibiotics until a physician finally referred me to a specialist, who put me on vaginal estrogen. But even then, because I was still menstruating, nobody talked about menopause or even perimenopause or why vaginal estrogen should make any difference.

Reading Jen Gunter's book was a real eye-opener, and it made me realize that there were likely many other women like me, who really didn't know much about what to expect during the menopause transition, with doctors who didn't spend much, if any, time discussing menopause with us. For women born in the 1960s and 1970s, we grew up not really talking about "women's issues" in any kind of public way. My mom gave me a book about menstruation (*Now You're a Woman* (ND)) that didn't really explain much. I can't remember that we ever really had a conversation about sex, and we never talked about menopause.

Janet: When I was in my early 20s, I remember seeing a comic come through the office fax machine (an early precursor to memes) with an older woman saying, "these aren't hot flashes, these are power surges." I laughed because it sounded so positive. Clearly, it was memorable since I can quote it more than 30 years later. However, I didn't give much thought to menopause until I was in my late 40s and friends mentioned they were postmenopausal, but my periods were as regular as ever. In my mid-50s, I joked about this to my family physician, and his response was, "well, don't get pregnant then." That was the full extent of my conversations about menopause with a medical professional until after my periods stopped. My conversations with my mother and sister were limited to "When did you stop having your period?" getting very short answers, with my mom saying, "I don't really remember." How was I to know that it is normal to still be in perimenopause at 57?

Working on this book while in the menopausal transition has been illuminating. The range of experiences that women have, from no symptoms at all to debilitating symptoms, is something that we don't normally consider. I learned that I'm not the only person who hasn't had many conversations about menopause. Now, when another woman mentions an array of health problems, my first response is "Could you be in peri-menopause? You need to tell your doctor about all your symptoms as a bundle because they may have a common underlying cause." As a result of our research, I had a long and specific conversation with my GP about Menopausal Hormone Therapy (MHT) to deal with my night sweats. The result was life changing. I went

from waking three times to sleeping through the night, sometimes a full eight hours! This led to feeling more awake and more clearheaded at work. MHT may not be right for every woman, but it is important to talk about what would work for you.

Emma: I remember as a teen, talking about periods with my friends was a bit like talking about a horrible disease or embarrassing physical ailment. You whispered about it, hid tampons up your sleeve, and swallowed pain meds quickly at your locker with a thankful nod to the friend who gave it to you, hoping she understood what you were going through. I took it as a given that the female body was a taboo topic of discussion and something you should struggle with silently. The expectation that girls and women would push through the pain, emotional turmoil, and discomfort of menstruation was well ingrained in me. One weekend, painful cramps made me so nauseous I threw up. A friend of mine came over and shrugged it off. She told me to get over it, and I'd feel better if I moved around. So, I showered, ate what little I could, and reluctantly left the house to go shopping. Menstrual cramps so painful I vomited were not a reason enough to skip a shopping trip.

I suspect for many menstruating people, this is not so uncommon a story. We do this. We socialize girls and women to dismiss their own pain, fear, and symptoms from the moment their bodies reach puberty. And when we talk about it, we can hold up this unreasonable expectation for our peers.

Chichi: I didn't talk about my period with my friends; it was a lonely process for a terrified ten-year-old girl who thought she had hurt herself. There is isolation and shame when you get your period much earlier than your friends; it feels unfair and like the world is ending. Thankfully, I was surrounded by the love and comfort of my mother and sister, who loudly proclaimed that I was finally entering womanhood. Now I wonder if she spoke so openly about my period, arguably a significant change in a woman's body, why not about menopause, another important change?

Thankfully, in summer school, I had a wonderful black female teacher who somehow knew I was uncomfortable with my rapidly changing body and developing much faster than my peers. That precious book, *The Care & Keeping of You* (Schaefer, 2013), made me feel less lonely and that my body and the changes weren't abnormal. Beyond that, we didn't talk about the body in our household. Fortunately, this study has given me the opportunity to continue getting to know my mother and hear about her experiences with menopause. In my immediate Nigerian community, I hope it sparks conversations about menopause to move throughout the community and for mothers to talk with their children.

For Emma and me, as two millennials in their 30s, a study about women's experiences of menopause might not seem relevant to our daily lives. But as we conducted interviews, read over transcripts, and discussed the findings with each other, we were both struck by how familiar the feelings women

expressed were to us. Maybe we didn't yet share the dread over a lack of sleep or the frustration around dry or prolapsed vaginas. But doctors ignoring you? Check. Emotional turmoil caused by hormones? Check. A sense that your body is a mystery and there's no one around to help you navigate it? Check, check, check. We know our mothers were not given all the tools to inform their experiences of menopause. We want to break that cycle and hit menopause armed with information. We want to prevent other menstruating people from reaching perimenopause and feeling like they are looking over an abyss of confusion, gaslighting, and uncertainty. That is why we wanted to be part of this research.

It is essential to share stories of menopause

According to the Menopause Foundation of Canada (2023), women often struggle with conversations about menopause, leading to feelings of isolation and embarrassment. For many of us, the menopausal transition can be a pretty lonely place, not knowing at times if we're losing our minds, not realizing that others are having similar thoughts, not really knowing the breadth of experiences that make up the menopausal transition. It doesn't help that the menopausal transition is idiosyncratic for each woman. About 20% of women have a truly horrific experience, others have virtually no symptoms, and the rest of us are somewhere in the middle (Corinna, 2021). In addition, the few conversations we do have are often influenced by our tendency as women to minimize or downplay our discomfort, making it difficult to have a clear sense of women's experiences.

While there may be more information available about menopause now than ever, we're still not talking about menopause with each other, with our families, and definitely not with our doctors. Many women are suffering in silence because they have nobody to talk to and/or their doctors have minimized or dismissed their symptoms. This is unacceptable, as many women will spend a third or up to half their lives postmenopausal.

The central contention of this book is that hearing other people's experiences of menopause is valuable and necessary. But more than that, giving people the opportunity to tell their stories, to be *heard*, can maybe alleviate the feeling that their symptoms aren't valid and that this huge life change that *every person with a uterus goes through* is not important.

This book shares the stories of 60 women who shared them with us as they participated in our research. Some women in this study had spoken to friends, doctors, partners, colleagues, and therapists about menopause. Others were speaking about it for the first time during their interview. We situate their stories in the context of other research on menopause to provide a context for the vast range of experiences we heard about.

So, sharing stories is one piece, but we hope this book also creates a receptive audience ready for these conversations in their own lives. Being

a receptive audience member might mean taking stock of your own feelings around menopause, aging, sex, and the healthcare system. Hearing about what other people did or didn't do might provide insights into what you could do and who you should be talking to. We certainly hope that thinking about these things now will help you navigate the menopausal transition. Our hope is that this book increases the conversations you have with your family, your friends, your doctor, and even your colleagues and supervisors. We spend a lot of time at work, and there are simple things that can be done at work to ease symptoms and help you get through the day, but only if we talk about them.

Sharing experiences of menopause can offer relief from feeling ignored, forgotten, or alone. But it can also lead to real change. When we talk about these issues in the broader context of reproductive rights—when we see these issues as compounding existing racial inequalities and gender discrimination, then we can start acting in solidarity to support each other when faced with discriminatory situations that happen in doctors' offices, in the media, and among politicians every day.

This book is not a “nuts and bolts” description of menopause or a “how to get through it” self-help guide. It presents conversations about menopause, conversations that we don't usually have with each other and with the people we love. This is a book for any woman who wants to hear from other women about their menopausal experiences and how that experience impacts other parts of women's lives. It can provide you with an idea of what to expect in your own menopausal journey, or it might allow you to see your own experience mirrored in someone else's journey. It's an opportunity to start or continue a conversation that has just begun.

At the very least, when we start to talk, we can listen with compassion and care, something that happens far too rarely. While doing these interviews, we cried with participants when they shared painful stories and laughed with them when they described the surreal changes they went through as part of the transition to menopause. We hope it sparks conversations in their lives and in the communities important to them. We thank them for their stories. We hope we were good listeners.

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