



A PRIMER ON CREATING MENOPAUSE-FRIENDLY WORKPLACES

WHO THE TOOL IS FOR:

The person responsible for rolling out the strategy

OBJECTIVES OF THE DOCUMENT:

- Understanding the impact of perimenopause and menopause on women and organizations.
- Offering individual action paths for women related to this stage of their personal and professional lives.
- Exploring concrete ways to prevent risks and improve the quality of life for women at work.

To write this article, 16 sources were consulted.

Menopause is a natural and inevitable stage of life that all women typically experience during their professional careers. Once a taboo or neglected topic, menopause is now increasingly discussed in society, highlighting its significant impact on the workplace. As women continue to play crucial roles in organizations at ages where menopause is common, it is essential for companies to acknowledge and address this reality.

Organizations that proactively address menopause reap numerous benefits. By creating supportive work environments for this life phase, companies can not only improve talent retention, reducing costs associated with turnover, recruitment, and training, but also enhance employee productivity and engagement. A workplace that supports women's health and well-being during menopause can also decrease absenteeism and strengthen the employee value proposition.

Furthermore, by integrating practices that promote diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging, companies position themselves as responsible leaders attentive to their workforce's varied needs. This support fosters a climate of trust and respect, thereby increasing employee satisfaction and contributions while affirming the organization's commitment to core values.

This guide aims to provide human resources professionals with the necessary tools to address menopause sensitively and effectively.



UNDERSTANDING PERIMENOPAUSE AND MENOPAUSE

51% of the population will experience menopause, a normal, natural, and inevitable aspect of aging. Menopause occurs when menstruation stops due to a reduction in hormone production by the ovaries or as a result of surgical removal or medical treatments such as chemotherapy.

Perimenopause is medically defined as **the onset of cycle irregularities until 12 consecutive months after the last menstrual period**. The term means "around menopause" and can last up to 15 years. During perimenopause, hormone levels (estradiol, progesterone, and testosterone) fluctuate and decline, leading to various physiological and psychological signs and symptoms.

The average age of menopause for women in Europe and North America is 51. Symptoms of perimenopause are generally observed during the transition in the mid to late forties, although they can occur as early as the mid-thirties. It's important to note that 1 in 100 women is menopausal before age 40, 1 in 1,000 before age 30, and 1 in 10,000 before age 20.

Menopause in Numbers

- In Canada, productivity losses due to menopause-related absences cost approximately **\$2.5 billion** annually.
- In France, **25%** of menopausal women report that symptoms affect their attendance at work, with indirect costs for French companies estimated at €1.3 billion per year due to lost productivity and absenteeism.
- Menopause affects over **10 million** women in Canada aged over 40, representing a quarter of the population.
- **100%** of women will experience menopause.
- Three out of four women experience menopausal symptoms that interfere with their daily lives, and **90%** of them believe these symptoms impact their work performance.
- One in four women suffers from severe menopausal symptoms, and **10%** will stop working due to these symptoms.
- Women report being less able to concentrate (**72%**), experiencing increased stress (**70%**), and feeling a loss of confidence (**67%**).
- **One in three** women considers reducing their work hours or leaving their job due to menopausal symptoms.
- Only **22%** of female employees discuss menopause with their colleagues or supervisors in the workplace.

What is the Experience of Perimenopause?

There are 34 known symptoms associated with perimenopause and menopause, including, but not limited to:

- Lack of energy
- Depression
- Irritability
- Hot flashes
- Night sweats
- Muscle and joint pain
- Insomnia
- Bladder control issues
- Heart palpitations
- Headaches
- Etc.



During the transition to menopause, 80% of women experience hot flashes and night sweats, while up to 68% report mood instability, and 50% experience joint pain, sleep disturbances, and/or sexual dysfunction.

Psychological symptoms that may be attributed to perimenopause include anxiety, depression, paranoia, anhedonia, irritability, dissociation, insomnia, and feelings of worthlessness. Women with pre-existing mental health issues may experience exacerbated symptoms and changes in the effectiveness of their treatment.

Neurodivergent women may also find their challenges intensifying during perimenopause. Additionally, women who have experienced adverse childhood events may be at risk for earlier menopause and a greater prevalence of vasomotor symptoms.

Cognitive difficulties, such as memory and concentration problems, are commonly reported during perimenopause, and these symptoms can resemble those of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

What is the Impact on Individuals?

In general, to cope with the adverse effects of menopause while maintaining performance, women either adopt compensatory strategies to hide weaknesses or work despite mental fatigue out of fear of job loss, leading to presenteeism.

These circumstances can worsen due to a lack of support, resulting in decreased working hours, withdrawal from additional tasks or promotions, burnout, sick leave, or even resignations.

Additionally, the unpredictability of menopausal symptoms and a lack of awareness are significant risk factors in the workplace.

MENOPAUSE AND WORK

Approximately 1/3 of women experience moderate to severe difficulties managing their work due to psychological symptoms associated with menopause. Contributing factors to these challenges include financial pressures, suboptimal self-assessment of health, depressive symptoms, and negative psychosocial risk factors.

In addition to these factors, work-related stress poses the greatest risk associated with menopause.



Stress and Menopause

Stress levels are particularly high in sectors with a significant proportion of female employees. Additionally, women who fear or experience ageism, sexism, racism, and other forms of discrimination are often compelled to conceal their experiences at work, resulting in increased stress, anxiety, isolation, and compromised mental health, which can lead to absenteeism.

Stress significantly impacts women facing financial or job insecurity, underlying health issues, uncertain relationship status, low educational levels, unhealthy lifestyle habits, financial dependence, job dissatisfaction, or a sense of being undervalued in the workplace.



Support for Menopause

Currently, only a minority of employers have implemented policies to support their employees experiencing perimenopause. In France, only 15% of companies have specific programs or policies to assist menopausal employees, despite a growing awareness of the impact of these symptoms in the workplace. In Canada, approximately 18% of companies have specific policies to support women during menopause, even though there is an increasing demand for supportive measures such as flexible work arrangements.

However, in Canada, the fastest-growing segment of the workforce are women aged 45 to 55, who are remaining in the workforce longer than ever before. The country could see a 27% increase in the number of active women aged 45 to 55 by 2040. In France, the fastest-growing group is women aged 55 to 64. This indicates that a significant proportion of women are currently experiencing or will soon experience menopausal symptoms.

Overall, active women suffering from perimenopausal symptoms need two main things:

- 1 Access to support
- 2 A menopause-friendly culture

The most commonly recommended supports are relatively straightforward:

- Medical insurance covering menopause-related treatments and therapies.
- Policies that integrate menopause, including leave provisions and flexible work arrangements.
- Adaptation of the work environment for menopausal individuals.
- Education for colleagues and leadership.
- Awareness sessions on menopause for all employees.

Employers can implement several strategies to foster a menopause-friendly culture:

- Educate and communicate about the impacts on physical and mental health.
- Offer professional flexibility by allowing additional hours for shift work.
- Promote environmental autonomy, including greater control over temperature and ventilation (access to open windows and/or cooler air), breathable uniforms, access to restrooms stocked with menstrual products, and designated rest areas.
- Establish policies and measures that encourage inclusion, flexible work, and access to health benefits.
- Provide recognition and appreciation through a tailored employee assistance program or an active lifestyle program (e.g., walking desks or gym memberships).



THE DIFFERENTIATED EXPERIENCE OF MENOPAUSE

Research suggests that employers should develop an awareness that the experience of menopause and its effects on work can vary significantly from one woman to another. Therefore, an evidence-based approach could be an effective way to identify the specific needs of menopausal women in the workplace.

MENOPAUSE THROUGH THE LENS OF EQUITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION

It's important to recognize that cisgender women are not the only ones affected by menopause; non-binary individuals, people with ovaries, transgender men, two-spirit individuals, and those assigned female at birth also experience it. These groups require colleagues with whom they can safely discuss sensitive and personal matters.

Women from historically marginalized groups face additional challenges related to menopause. For example, individuals from LGBTQ+ communities often experience more severe symptoms and consequences than their European counterparts, yet they are less likely to receive necessary treatment or support in the workplace. They may also encounter unsolicited comments about their appearance, such as being told they "look angry" or "should smile more."

Indigenous individuals facing menopausal symptoms also bear the added burden of navigating a healthcare system that can be biased against them, further complicating their access to necessary care. Similarly, women with disabilities are much more likely to have their judgment questioned in their areas of expertise.

Furthermore, studies indicate that Asian and Black women are less likely to have strong allies within their teams, which can hinder their support and representation during this significant life stage. Addressing these inequities is essential for fostering an inclusive workplace for all individuals experiencing menopause.



7-STEP ROADMAP FOR A MENOPAUSE-FRIENDLY WORKPLACE

1 Make Menopause a Priority

Appoint a menopause champion who plays a dedicated and proactive role in raising awareness, providing support, and driving positive change related to menopause within the organization. This sends a strong message to team members and women in perimenopause that you take this issue seriously enough to allocate resources to it.

2 Show Curiosity and Gather Data

Surveys using self-assessment questionnaires, individual interviews, or focus groups can engage employees in participatory processes aimed at identifying interventions that could make workplaces more menopause-friendly. Launch an anonymous survey to assess the situation, discover your colleagues' experiences, and learn how you can support them.

3 Opt for Quick Wins

Based on the collected data, implement simple yet effective changes and communicate them widely. For example, consider relocating desks, opening windows, providing breathable uniforms, stocking restrooms with menstrual products, or offering flexible work hours.

4 Develop Your Business Case

Ensure that your leadership team is aware of the impact of menopause on your organization. Using the statistics from this tool and the data you gather, create a case study highlighting productivity loss, avoidable attrition, absenteeism, as well as employee well-being and satisfaction.

5 Meaningfully Update Your Policies

When asked, women express the need for flexibility in their work arrangements when experiencing menopausal symptoms. Explore and offer options such as personal sick leave that does not lead to performance evaluations or disciplinary measures, virtual work arrangements, or flexible work hours to accommodate sleep disturbances.

6 Provide Specialized Training

Specialized knowledge and training are important not only for HR team members but also for managers. The goal is to help them understand how perimenopausal symptoms can affect their colleagues and how to approach the topic. Men and younger colleagues can also benefit from training on this subject.

7 Create Events and Support Spaces

Organize targeted events focused on the continuum of women's reproductive health, with an emphasis on menopause. Provide tools and specific support for employees who need it. You can also create spaces to destigmatize menopause and facilitate discussion, such as menopause coffee chats or support groups, either in-person or virtual.

MENOPAUSE CAFÉ



In 2017, Rachel Weiss, a coach specializing in women's health, created menopause cafés as safe spaces for individuals to come together and share their experiences related to menopause. A menopause café is an accessible, respectful, and confidential environment aimed at fostering inclusive conversations.

Examples of Support Groups

Dalhousie University in Canada offers a monthly support group that now includes over 80 employees exploring the transition to menopause through discussions on nutrition, advocacy, active aging, mental health, hormone therapy, joint and pelvic health, and more.

"My Menopause at Work" is a virtual group available on GCcollab, the Canadian federal government's collaboration and networking platform, open to all public servants, academics, and Canadian students, as well as all Canadians by invitation, created in 2023.

SUPPORT STRATEGIES FOR MANAGERS

Whether it's the employee requesting a meeting or you as a manager observing changes or needs that require a discussion, adopt a coaching approach as a manager. For example:

- Give the person your full attention by creating a dedicated time and space to discuss.
- Make sure you are grounded and well resourced.
- Speak calmly and maintain good eye contact throughout the conversation.
- Ask simple and open-ended questions that are exempt from judgment.
- Give the person a full opportunity to explain their experience in their own words.
- Focus on the person, not the issue.
- Show empathy and understanding by listening actively and carefully.
- Encourage the employee to talk by asking by saying, for example: I'm curious, please tell me more! Or: Is there more to what you just said?
- At the end, offer a recap and ask the person if you missed anything. Duly note whatever you might have missed that the employee deems important.
- Express understanding and appropriate compassion for the person and their experience.
- Ask them what they need specifically and what it might look like.
- Recap what the person has named, making again sure you ask if you have captured everything.

After the meeting, make sure to develop a working plan tailored to the person. Each employee and experience is unique and may need different forms of support. Review the plan with the person as well as with your HR department and support arrangements on a regular basis. Remember to keep the conversation open periodically, as needs may change over time.



What to Avoid

Be careful not to say anything that could be interpreted as:

- Derisive (problematic or shaming)
- Disparaging (not listening or explaining the person's own experience)
- Discriminatory (associating menopause with negative descriptions or judgments about behavior or performance)

CONCLUSION

During perimenopause, women are typically at the peak of their careers and are valuable team members who need support at a critical stage of life over which they have very little control. Supporting them is a shared responsibility, and the backing of supervisors, management, and senior executives is crucial. Allowing women to remain in the workforce until menopause is essential for achieving gender equality, breaking the glass ceiling, and enabling true female leadership. By addressing menopause symptoms in the workplace, employers can create a ripple effect that enhances women's autonomy and promotes a more equitable society.



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