

The Mind Side of Menopause

In an essay titled 'Pause', Mary Refule writes about how she had kept a 'Cryalog' in her 40s, to document the number of times she had cried in a day. She then talks, with much humour, about the upheavals - mental, emotional and physical - that her personality underwent, until she came to terms with the M-word that every woman dreads: Menopause.

To most people, the term menopause has become synonymous with hot flashes - those sudden waves of mild or intense body heat 'caused by rushes of hormonal changes resulting from decreased levels of oestrogen'. "But as hyped up as they are, hot flashes are often just one of the many manifestations of the changes in the female body that lead up to menopause," says Dr Shankar Kuchibatla, Consultant Psychiatrist and Medical Director of LifeWorks Foundation, Dubai.

Menopause occurs when the function of a woman's ovaries ceases, marked by an absence of menstrual periods for 12 months at a stretch. It normally happens between ages 45 and 52, but there are instances of the periods stopping in the 30s, and conversely, lasting past the age of 60. Either way, this transition of a woman's body does not happen in a day or two - it's a gradual process, often taking years. And during this perimenopausal period, a woman often goes through a series of issues physically, mentally and emotionally.

The physical symptoms include - apart from the hot flashes - tingling, numbness, sleep issues, vaginal dryness, thinning of hair, slower metabolism and the resultant weight gain, among others. These symptoms and the intensity of their occurrence vary from woman to woman.

However, as Dr Shankar reminds us, "The emotional changes begin earlier, and are just as diverse. Irritability and mood fluctuations may start when a woman is in her 40s. She may begin to find it difficult to multitask, resulting in a mismatch between expectations (from self and others) and her capability to deliver. This affects

her self image and confidence which may lead to anxiety even over the day-to-day activities.”

Every human being goes through personality changes during highly emotional and stressful states, and this becomes more pronounced during the perimenopausal phase. “Such changes in personality and behaviour do not affect the woman alone, but have a direct impact on her relationships - with partners, family members, and others around her,” adds Dr Shankar.

Middle insomnia (waking up multiple times in between sleep) is one of the biggest challenges that women face at this stage because it affects every other aspect of their behaviour. Sleep deprivation results in anxiety, restlessness and irritability, which add to the existing problems.

Dealing with Menopause:

“Ironically,” says Dr Shankar, “menopause can also be a harbinger of good things. Many a time, women who are excessively emotional, impulsive or prone to taking rash decisions calm down during this phase. The sharp emotional edges wear down, and the person becomes more rational in their behaviour.” However in order to ensure that these positive changes last, one has to make certain changes in their lives.

“The first thing to do is to bring a sense of order, calm and discipline through making positive lifestyle changes. Regular exercise can be a lifesaver as it elevates levels of serotonin and endorphins, which in turn helps relax, and, to a certain extent, regulate body temperature,” Dr Shankar explains. “Sleep hygiene is vital. This includes going to bed at regular hours and making sure that the ambience in the bedroom is quiet and relaxing, among other things.”

Dr Shankar also recommends setting aside some ‘Me’ time in a day to relax, reflect and engage in activities that one enjoys. “Socialising is equally important,” he adds,

“especially with friends. There are many self-help groups that offer support and guidance at this phase, so make best use of these. Have an open channel of communication with the family. This helps them understand what you are going through and be more supportive.”

Last but not the least are regular visits to the gynaecologist to ensure physical wellness. “Similarly,” he adds, “it is important to seek professional help when depression, anxiety or sleep issues are persistent, and are beginning to affect your behaviour, relationships, and wellbeing of self and others.”

“While it is impossible to stop nature from taking its course, it is, to a large extent, possible to manage the impact of these changes in our lives,” Dr Shankar clarifies. “Awareness is the first step towards in this direction. Making conscious, positive lifestyle choices and putting in consistent effort towards leading a better lifestyle can enrich your life in many ways.”