



MY VISION FOR MENOPAUSE

I would like to offer my perspective and my vision to the conversation that's happening about menopause.

Menopause as a natural rite of passage that offers us personal transformation and an opportunity to come together for support.

From my experience of working with peri and post menopausal women in both group workshop settings and private sessions, I can bring to this conversation an approach to menopause that sees it as a rite of passage, a normal and expected process that happens to all women (whether that be a natural, surgical, chemical or premature menopause).

In the same way that childbirth has been medicalised, so too has menopause, and this has resulted in fear and lack of autonomy for women in both these transformational experiences. In childbirth this results in increased intervention and all its side effects including post natal depression, birth trauma and PTSD. We can learn from that.

My offering is an alternative to the medical approach of managing menopause, by remembering that menopause is a rite of passage into the second half of a woman's life. And, like all rites of passage, it is a transformational experience that includes a physical, mental, emotional and spiritual component. Rather than be encouraged to ignore the symptoms by stopping the change that's happening with hormone replacement and other drugs, what I am here to offer are ways to work with this transformation for healing, wellness, personal growth, and development, and actually the reclamation of feminine power and knowledge.

This approach is a far cry from what most women experience, and yet it is their birthright to be supported through this rite of passage, as it is through their other rites of passage – menarche, childbirth and death.

Fortunately, now, we have the advent of 'social prescription' (a proven new idea that has been adopted by the NHS) a treatment to use for health issues before using drugs, that includes a large range of non clinical suggestions such as: spending time in nature, connecting with like-minded people in groups, exercising etc, with the recognition of the role of all that in mental health during major life changes. And, as the studies of these non clinical suggestions show improvements in quality of life and emotional wellbeing, mental and general wellbeing, and levels of depression and anxiety. So we can confidently offer alternatives like those to try before drugs and synthetic hormones to help during a woman's journey through menopause.

The issues that will likely arise for a woman during her menopausal journey can include facing long-held and often ignored issues related to her health, well-being, body, relationships, self-worth, etc. These sorts of situations cause anxiety and depression and isolation which worsen physical symptoms and so with social prescribing as a first approach, rather than HRT/other drugs, the root causes for the symptoms can be addressed, rather than using the drugs to stop the symptoms, and therefore lose the opportunity for what they connect to that is requiring transformation and healing during her menopausal journey.

That's actually what's going on, a healing journey, it has been called the rite of passage designed to heal all the unhealed parts of us.

I propose community based health systems, for example a 'clinic' in the community hall to gather local women experiencing menopause and help them, support them, through this transformation, by guiding the women to join or begin a women's circle to hold them through their process. In these sorts of circles which can be guided and assisted, women get the chance to tell their story and be heard. That often changes everything.

In circle women feel the power of the sisterhood and feel like they belong, and these basic things shift everything. They realise that what's arising for them in their body, mind and emotions are the clues for the inner work they need to do to heal the wounds they carry within from their past and step forward in power and sovereignty into the second half of their lives. They also see how many other women are experiencing the same or similar things.

In my experience of teaching about menopause in the community with my workshop called Autumn Woman, Harvest Queen, I have seen transformation in one day. When women get the information they need, they can make sense of their experience, and they can do what they need to do. That is, not try to stop the symptoms, rather ask what is this showing me?

Common themes include relationship issues, health issues, sexual issues, fear of ageing and rejection and these are not menopause's fault, they are what arises at menopause offering the opportunity for healing. The root cause of these issues that arise at menopause occur further back in our lives, including childhood trauma, menstrual pathology, previous rites of passage, including traumatic childbirth. The issues that arise during menopause, come as the harvest of what began in our childhood, and young adulthood and from our birth experiences.

Women's experiences at menopause range from regret to relief, and often include rage. One of the easiest ways to understand what's going on, is to see the situation around the hormone oestrogen. Oestrogen is known as the hormone of accommodation, and at menarche the veil of oestrogen descends upon us and stays there encouraging us to look after everybody else's needs before our own – the hormone of accommodation – at about five years before the last period the veil of oestrogen begins to rise. This manifests in all manner of ways with each individual woman, but mostly, it is an awareness of how much she is doing for other people and how much she is acknowledged for that, or not, and how much she does not want to be doing everything for everybody anymore. And there can, for perhaps the first time in her life, be a reorientation to self. Just the effect of oestrogen on us in this way shows the personal inner work and healing we need to do and we do not need others to tell us what it is, we just need to be held and supported and to tell our stories, so we know what we need to do next.

My biggest vision is the healed sisterhood, holding each other through major transformations in our lives, and at menopause, what this would look like would be menopause specific circles for women. These would include education, processes to understand and make meaning of their experience, connecting with their body to see where they're held emotions are stored and release them, and talk together about their experience and the range of experiences of menopause during the process and beyond. Women have so many questions and they can help each other find the answers.

This could start with:

- * an emotional self-help pamphlet with tips for how to self care through menopause.

It could grow to:

- * free webinars for women, offering information/education,

and on

- * to face-to-face circle groups,

- * and specific menopause counselling

- * and the education program for circle holders, and menopause counsellors.

Women need support through the major rites of passage, we know that, that's why everybody gathers around to help a mother through childbirth, and in her early mothering days. That's what hopefully happens for a young girl at her menarche, when she gets her period for the first time – of course we know that usually doesn't happen. And so for menopause, there needs to be a re-creation of community to hold and honour these wise women.

This rite of passage of menopause is the third big shift in our lives- after birth:

Adolescence

Matrescence

And now Sagescence

Peri Menopause (both sides of menopause, before and after)

The becoming of a Wise Woman.

We can get a sense of a different perspective to our modern one from other cultures.... In Traditional Chinese Medicine, menopause is called the second spring.

First Nations American saying, – at menarche a girl meets her power, through menstruation she practices her power, at menopause she becomes her power.

And if we need any economic justifications for this way, it will help women stay at work, rather than leave due to menopause, and it will arm them with the tools and passion to bring change in the workplace that helps women in their situation – the menopause workplace policy.

This could also include a menstrual workplace policy.

For way too long, we have been pretending women don't menstruate and go through menopause and have turned it into pathology as the way to get support.

We need to get with the program and shift from this pathogenic perspective to the salutogenic perspective to encourage health and well-being, not dependence on doctors and drugs.

(the salutogenic approach or salutogenesis is a term applied in health sciences, and more recently in other fields, to refer to an approach to wellness focusing on health and not on disease which is called pathogenesis).

So, rather than fix menopause, by replacing hormones to remove the symptoms or using other drugs to mask them, we could work with looking at menopause as a natural process in a woman's life and approach it from a well-being perspective, in the same way, that one might approach childbirth as a natural process in a woman's life. And, support a women's wellness on every level, to support her process through menopause. If she needs medical help, then that is available, however, step one should not be use drugs.