

9 Things You Wish Your Partner Knew About Menopause

By Naomi Chrisoulakis December 1, 2015

Whether it's the strange looks he shoots at you when the handheld fan comes out in the middle of winter or his confusion when those go-to moves just aren't doing the trick anymore, you can't help but feel a little sorry for your other half when menopause starts to make waves. (And yes, you probably feel pretty irritated, too.) To make their lives a little easier, we asked women who've gone through that transition to help us put together a cheat sheet of everything you wish your partner understood.

"I still want you, it's just hard for my body to get on board."



If an upper lip wax sounds more appealing than sex, welcome to menopause. A dipping libido is a classic symptom, but not exactly a welcome one. "When my interest in sex dropped off, my husband was really hurt," says Lorraine, 56, who has been married for 32 years. "I wish he could understand that it has nothing to do with him—I'm still very attracted to him, and love touching him and kissing. I just don't care to initiate sex anymore." Explaining the physical changes that hit you during menopause—including less blood flow to genital organs, a decrease in vaginal lubrication, and a decreased response to touch—might help him see it's not all about him, after all.

"I don't need you to try to fix me."

"Whenever I talk to my husband about my menopause symptoms, he immediately launches into possible solutions, when all I want is for him to listen and show some empathy," says Jo, 51, married for 16 years. "It drives me up the wall and he can't understand why!" Yep, "fixing" the issue can be a compulsion for men, and it's because of how their brains are built, says psychologist Les Parrott, coauthor of *Saving Your Marriage Before It Starts*. "Men's brains are hardwired to light up when a problem is presented to them. The male frontal cortex [the problem-solving area of our brain] quickly engages in the problem to find a solution. Women, on the other hand, tend to want to explore the issue more thoroughly than most men." Cue the irritation. "Try prefacing the conversation with, 'I want to talk to you about something that's really important to me and I want you to refrain from trying to fix it with solutions. We can eventually talk about that, but I really just want to be understood at this point.' That may sound silly to a woman, but it's a huge gift to a man."

"I wish you'd stop sabotaging my health kick!"

We hate to confirm what your jeans have already told you: Women gain an average of 10 pounds around menopause. A large study carried out by the International Menopause Society found that hormones start redistributing fat directly to your waistline, increasing the risk of insulin resistance and cardiovascular disease. The good news? Research shows a calorie-controlled diet loaded with fruits, vegetables, and whole grains can get rid of the gut *and* reduce hot flashes. Now for the really hard part: getting your partner on board. "He takes it personally when I say no to a bowl of ice cream after dinner and want to go for walks instead of watching TV," says Sandra, 57, who has been with her partner for 9 years. "But when I explained the risk factors I was trying to avoid—and took up golf with him!—he got behind my weight loss efforts." (Balance your hormones and lose up to 15 pounds in just 3 weeks!)

"You have no idea how tired I am."

"My husband doesn't seem to understand why I'm so exhausted," says Lynda, 52, married for 26 years. "I haven't had a decent night's sleep in 2 years!" Sleep problems are very common during menopause, says Erika Schwartz, MD. "One of the most common patterns I see is falling asleep easily, then waking up around 3 AM with either a night sweat or full awakening and the inability to fall back to sleep. Physiologically, sleep is a complicated process that involves a series of hormone changes in the brain and body. When the adrenals and ovaries fail to produce these hormones due to menopause, the body doesn't relax and we keep churning and turning all night." She recommends avoiding caffeine, alcohol, and sugar after lunch; working out regularly; and talking to your doctor about hormone, calcium, magnesium, and zinc supplementation.

"This is really tough emotionally."

Hot flashes aren't the only challenging part of menopause: It can have a huge psychological impact, too. "When I started going through menopause, it threw me for a loop," says Anthea, 57, who has been married for 30 years. "It felt like a new chapter, but not an exciting one, and I became far more aware of my mortality. I found myself questioning my new place in the world, and my husband didn't know how to support me." While changing hormones play a big part in feeling low, menopause can also prompt us to take stock. "Neurochemistry changes along with aging aren't in the business of boosting a woman's self-esteem," says Parrott. "That's why it's important to have friends to talk with. Menopause used to be seen as the beginning of the end. Not now. It's actually the beginning of an exciting new passage for women. It's a time of competence, wisdom, and being comfortable in one's skin. But to experience this optimism, you can't travel the road alone."

"Hot flashes aren't there for your amusement."

Sure, you're a sight to behold when you're standing in front of the fridge while it's snowing out, but hot flashes are at best inconvenient and at worst humiliating, uncomfortable, and disruptive. "My husband stopped laughing when I asked him how he'd feel if he became drenched with sweat within 2 minutes at his next presentation," says Melinda, 49, married for 21 years. More than 80% of women going through menopause experience hot flashes, says Schwartz. They're caused by the same mechanism that stops us from sleeping at menopause—a lack of estrogen. "When the shriveling ovary cannot produce the hormone, we get a hot flash," explains Schwartz. "Because this occurs in pulses and not continuously, we get the hot flashes lasting 1 to 2 minutes at varying intervals." The answer? Hormone replacement therapy can help.

"It's not you, it's my hormones."

OK, sometimes it's them, but partners are often at the receiving end of your wrath for no other reason than hormone-induced rage. "My husband only has to look at me the wrong way and I turn into a crazy person," says

Lynda. "I wish I could tell him not to take it personally, but I guess being screamed at is kind of personal!" Try explaining that it's actually a lack of hormones that are making you mad (unless he really does deserve a telling off). "Estrogen, which when abundant in our system makes us feel great, makes us moody and sad when it becomes depleted," says Schwartz. "At and after menopause, we are in a constant state of hormone depletion, leading to symptoms of depression, irritability, sadness, that general feeling of being under a cloud." The answer, Schwartz believes, lies in lifestyle changes and hormone supplementation, not antidepressants.

"Keep the jokes to yourself."

It's good to laugh at yourself—but it's not so fun when it's other people who are doing the laughing. "My partner loved to pull out menopause jokes or tease me about what I was going through," says Maria, 54. "I have a great sense of humor usually, but I felt belittled and hurt." Joking around isn't off the table, says Parrott, but it needs to come from you—not him. "Men have to let the woman be in the driver's seat when it comes to making light of menopause."

"Actually, this isn't all bad!"

"I'd heard so many negative things about menopause," says Sandra, 55. "But when I went through it myself, I found that it really invigorated me. When I wasn't enduring hot flashes, I was rethinking what I really wanted from the rest of my life now that I was free from periods and babies. And my relationship actually improved!" Indeed, one study published in the journal *Clinical and Experimental Obstetrics & Gynecology* showed both menopausal women and their spouses generally had positive attitudes toward the new phase. Now *that's* hot.