

Menopause: One of Many Changes in Life



"The sandwich generation" is a phrase we have all heard. Our midlife years present many challenges and opportunities. Learning to balance sometimes competing responsibilities can be difficult. Dr. Cooney discusses how to meet these new challenges while continuing to grow and enjoy our lives.

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Midlife Brings Pivotal Changes in Women's Roles

Menopause is often referred to as the "change of life." This phrase has generally been used because it's the stage when a woman permanently stops having menstrual periods and the end of her child-bearing ability. However, the phraseology "change of life" is a gross understatement for all of the major changes that a woman may go through simultaneously during this phase.

In addition to menopause being a time of great changes physiologically, emotionally and psychologically, it's also a time where women experience many pivotal changes in the various roles they play in their lives.

Not only do a woman's biological functions change and eventually diminish as she approaches menopause, so do the roles she has experienced for many years in the first half of her life. Women are faced with challenges involving her roles as wife, mother, daughter, and career-person, to name a few.

A common phenomenon associated with role changes during menopause in the "empty nest syndrome." With children leaving home, many women, including working mothers, feel they have lost their primary role as mother. Women need to

entertain a certain amount of letting go of their children while renegotiating the relationship with grown children.

Some women who long for the experience of an "empty nest" may find themselves becoming caretakers of elderly and sick parents often sooner than they expected. They may also find themselves becoming the primary caretaker for their grandchildren who have working mothers. These women may feel robbed of the freedom and free-time they thought would be afforded to them as caretakers once their children left home.

Women who were homemakers for the first half of their lives may now have the time and the opportunity to further their education and discover new career opportunities. Women who have been working mothers may find the opportunity to put renewed interest and time in their careers. Others find themselves able to put more time and effort into hobbies for which they never had time. The emergence of a new and independent woman free to use her time and energy as she chooses can be a wonderful experience.

During middle age a woman's marital role may change dramatically. As her roles change in other areas of her life, this may impact her role as wife. A woman's sexual role may change as she becomes freer sexually, unencumbered by the possibility of pregnancy, or she may experience loss of desire due in part to physical changes. At the same time her partner may be experiencing impotence or loss of libido.

Some women find themselves coping with divorce or separation during this time. Finding oneself suddenly single during middle age, while at the same time coping with the changes in body image often experienced during menopause can be especially challenging for women.

This is intended as an information resource providing guidelines for women. As always, check with your own healthcare practitioner with your specific concerns and questions.

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Feeling Good About Oneself is Part of Coping Successfully

Although menopause is a universal experience for women, each will experience it in a different way. A woman should consider her own perceptions about this transition. Women who perceive aging and their changing life roles negatively, have greater difficulties with emotional problems. Many women find they can improve their outlook by sharing and building support groups among other women.

During this time of transition, it is more important than ever for women to make sure they exercise regularly, eat nutritiously and get plenty of sleep. This advice may sound cliché, but these measures are significant in helping women to avoid fatigue and mood swings. Women who are who are in good health feel better about themselves and experience an improved quality of life, which makes it easier to cope with their shifting roles and the hormonal imbalances and changes associated with menopause.

In caring for themselves, women should take time out for activities that bring them joy, relaxation and a sense of fulfillment. Doing so on a routine basis, helps women to rejuvenate so they have the emotional energy they need to handle all their other responsibilities.

After spending a lifetime caring for others, some women have difficulty identifying new areas of interest during menopause. Some benefit from participating in lifestyle courses or seek the help of a professional life coach at this time. A life coach helps people to realize where their interests lie, what they are good at, and what kind of work and/or relationships would bring them satisfaction. Other women seek advice from close friends, supportive family, a therapist, or health professional.

As women age, sexuality remains extremely important and plays a significant role in self-esteem, self-image and overall quality of life. Those with positive attitudes about aging and their changing roles, report an increase in sexual feelings, heightened sexuality and higher self-esteem. Women should communicate openly with their partners and talk about the physical, sexual and emotional changes they are experiencing.

Menopause is a time of transition. Some women can see this time of change to be rather daunting while others find it freeing and exhilarating. Most women adapt to new roles quickly. Menopause affords a woman the opportunity to grow in areas she many never have considered previously. It can be a time of new beginnings and endless possibilities.

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