

There have always been negative associations with menopause. One concern that I hear voiced repeatedly is that depression is going to become a fact of life once a woman makes the transition into menopause. As you will learn from Dr. Meisler's article there are other factors that influence mental health. We should not blame the changes in hormones that occur with menopause as the only cause for change in mood and sense of well being.

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Myth vs. Reality

Menopause is an emotionally-charged word and some would say, an emotionally-charged time during a woman's life. There are some myths surrounding menopause, and I will try to help distinguish myth from reality. To cite an example of a myth some of us grew up with, is that a woman shouldn't wash her hair during her menstrual period or some ill may befall her!

But what of women's mental state as they approach, and then reach, menopause? There is a wide range of emotional responses that a woman can have, based on the physiology, her general health, her past mental health, and familial and cultural factors. As I said earlier, menopause is an emotionally-charged word, and no two women will bring the same set of contributing factors, let alone the same attitudes, fears, and fantasies, to this watershed life event.

First of all, there is a myth that women inevitably become depressed, irritable and/or forgetful at this time. The reality is that some women may experience all or some of these symptoms, but others may experience none of them.

Certainly, women who have experienced episodes of depression earlier in life may be at risk for developing depression with menopause, but

not necessarily. If a woman has had recurrent episodes of depression earlier, she may be on a maintenance regimen of antidepressant treatment (medication, which may or may not be combined with psychotherapy) which may protect her from becoming depressed.

A Time of Change

However, there are many other factors which affect a woman's emotional response. For women whose main identity has been as a wife and for some women in this same group, menopause may bring an unprecedented sense of freedom, in which they see themselves as "freed up" to pursue other aspects of their lives.

Familial and cultural factors play a role here, as well. If a woman experienced/observed her mother's menopause as a neutral, or positive event, she may be more likely to have that expectation for herself. The opposite, of course, is also true.

Similarly, in a culture such as ours, which puts a highly priority on youth and youthful beauty, this may imply, to some women, that after menopause, they won't be valued as highly as before. Conversely, in cultures in which age is respected, indeed venerated, such as in China and Japan, women may look forward to this stage of life, when they can take their place among the highly-respected elders.

The time of menopause is also a time of multiple life changes for many women. Children may be leaving home, for college or work, resulting in so-called "empty-nest" syndrome. Simultaneously, elderly parents may be developing age-related illnesses and infirmities, leaving women in the middle-the filling in the so-called "sandwich generation".

Also, at this time, marriages may be ending, either by divorce or by the death of the middle-age husband. All of these are significant losses, and loss is a major predisposing factor to depression.

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.

Not all women, though, may experience the time of menopause as one of loss; for some women, there is a sense of liberation. A woman may see herself as finally free of the responsibility of daily, nurturing motherhood. If she's been working, she may find herself with more time and energy to devote to her career. If she's not worked outside the home, she may now find freedom to start a career or devote time to other interests and pursuits.

Finally, for women who never had children, for whatever reason, menopause may bring mourning, for the mother role that now will never occur.

In short, there are a variety of psychosocial, as well as physical, factors which may come to the fore in menopause. A key point to remember, from a psychiatric point of view, is that depression is not inevitable part of menopause. Of course if depressive symptoms do develop, professional help should be obtained.

When to Seek Professional Attention

Basically, there are some symptoms that occur with any depression: First, depressive mood most of the day, nearly every day and/or significantly decreased interest or pleasure in all, or almost all, activities most of the day, nearly every day, for at least two weeks. One or both of these symptoms must be present along with three or more of the following:

- significant weight loss when not dieting or weight gain (e.g. a change of more than 5% of body weight in a month), or decrease or increase in appetite nearly every day,
- insomnia or excessive sleep nearly every day,
- feelings of restlessness or being slowed down nearly every day,

- fatigue or loss of energy nearly every day,
- feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt nearly every day,
- diminished ability to think or concentrate, or indecisiveness nearly every day,
- recurrent thoughts of death or suicide, with or without a specific plan.

These are the hallmark symptoms of depression and any woman experiencing the first and/or second, along with at least three of the others for more than two weeks should seek psychiatric help.

For the majority of women, however, menopause is either a neutral or positive milestone. Given current life expectations, most women if they take care of themselves in terms of basic healthy lifestyle-diet, sleep, exercise, etc, and keep their minds challenged, with paid careers, volunteer work, active social lives, etc., the decades of menopause can be a challenging, fulfilling part or life.