

Supporting staff experiencing peri-menopause and menopause:

A guide for all school leaders

Introduction

The Department for Education suggests that approximately:

1 in 6

of the teaching workforce is likely to be experiencing peri-menopause or menopause right now.¹

And the Fawcett Society report that:

1 in 10

women have left work because of peri-menopause or menopause symptoms

44%

of women found that their ability to do their jobs was affected'.²

This guide has been developed in conjunction with Helen Clare, a menopause educator, mentor and former biology teacher. It aims to help your school retain valuable team members and ensure they are well supported as they experience peri-menopause and menopause.

Read on to learn how to get comfortable having conversations around peri-menopause and menopause with your team. Below we talk about creating stigma-free cultures, making reasonable adjustments to better support staff in your school and useful sign-posting information.



Menopause and peri-menopause: what's the difference?

Menopause is the point at which our periods stop and we become post-menopausal. Peri-menopause is the phase leading up to that — sometimes for a decade or more — where our hormones are fluctuating dramatically. For many, this can be the most challenging time. However symptoms can take a while to settle after menopause and some of us can continue to experience them for years. Post-menopausal bodies and brains may require care and management for a long period of time.

Although there is a medical distinction between peri-menopause and menopause that distinction is not always reflected in our experience. We will therefore use the term peri/menopause to cover any state where someone is experiencing the symptoms of perimenopause or menopause.



What might peri/menopause look like in schools?

Everyone's experience of the peri/menopause is going to be different. The most important thing managers need to do is to listen to the individual experiencing it.

Not everyone, however, feels comfortable disclosing their symptoms at school, or with colleagues. It's therefore essential that school managers, leaders and other staff, have a good working knowledge of how peri/menopause could look at work:



Signs and symptoms that may be noticeable include:

- Low energy, fatigue and exhaustion (this may or may not be caused by sleep problems)
- Insomnia and sleep disturbance
- Headaches and joint aches or pains
- Hot flushes
- Increased, unexplained bathroom breaks or regular change of clothes (potentially to manage painful, irregular and heavy periods or bladder problems due to tissue changes that affect the genito-urinary system causing pain and discomfort)
- Weight gain and/or change in body shape
- Changes to the immune system that can cause
- Increased, unexplained absences

Remember, it's not just physical symptoms

Staff may experience psychological symptoms such as:

- Anxiety or panic attacks
- Changes in mood or regular low mood (including rage or anger with mood changes which can be a particular challenge in the classroom)
- Memory problems (also referred to as 'brain fog')
- Difficulty concentrating
- Worsening of pre-existing physical or mental health conditions

Certain tasks may become more difficult to carry out temporarily; for example, learning new skills (this may be compounded by lack of sleep and fatigue), performance may be affected and work-related stress may exacerbate these symptoms. This can impact a staff member's confidence and working relationships.³



And, it will not affect everyone in the same way!

Sadly, peri/menopause is not fair or equal. Our experience can be affected by our culture, our class, our sexuality and our relationships — including that with our doctor.

We also know that:

- Those with two or more adverse childhood experiences can experience a more difficult menopausal transition.⁴
- Black women may experience more symptoms and start the peri/menopause earlier.⁵
- There is also some research that may show those who do not have children — through infertility or by choice - could potentially experience menopausal symptoms differently.⁶
- There can be additional challenges for those who have pre-existing health problems or are neurodiverse.

- Some people will have an early or sometimes extremely premature menopause and the sudden onset of menopause triggered by surgery or medical treatments can be particularly challenging to manage.

Please note, this is not an exhaustive list and symptoms can vary in severity, variety and length. It is also important to remember that peri/menopause will affect staff of diverse gender expressions and identities. Religion, economics and many other factors can also impact a colleague's personal experience of peri/menopause.⁷

You can read more about how the peri/menopause affects different people, including LGBT+, older staff or those who have a disability, people of colour and trans educators, [here](#).



1 www.menopauseinschools.co.uk/2021/11/10/is-your-school-menopause-savvy/

2 www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/menopauseandtheworkplace

3 www.nasuwf.org.uk/advice/equalities/under-represented-groups/women/managing-the-menopause-in-the-workplace.html#AddressingWorkplace

4 [www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7880696/#:~:text=Women%20with%20the%20most%20severe,symptom%20domains%20\(Table%202\)](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7880696/#:~:text=Women%20with%20the%20most%20severe,symptom%20domains%20(Table%202))

5 www.nasuwf.org.uk/advice/equalities/under-represented-groups/women/managing-the-menopause-in-the-workplace.html#AddressingWorkplace

6 www.swanstudy.org/swan-investigator-dr-victoria-fitz-is-featured-in-healio-article-infertility-involuntary-childlessness-link-to-midlife-depressive-anxiety-symptoms/

7 www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/B1329-guidance-Supporting-NHS-people-through-menopause-November-2022.pdf

Building stigma-free school cultures



Creating an open and comfortable workplace culture for discussing peri/menopause is essential to breaking down stigma, and helping you to put supportive accommodations in place. You might want to consider running training and awareness raising sessions regarding the menopause across your school. Can you include it in CPD? (we explore this further on in the guide!)

Making sure senior school leaders are improving their own knowledge and awareness is also key. This means ensuring all school leaders and

managers understand peri/menopause and are prepared to supportively discuss any staff concerns - despite potential discomfort.

Conversations about the menopause will make other conversations easier for colleagues too e.g. those experiencing menstrual, fertility or mental health issues. This has the potential to improve the overall culture, and sense of belonging that everyone feels, which ultimately helps staff to perform at their best.

So, how can we make those conversations easier?

Check out Helen's top tips on how to approach conversations with school staff who may be struggling with peri/menopause symptoms at work:

1 Don't diagnose symptoms
If a staff member experiences a hot flush for the first time while at school, it's best not to try and diagnose peri/menopause or give them unsolicited advice. Those conversations are delicate enough within personal relationships. They can be damaging in professional ones.

2 Consider your language
Don't use euphemisms - they can be confusing, especially if you're from different cultures, or even different parts of the country. Try to familiarise yourself with the biological words as this will be clearer. It's also a good idea to be guided by the other person's language, unless they seem to find it difficult to find comfortable words.

3 Let them choose how much to disclose
Allow your peri/menopausal member of staff to choose the level of disclosure that's comfortable to them. You only need to know

enough information to provide the right levels of support. But try not to fill in the gaps with assumptions — everyone is different.

4 Ask open questions
Be curious and ask open questions so you can improve your understanding of their experience. This ultimately builds trust and safety. But allow staff time to think about their responses, especially if they are struggling with brain fog or memory problems.





5

Work together at their pace

Balance giving space to people's difficult feelings with working together to find solutions. Be patient and work at a pace that's comfortable for them.

6

Be clear about confidentiality

It's important that staff can trust that you will treat their experiences sensitively and in confidence, wherever possible. There may be occasions where safeguarding over-rides confidentiality. Also, in order to provide support you may need to talk to other people. It's important to be clear about this with your staff, and ensure they understand, and are comfortable with, you talking to third parties.

7

Be clear about why you want to meet

If you want to initiate a conversation with a staff member who has been struggling with low mood or lack of confidence, tell them in advance what the meeting is about. This will give them a chance to think beforehand and not feel ambushed.

8

Make time and space to talk properly

If you need to have a sensitive conversation, make sure you find a time when you can both be relaxed. Ensure there's no urgency to bring the discussion to a close and agree to return to things if they become overwhelming or distressing.

9

Find a private space

Likewise, make sure you can talk somewhere that's private and where you will not be interrupted — not always easy in a school!

10

Think ahead

What do you need from the conversation? What do they need? Are there any particular accommodations that need to be discussed? Allow yourselves time to consider these points ahead of any discussion.



Adjustments your school might be able to make

Helen provides some examples of adjustments schools have chosen to make to support staff experiencing peri/menopause below. She suggests you have a think about what might work for your setting below and tick them off the list.

Not all schools are able to offer these adjustments but it provides a useful starting point for discussions.

You can also use this comprehensive [guide](#) to addressing the symptoms of the peri/menopause through different, school appropriate, adjustments — see the 'addressing workload issues' section.

A [2023 CIPD survey](#) found that planned flexible working (48%), the ability to control local temperature (46%) and last minute or unplanned late starts after sleep disturbances (36%) were mentioned the most as being helpful when managing menopause symptoms at work. More breaks when needed (34%), specialist support through occupational health (34%) and adjustments to work responsibilities/workload (31%) were also seen to be helpful.⁸

⁸ www.cipd.org/uk/knowledge/guides/menopause-people-professionals-guidance/#develop-a-framework-to-manage-the-menopause

Being comfortable in the workplace

- Can a fan be provided in the classroom/workspace?
- Do you need adjustments to the dress code?

Flexible working

- Can hours be compressed or reduced?
- Can you reduce the amount of time spent moving between classrooms or sites?

Finding calm spaces

- Can quiet spaces be provided to help staff decompress?
- Is school prepared to allow off site during non-contact time?

Toilet arrangements

- Is there someone who can be emailed to cover a class in an emergency when staff need a toilet break?
- Can sanitary supplies be placed in toilets?

Getting support

- Can you provide counselling or support groups?
- Can you facilitate alternative methods of communicating tasks and planning of work to assist staff struggling with memory?



Developing a framework to support staff

So, you've done your peri/menopause homework i.e. you know the facts. And you understand how to approach sensitive conversations with staff. What next?

CIPD recommends all organisations — including schools — get a supportive framework in place to support staff experiencing peri/menopause. These steps do not need to be completed in any particular order (although by reading this guide, you have already made a start on step one 'adopt a proactive approach').



Peri/menopause: three steps to developing a supportive framework



Adopt a proactive approach

Adopting a proactive approach to the peri/menopause at work means helping to mitigate the potential negative impact that the workplace can have on someone's symptoms— rather than taking a reactive approach to people's health and wellbeing. It means taking the opportunity to develop a more strategic and preventative framework to help staff perform to their best even if they do develop problematic symptoms.

CIPD suggest a way to be proactive in your education setting might mean regular monitoring of the gender and age of the workforce which will enable you to anticipate the potential health-related needs of this group and the scale of support that is likely to be needed. This doesn't mean making assumptions about staff members circumstances or required support; however, if your setting has a large proportion of employees in this bracket, it should ensure that it has the right level of line manager training in place in the right areas. It could also consider running an awareness campaign as part of any ongoing health promotion programme, signposting to the formal and informal support in place.⁹



Audit existing policies and practices

CIPD state that creating a supportive framework to support staff experiencing peri/menopause means recognising that this is an equality, occupational health and people management issue. Certain workplace factors could worsen someone's peri/menopausal symptoms, and so the first step is to ensure that the organisation's existing policies and working practices don't unintentionally create barriers (physical and psychological) for staff.

For example, could the constrictions of a dress code exacerbate symptoms? How well ventilated is the classroom? Do line managers understand that the peri/menopause should be viewed as an occupational health issue, and do they take this fact into account during the performance management process where appropriate? Is there a flexible working policy explicitly recognises that the menopause is an occupational health issue that could require adjustments for someone by highlighting the range of working options that could be offered to support staff in these circumstances?¹⁰



Develop a policy or plan

Not all schools will decide that having a standalone menopause policy is appropriate for its culture or people management. Some schools may prefer to incorporate provision related to the menopause across existing policies, such as flexible working and equality and diversity, and develop dedicated line manager guidance and training to bring this policy provision to life. However, if a standalone policy or plan on the peri/menopause is developed, CIPD advise it should aim to cover:¹¹

- Statement of principles, including how the school and its senior managers are committed to supporting employees through the menopause transition, and why this is an important workplace issue for everyone.
- Policy objectives, including the actions that the organisation will take to implement the policy, and the key outcomes it wants to see, such as a more open and inclusive culture so that people feel able to discuss the menopause and seek the support they need.
- Definitions and symptoms of the peri/menopause, to promote a basic understanding among all employees about what the menopause is and how it can impact health.
- Key responsibilities, setting out which employee groups have responsibility for implementing specific aspects of the policy, including senior managers, line managers, HR, employees and occupational health.
- Activities and initiatives to be implemented under the policy, such as stress risk assessments and people manager training
- Links to internal and external sources of support, such as occupational health, an employee assistance programme, counselling services, any internal employee networks and external support groups.



And don't forget:

- **Training, talks & CPD:** Being proactive about attending peri/menopause training is vital for creating a supportive framework and serves as CPD. You can look out for short webinars and masterclasses on our [event webpage](#). Or watch our latest [webinar](#) with Helen covering tips for school leaders on supporting staff with peri/menopause in schools.

Helen can also provide menopause talks and training for staff including in-depth information on adjustments, help to set up school support groups and a menopause audit for your school through '[Menopause in Schools](#)' which she has been running for 3 years.
- **Risk assessments:** ensure that risk assessments take account of the needs of anyone experiencing peri/menopause and that adjustments effectively remove or control risks. Learn more in our guide '[Menopause in the workplace](#)'.
- **School support groups:** It is useful to facilitate connections between menopausal staff so that they are in a position to support each other, although you'll need to make sure they're comfortable with that. Many schools set up their own support groups. Take a look at the [Menopause Café](#) for tips on setting up groups.
- **Employee assistance programme (EAP):** Our [EAP](#) gives school staff - including those struggling with peri/menopause, confidential support and guidance when they need it most. Staff can access a range of emotional and practical support including counselling, financial and legal advice and online health and wellbeing resources.

Helpful sign-posting for leaders and education staff

- The patient arm of the British Menopause Society www.womens-health-concern.org provides a wealth of evidence based information which is respected by medical professionals
- New Menopause Practice Standards from the British Menopause Society www.thebms.org.uk/2022/06/new-menopause-practice-standards/
- Working with menopause in schools — a case study by Helen Clare: henaclare.medium.com/
- Menopause Cafe - online and real life supportive gatherings: www.menopausecafe.net
- Make Menopause Matter - campaign to improve menopause provision and information: www.menopausesupport.co.uk/
- 'Menopause in the workplace' and 'Managing your menopause stories' by Education Support.

If you or a colleague are struggling:

You and your colleagues can contact the Education Support helpline for immediate, confidential emotional support on: **08000 562 561**.

It's also worth remembering that navigating any difficult conversations can have a knock-on effect on you. It's important to consider who can be there for you too, without breaking confidentiality.



Sources:

1. www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/menopauseandtheworkplace
2. www.menopauseinschools.co.uk
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4. www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/B1329-guidance-Supporting-NHS-people-through-menopause-November-2022.pdf
5. www.nasuwat.org.uk/advice/equalities/under-represented-groups/women/managing-the-menopause-in-the-workplace.html#AddressingWorkplace

