

M is for Menopause: how to champion it in the workplace (and remove the stigma)?

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At least half of the UK population will experience it ¹, and yet the subject of menopause remains taboo in most workplaces, including hospitality businesses. It is astonishing that in an age of raising awareness of and championing mental health, and advocating for employee's wellbeing, such a natural process is still not openly and inclusively discussed in workplace settings. One might argue that it is simply socially irresponsible to not do so. Having said that, menopause has been receiving increased media and press attention, including on social media channels and tv documentaries, such as Davina McCall's own menopause story, with the aim to break the taboo and normalise the subject altogether.

In this article, I will share some insights about menopause, including symptoms and practical recommendations, based on examples of good practice, on how hospitality businesses can support their employees who are directly and indirectly impacted by it, ensuring a more inclusive and supportive working environment for all.

Menopause is a stage in life where there is a change in hormones, periods end, and the individual is no longer able to get pregnant naturally ². It can affect younger women, through a premature, medical, or surgical menopause, and it can also affect transgender and non-binary people ³. Largely, those who go through the menopause are generally between the ages of 45-55. There are currently 34 recognised symptoms of the menopause. Hot flushes are the most common symptom of the menopause, occurring in 3 out of every 4 menopausal women. Other common symptoms include night sweats, sleeplessness, low mood, anxiety, lack of confidence and brain fog. Symptoms vary hugely in duration, severity, and what impact they have on a woman, often resulting in higher sickness rates. But it is not women' issue only. Symptoms of the menopause can also indirectly affect partners, family members and colleagues ⁴.

Women are now considered the fastest growing demographic in the workforce. According to the latest ONS statistics published in 2022, there are now 2 million more working women than in 2010⁵, meaning 72.2% of women between 16-64 are in employment. It is also estimated that nearly 8 in 10 women currently at work are going through menopause ⁶, ⁷. Considering the hospitality industry, 56% of all hospitality workers are women ⁸, and many are largely

¹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/281240/population-of-the-united-kingdom-uk-by-gender/>

² <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/menopause/#:~:text=The%20menopause%20is%20when%20a,Sometimes%20they%20can%20stop%20suddenly.>

³ <https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2019/10/25831.pdf>

⁴ <https://peppy.health/blogs/menopause-its-not-just-a-womens-issue/>

⁵ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/timeseries/lf25/lms>

⁶ <https://menopauseintheworkplace.co.uk/articles/menopause-and-work-its-important/#:~:text=The%20average%20age%20for%20a,menopausal%20women%20are%20in%20work.>

⁷ <https://www.engage.england.nhs.uk/safety-and-innovation/menopause-in-the-workplace/>

⁸ <https://www.thechange.org.uk/blog/ons-data-shows-drop-in-uk-chef-numbers/>

represented in departments such as housekeeping and front of house. Therefore, the industry is urged to consider menopause awareness to retain staff.

The transition to the menopause is a personal experience, which for some women can be relatively easy, however, for others the symptoms may cause difficulties both in and out of work. In the most comprehensive study of its kind, Brewis et al. (2017) reported that ‘many women tend to feel that they need to cope alone’ - because of ‘a reluctance to speak up at work’. In fact, some menopausal women struggle with the symptoms, especially at work, and the impact is such that they contemplate leaving their employment, due to the impact the menopausal symptoms have on their working life (Harris 2019).

In the UK, there are no legal policies in place. The Women and Equalities Committee has called for separate changes to the legislation to protect menopausal women, recommending that the government launches a consultation on introducing a new protected characteristic of menopause ⁹. However, in January 2023, the proposal to make menopause a ‘protected characteristic’ under Equality Act was partly rejected by ministers. ¹⁰

There are hospitality businesses who are already paving the way and championing raising awareness of the subject of menopause supporting their employees and making the workplaces more inclusive. Examples include:

- Pub launches ‘Menopause Mondays’ to support women who are going through menopause; also Pause-o-men, a play on words, as this subject is not exclusive to women and menopause symptoms can affect relationships with those close to them (<https://inews.co.uk/news/menopause-mondays-pub-support-women-men-affected-symptoms-1628958>)
- Night Owl: a nightclub urges hospitality businesses to tackle the stigma and prejudice about menopause in workplaces. Its policy handbook states that the company acknowledges that menopause affects individuals in different ways and encourages employees who are experiencing symptoms to speak to managers to seek help tackling it as an ongoing health issue rather than ill health. <https://www.morningadvertiser.co.uk/Article/2022/07/05/do-hospitality-businesses-offer-menopause-support>
That same business hosted a Perimenopause and Menopause Awareness seminar on Saturday 8th October as part of World Menopause Month. This gender-inclusive event was open to all.

A team of University of Greenwich colleagues (led by Dr Ratnesvary Alahakone – Senior Lecturer in Human Resource and Organisational Behaviour; Anna Radley – Organisation Development and Engagement Manager in the Human Resources Directorate; Maureen Montague – Executive Officer, PVC’s Office, Greenwich Business School; Vanessa Roots – Senior HR Policy Officer, Human Resources Directorate; and Dr Maria Gebbels) have come together to conduct a project evaluating the impact of menopause awareness initiatives at the University of Greenwich. Based on the preliminary findings, here are the recommended solutions for increasing awareness about menopause in the workplace, applicable to hospitality businesses.

⁹ <https://www.hrmagazine.co.uk/content/comment/employment-law-outlook-for-2023/>

¹⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/jan/24/menopause-law-equalities-act-uk-change-rejected>

1. Menopause Awareness Training for all Line Managers; this is pivotal to educating managers to support their staff.
2. Menopause Awareness Training for HR colleagues, who can signpost menopausal women onto the support and resources available.
3. Menopause Awareness Training for colleagues to educate and get the conversation started.
4. Becoming a member of 'Henpicked Menopause in the Workplace', and work towards becoming Menopause Friendly Accredited; this further supports businesses to become an inclusive employer, can fulfil their duty of care to staff, increase productivity, lower absence levels, reduce recruitment costs, reduce risk of being taken to a tribunal.
5. Human Resource department to write a policy/guidance on Menopause in the Workplace.
6. Menopause Website – design a website for all staff to find out what support, information and resources are available to help menopausal persons, line managers, and all staff both young and mature.
7. Menopause Listeners – named contacts in each department for staff to know they can speak confidentially to that person and that person can be the voice for the menopausal persons or accompany them into a meeting with a line manager to discuss support available.
8. Engagement from male colleagues and managers – who will be living, working, or knowing a friend/family/colleague transitioning through peri-menopause.
9. Uniform – breathable materials (100% cotton); duplicate uniform to allow for change of clothing.
10. Menopause Cafes – to keep the conversation alive, and breakdown the taboo.
11. Keynote speakers – for Menopause Awareness Month: October; Mental Health Awareness Week, and International Women's Day.

The menopause will and does affect everyone, and lack of employer engagement and support can result in poor employee performance leading to low retention rate and high staff turnover. In order to break down the taboo, hospitality workplaces should consider including menopause awareness training for all their staff, keep the conversation alive by setting up menopause cafes, and put in place relevant policies to formalise the support that needs to become available to all menopausal persons.