

The onset of menopause came as a big surprise to me. I was in my early forties and felt too young for my monthly cycle to cease. In fact, I hadn't given menopause a moment's thought. I had similarly little awareness that menopause might be preceded by 'peri-menopause' which could last for several years. I didn't have time to not have my usual abundance of energy and enthusiasm for life's everyday moments! With my loving husband I was in the midst of parenting three children in their early teens, running a business, teaching yoga and mindfulness meditation, and growing organic veggies on our acreage. Well, as the saying goes "the only constant is change" and change it was for me.

Faced with the physical and psychological challenges of menopause, I found that adopting the holistic approach to daily life set out in this article brought me benefits in body, mind and spirit.

PERI-MENOPAUSE AND MENOPAUSE PROPER

For most women the process of menopause begins when they are in their mid-forties. For some women the onset may be earlier and the symptoms more deeply felt. A woman's medical history can have an impact. Chemotherapy treatment for cancer can cause a woman's periods to stop, and women whose ovaries are removed experience surgically induced menopause.

You may find that your monthly cycle simply ceases, or becomes erratic – sometimes heavy and more frequent, sometimes lighter and intermittent. You may miss a month or two. This time is called peri-menopause. It can begin six to eight years before actual menopause proper, which is defined as the cessation of your monthly cycle for 12 months or more.

Other symptoms of peri-menopause are insomnia, anxiety, feelings of melancholy, fatigue, mood swings, foggy head, loss of concentration (staying

on task becomes a task in itself), lack of willpower, heart palpitations, urinary frequency, incontinence and hot flushes. Most women experience some of these symptoms. You may find that these symptoms continue even after the cessation of your monthly cycle. These symptoms occur because of the fluctuating hormonal levels between the ovaries and the pituitary gland. As we come to the end of our childbearing years we don't require as much oestrogen and progesterone as we once did. These hormones influence our sleep cycle, brain function, bone health and weight. The ovaries want to hand over hormone production to the adrenal glands and other organs; hence the ovaries begin to slow down their hormone production to a gentle rhythm. The pituitary gland has other ideas and wants to up the tempo. It continues to encourage the ovaries to wake up. No wonder we feel our bodies are spinning us up, down and round and round.

The good news is that once your hormones settle, the body adjusts to the changes and can flourish. The transition may be easy for some women and more difficult for others. The perfect time to begin your holistic approach is when you first start experiencing peri-menopausal side-effects. Get your hormone levels checked and explore the following techniques to assist you on the rollercoaster ride into the next stage of your life as a woman.

MANAGE YOUR STRESS LEVELS

High levels of ongoing and accumulated stress exacerbate any peri-menopausal symptom. Often the adrenal glands – the body's stress-handling glands – are exhausted and need a rest if they are to be re-invigorated. The adrenal glands are one of the organs that take over hormone production after the ovaries reduce their production of oestrogen and androgen. Having healthy adrenal glands is therefore very important. Avoiding stress relieves the adrenal glands, soothing the body's fight or flight sympathetic nervous system. This allows the 'rest and digest'

parasympathetic nervous system to come into play. Linda, a yoga teacher in her mid fifties, told me that she manages her stress levels and fatigue by simply not cramming too much into her day.

BREATHE DIAPHRAGMATICALLY

Take the time to check in with your breath throughout your day. This is a direct way to stay in the moment. Often when we are stressed, tired and feeling a little out of our depth our breathing may become shallow and quick. This can lead to fragmented thought processes, lack of focus and a disconnection from the self.

If you become conscious of your breath and notice its quality (shallow, edgy, even, or quick), you may find that the breath begins to settle and lengthen of its own accord. Shallow breathing encourages the nervous system to stay heightened and alert. Breathing deeply and diaphragmatically allows one to feel a sense of calm and ease; on the inhalation the belly gently rises, on the exhalation the belly softens back. Just a few moments are often all that is needed. You should never feel force or strain when you deepen your breath as this may aggravate the nervous system. The intention is to settle, soothe and replenish.

RESTORE YOUR BODY

Finding five minutes in your day to do a restorative posture such as supported Supta Baddha Konasana, or Butterfly Pose (featured in the sequence) helps to rejuvenate mind and body. This posture is a gentle backbend which tones and strengthens your nervous system; it also tones and lifts your pelvic floor. During menopause oestrogen is declining but it is still required to keep the mucous of the bladder and urethra healthy. So this posture is one to practise on a regular basis. If you have the time, stay longer in this posture and flow into a progressive muscle relaxation sequence.

RELAX YOUR MUSCLES

Progressive muscle relaxation techniques are also very helpful in reducing stress. When the body relaxes,

this feeling of relaxation flows on to calm the mind. The calmer the mind, the deeper the relaxation is felt throughout the body. As we bring concentration and mindfulness to the process of relaxation, the body and the mind become deeply relaxed. This re-establishes homeostasis, a state of deep healing.

MEDITATE WITH MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness meditation helps us to see things more clearly. You will find that you can take in your stride situations that may have once been stressful. Meditation helps you to respond and not react. Any length of time is fine. Start with 5 to 10 minutes and see how that works for you. You may be pleasantly surprised at how liberating this time for self becomes.

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LOOK AFTER YOURSELF

Many women have told me that allowing time for yourself is very helpful during menopause. As women we have more often than not been the ones to nurture our loved ones. Pressing the pause button and allowing ourselves time to rest, rejuvenate and look inwards is not selfish. It is healthy self-love and self-care. You may also notice that when you give yourself time to just 'be', you experience a sense of balance between the head and heart. What you feel and what you think become more closely in tune, which is perhaps what is meant when we describe our later life as 'the wisdom years'.

LEARN TO LET GO — APARIGRAHA

Aparigraha, translated as 'non-grasping', is one of the yamas in the yogic system. Bringing this yama into your daily life helps you firmly planted in the present moment, flowing with what is, not yearning for what isn't, or once was. This acceptance

of where you are at in each moment is extremely healing and liberating.

In this time of transition, unfamiliar bouts of sadness and grief are often experienced more frequently and may take the shape of yearning for what once was. This is perfectly normal. You are not alone in having these thoughts and feelings. Accept that these sensations are all part of the process of life. Connect with them and do not criticize yourself for having them. This often allows these sensations to pass, bringing mindfulness into your daily moments.

Chris, in her late fifties, has a daily meditation practice. She discovered that accepting her hot flushes and not resisting them helped them to pass more quickly.

Clair, a long-time yoga student in her mid-fifties, keeps a list of the eight limbs of yoga next to her computer at work. Clair attributes her success in life and enjoyment of it to observing these limbs and implementing them in everyday moments. Yoga helps her in, "accepting change, concentrating on doing the task at hand the best I can, living in the present and being grateful".

BE PRESENT ON THE MAT

If you have a daily asana practice, now is the time to be truly present and aware of your need in this moment. You may be feeling fatigued as your hormone levels continue to fluctuate. Your active practice may now need to become more restorative. This is a wonderful opportunity to explore aparigraha (non-grasping) on your mat. Experience the grace and authenticity that comes with recognizing that it is okay to let go a little.

GO WITH THE FLOW

Postures such as twists may exacerbate

hot flushes. Conversely I have found that open twists keep space in the belly and are very soothing. Some women move away from heating inversions such as headstand; others find that such postures help to clear the cobwebs from an often-cloudy mind. Strong backbends such as the Wheel Pose may make you feel overheated. Remember, this is a time of change and you may revisit these stronger postures once your hormones settle. Some days you may be content to flow with a restorative sequence.

SPEAK UP

Now is the time to express to others that you may need a little more support in situations where you once coped quite effortlessly. More often than not we live 'in our heads' and not in our bodies. We become caught up by beliefs that we 'should' do this or that, or by the uncertainties of 'what if'. We do not acknowledge our intuitive sense of what we need. If you need to rest, do so. If you have more energy, use it wisely.

CREATE SPACE

Walking for at least 20 minutes is a wonderful mood enhancer and helps the feel good hormones to flow. At this time when your practice may be largely restorative, getting outside and walking in nature is extremely therapeutic. Sue, a yoga teacher in her early fifties, noticed that at this time of change she felt claustrophobic and often took her yoga mat outside to practise. Sue found this helped her feel a sense of spaciousness on and off her mat. You may, like me, feel the need to modify certain postures to create that sense of spaciousness. With Tadasana (Standing Mountain Pose), try placing your feet the width of your hips apart, instead of together. In Warrior 1 (Virabhadrasana 1), as you extend your arms over your head, keep your arms wider than your shoulders. In Utkatasana (Chair Pose) keep your arms wider than your shoulders. These simple changes may enable you to keep hot flushes at bay throughout a more active practice and to feel grounded, accepting, and calm.

WATCH YOUR DIET

Becoming conscious of what foods support you and what foods do not will help control hot flushes. For example, spicy foods may bring on hot flushes, as may red meat, caffeine, alcohol and refined sugar. Ayurveda, a sister science to yoga, recommends that women adopt an Ayurvedic diet from the onset of puberty, suggesting that this would make every transitioning stage of a women's life more balanced and harmonious.

Women in my workshops have told me that some have found acupuncture helpful with peri-menopausal symptoms. Others have used massage, homeopathy and acupressure therapy to help relieve peri-menopausal side-effects. What works for one may not work for another. Allow yourself the time to find what works for you. Other women have found that simply

coming together and telling their stories is also healing.

Pressing the pause button and allowing ourselves time to rest, rejuvenate and look inwards is not selfish.

RESEARCH YOUR OPTIONS

Your GP may have suggested that you try hormone replacement therapy to manage the discomforts of menopause. There are many arguments for and against HRT, and many studies into its benefits and risks. I invite you to do your own research before deciding what is right for you. By adopting the holistic approach described in this article you may very well be able to avoid the need for HRT.

FINDING THE GRACE

The holistic techniques recommended in this article will help you create the space to look after yourself in daily life. By accepting where you are in your life journey, and by encouraging lightness, laughter and love into your daily life, you can make this natural transition a graceful first step into your wisdom years.

The following is a great restorative sequence that I regularly use myself. It's designed to sooth, replenish and rejuvenate. You will need 2 blankets, 1 bolster, 3 blocks and an eye pillow. Hold each posture for at least 3 - 5 minutes, longer if you have the time making sure it feels comfortable. Keep your breath steady and smooth as we are looking to bring balance to the nervous and glandular systems. As always never force or strain – its yoga!

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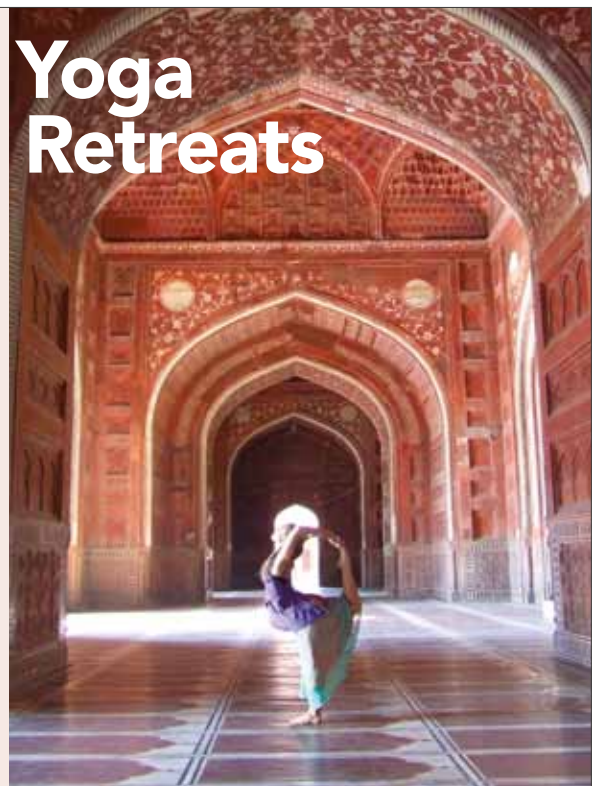
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Restorative sequence



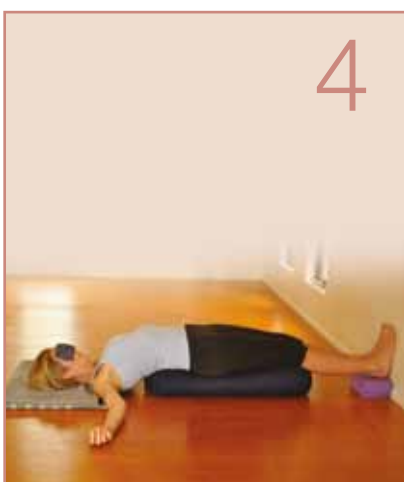
WIDE LEGGED SUPPORTED CHILD
 Pacifies the adrenal glands, calms all systems of the body, as it is a supported forward bend. 1a If you have discomfort in your knees I recommend doing this pose in a chair, remember to turn your head to each side for an equal amount of time.



RECLINING OPEN TWIST WITH A BOLSTER
 Replenishes the adrenal glands; by keeping your head turned towards your knees allows spaciousness in the belly. Hold each side; be mindful to come out of each side slowly.



SUPPORTED RECLINING BUTTERFLY POSE
 A gentle backbend, helping to tone and strengthen your pelvic floor, aiding circulation to that area. It also tones and strengthens the adrenals. Gradually lengthen your exhalation and your inhalation, pausing at the top of each inhalation. Roll over to your right side when you wish to complete this pose.



SUPPORTED BRIDGE POSE
 Do not practice if you are menstruating, and/or have spine issues. Helps to reinforce the perineal and anal muscles, aiding the inner support for the ligaments of the uterus. It is cooling for the brain, helps one to slow down, hence very soothing for hot flushes.



SUPPORTED INVERSION
 Place bolster few centimetres from the wall to allow the pelvis to drape over the bolster. Not to be done if menstruating, as pelvis should be lower than the chest. Helps you to feel refreshed, creates space in the belly, lifts and tones the pelvic floor.



CORPSE POSE
 Helps to relieve anxiety, nervous tension and hot flushes, replenishing on every level. Stay for at least 5 mins. Next edition, Post-Menopause, continuing with the 'Holistic Approach'

Melissa has trained in Mindfulness based - Stillness Meditation at the Gawler Foundation, and is a registered teacher with Yoga Australia. Melissa holds regular Mindfulness Courses, Women's Retreats and Workshops.
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