

Menopause is a journey every woman takes eventually, if she lives long enough, but she doesn't exactly go it alone. Whether she comes through with relationships intact or leaves behind a trail of still-steaming bodies may depend on how well she communicates her needs and how well others respond. If you're going through menopause, some of the following may seem familiar. If you're living, working, friends, or a partner of someone who's going through menopause, this may be what she wishes you understood.

Here are 10 tips to help you both navigate a challenging time:

1. Learn the symptoms. One of the frustrations of perimenopause (the stage of life where hormonal fluctuations and menopause symptoms start) is its unpredictability. Some women begin experiencing hormone declines as early as their mid-30s, some not until a decade later, some don't have many symptoms at all. Women who have a hysterectomy that includes removal of the ovaries (oophorectomy) can be flung into the thick of menopause immediately following surgery. Women may not realize what's happening to them at first. Recognizing a mood swing for what it is can help you help her through it rather than letting it become a point of friction.
2. Keep lines of communication open. Or, to put it simply, *listen*. Centuries of health care practitioners have been unable to solve this thorny biological puzzle, and we don't expect our partners or friends to figure it out (but if you can, great!). What you *can* do is listen. Sympathize. Be patient. Do your best to understand an experience you may not ever share. But don't push. This is such a touchy and highly personal subject, many women may not ever want to talk about it, but just knowing you're there and supportive can make a huge difference.
3. Adjust expectations. For lovers: understand your once-voracious partner may suddenly have little appetite for sex. One reason for that may be vaginal dryness, but another may be a drop in her testosterone levels (yep, women have testosterone too). Be patient, be open to new ways of showing affection, and don't take it personally. The good news is, for many women, libido returns in all (or close to) its former glory once menopause is complete. And being free of the fear of pregnancy can make things even sexier.
4. Reduce friction. Changes in sex life are one of the biggest sources of friction, and it may be partly due to *actual* friction. Your perimenopausal or menopausal sexual partner may be unwilling to share this information with you, but declining oestrogen can make her vagina drier and more vulnerable to tearing. You'll especially run into these problems with sex after menopause. However, a little research can help you both out: explore tantric sex, talk with a sex therapist, introduce some sex toys or other aids during menopause, definitely check out lubricants.
5. Give her free range over the thermostat. And whether the bedroom or office window is open or closed. Oddly, many women we talked to said temperature regulation was a biggie in relationships, whether at home or work. Why? Menopause is a time when our bodies feel out of our control: weight gain, hot flashes, hair loss, blah blah blah. Being able to do *something* in response, even in a minor, manual way like opening and closing the windows, gives back a feeling of some control.
6. Don't call attention to her symptoms. Menopause is still a difficult subject, and while it **shouldn't be**, it's not really up to your partner/friend/whomever to bear the burden of going public.

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7. Buck up her self-confidence. In our youth-obsessed society, self-confidence can take a hit at menopause. Skin and hair become dry and thin, it's easier to gain weight around the middle, incontinence may make it difficult for women to be their flamboyant, devil-may-care selves, and brain fog means her witty retort might be a few minutes behind schedule. Remind your lady friend that she is as fabulous as ever, with her stunning laugh, her wicked sense of humour, her gorgeous ... [fill in the blank].
8. Limit guilt. Chances are the lady you're helping through menopause is dealing with substantial guilt and the anxiety that goes with it. She may feel she's not performing as well at her job. She may feel badly about snapping at her kids or co-workers. She may turn down sex and cancel plans more frequently or just be less available. Try to avoid adding to the guilt she's likely already carrying around. If she doesn't make time for you, let her know you miss her, but give her space to work through her issues in her own way.
9. Don't doubt or diminish her experience. Menopause is real, and possibly the worst thing anyone can do to a menopausal woman is deny her experience or tell her "it's all in your head." These symptoms are very real, including the emotional ones of depression and anxiety. There will be enough doubt, enough people telling her to "suck it up." Have her back, provide a safe space, know she's doing the best she can, and help her continue to be the best she can be.
10. Get the support you need, too. Unless you're going through symptoms as well (in which case best of luck to you both), it's probably harder to be her right now, which means the attention is on her. But it's tough being where you are too – on the sharp end of a mood swing, in a freezing cold office or bedroom, helpless but armed with tissues during the latest crying jag – and we don't want to minimize your struggles either. Find ways to take care of you so you can be there for her.

And finally, remember that menopause, while it may seem eternal, is temporary. Just like during adolescence, the hormonal peaks and troughs will level out and peace and harmony will return