



Blue notes

Why anxiety, anger and depression may be heightened during menopause.



The mood changes often associated with menopause may be hormone-based, but they can also be rooted cognitively and emotionally – as a reaction to loss, changing personal life-roles, how we feel we are seen socially, an altered relation to our own body, and an uncertain sense of our future. These can sometimes manifest in the form of anxious, angry or depressive states.

It is worth looking at these conditions, not because they are inevitable features of menopause – they're not – but rather as common conditions sometimes heightened by it. And the key to working with these feelings is to try to understand them.

Let's start with anxiety. There are two common types: circumstantial anxiety ('I'm anxious because I can't pay the mortgage'), and what is sometimes called, in an unfriendly term, 'endogenous' anxiety ('I feel anxious or panicky on and off all the time, without particular cause').

The anxiety often felt during menopause may have elements of both. Circumstantially, we may be anxious because we are losing our immediate everyday role as parents and care-givers. This may be anxiety intertwined with a feeling of loss now that our children are leaving home. Our sense of how we are seen – or, increasingly, not seen – makes us anxious about who we are becoming, and affects our relationship to our own bodies. We're anxious about the future now everything is in flux.

In the background there may be a more constant anxiety, amplified by these changes, which has been there most of our lives. This kind of anxiety is best seen not as an illness but as an adaptive response learnt during childhood. It is a feeling attached to watchfulness.

Every child finds itself in an emotional landscape where they must learn to cope, and in a family where there is a degree of unpredictability, uncertainty or inconsistency, watchfulness is often the skill to ensure the child's safety and even survival. Watchfulness has a positive outcome for the child, since they learn emotional intelligence – they become good at 'reading' people's feelings. At the same time, the cost is the feeling attached to watchfulness: anxiety.

If the safety strategy is watchfulness, anxiety becomes a habitual 'safe place' which can last throughout life. Giving up anxiety can feel like an overwhelming risk. The state of ever-watchful, mild anxiety becomes a guard against massive anxiety. So, in a way, anxiety prevents anxiety!

During menopause, this background 'watchful' anxiety may become heightened by circumstantial anxiety, to produce a quite debilitating mix. But rather than reach for anti-anxiety medication (which can only flatten out symptoms), it may be worth talking about how we feel. Because, if you think about it, both kinds of

anxiety not only make sense, they are, in a real way, actually signs of mental health.

As we have seen, life-long background anxiety, far from being an illness, is best seen as a positive adaptive response. And as for circumstantial anxiety, well, let's take the example of our children leaving home. Who wouldn't feel a sense of loss? Or have questions about our new roles?

'During menopause, background 'watchful' anxiety may become heightened'

Most importantly, doesn't our sense of being seen in a different way say much more about society's narrow and patriarchal view of the role of women, and women's bodies, than it does about ourselves? So the anger that we may feel during menopause is hardly 'crazy'. It is society that treats post-menopausal women as invisible, or suggests that they may have outgrown their usefulness.

It is similar with depressive episodes: while hormonal change may be partly a cause, there can also be a sense of not seeing a way forward, a de-motivation in which social pressures and expectations clearly play a large part, too.

Longer-lasting background depressive episodes, of course, may well begin in our families of origin. As with anxiety, it is useful to see background depression as a protective adaption: a psychic withdrawal, rather like hibernation.

We may not be able to love anxious, angry or depressive feelings, but seeing them as rational and reasonable may well help. jamesearl.com

Anxiety, anger and depression in menopause – in two minutes

- Anxious, angry and depressive feelings are common during menopause.
- These feelings, despite hormonal changes, may also be the product of society's negative stereotypes about women, ageing and changing roles.
- Longer-lasting anxiety or depression, amplified by this stage of our lives, should be seen as adaptive responses learnt early in life, rather than illness.
- Talking, rather than medication, is often the most effective route to understanding and change. But see your GP if symptoms are severe.
- Championing – together – 'a better second half,' is the best way forward!

To learn more about depression or anxiety in general, watch James' award-winning two-minute animations here.

ANXIETY



DEPRESSION

