



*Easing the
Menopausal
Journey*

By Karrie Osborn

After months of hot flashes, fatigue, and irritability, oftentimes the last thing a woman in the throes of menopause wants is to be touched. Yet, this is exactly when a woman needs to experience touch, especially massage and bodywork. When she most needs to be nurtured, comforted, and reminded of her beauty and inner spirit, is often when a woman's body rebels and begins fighting against her.

Many say touch, and a host of other complementary therapies, can rebuild a woman's trust with her physical self and help her ride through the transition known as menopause. For the 4,000 new members joining the club each day, that's good news.

Menopause — The Stages, The Symptoms

A natural occurrence in life, menopause usually begins in a woman's early 50s and signals the end of her reproductive years. Just as with pregnancy and childbirth, each woman experiences menopause differently. Some women sail through this time without much trouble; others are debilitated by the laundry list of symptoms that accompany it.

Menopause has three stages, each presenting varying degrees of challenges. Perimenopause is the first phase and usually begins a few years before full-onset menopause begins. Menstrual cycles change and become erratic, while hormone production begins to diminish. Hot flashes and some of the other more intense symptoms can start during perimenopause as well, although they usually occur in the second stage, known simply as menopause.

During this second phase, all the symptoms you're going to have will make their arrival, hormones take an even greater nosedive, and menstruation stops. Symptoms can last as few as two years or go on for a decade or more. Most women hover around the five-year mark.

The final stage of menopause is postmenopause. It's at this time, with all the hormonal changes in effect, that women are especially susceptible to the ravages of osteoporosis, Alzheimer's disease, and cancer.

The symptoms accompanying menopause are both varied and extensive, with hot flashes winning out for the most recognizable of them. Some women will notice slight changes in their body temperature when a hot flash strikes; others will have the full-blown effects of flushed face, intense heat, profuse sweating, even disorientation.

Other symptoms of menopause that don't get as much fanfare include insomnia, irritability, irregular menstrual cycles, night sweats, skin and vaginal changes, fatigue, memory loss, anxiety, headaches, and depression, to name a few. If not addressed, the intense hormonal changes that occur, especially the reduction of estrogen in the body, can lead to more serious problems, such as glaucoma, bone loss, and heart disease.

The school of thought for relief from many of these symptoms and conditions had, until recently, relied on hormone replacement therapy (HRT). Women around the world quickly halted their pharmaceutical HRT regimen when studies began showing that other, even deadlier dangers lurked behind the benefits of HRT.

Now women are seeking out other avenues for balancing hormones and finding peace during this sometimes difficult journey.

Bodywork Answers

In their book *Your Menopause, Your Menotype*, naturopaths Angela and Mark Stengler say it's important for women to be good to themselves during this time.

"Remember, major hormonal and metabolic shifts occur during menopause. Your body needs adequate rest. The more you can relax, the easier the transition will be for you. Your stress glands (adrenals) need to be working optimally to make up for the shutting down of your ovaries."¹ One solution — a few extra massages. They say their patients who scheduled more bodywork time during the "heat" of menopause were happy with the results.

Jennifer Tornstrom, owner of Heaven's Hands massage clinic in La Crescent, Minn., says massage is one of the best anecdotes for menopausal women, a group that comprises at least one-fourth of her clientele.

"A lot of the symptoms of menopause are anxiety, fatigue, sore backs, sore necks, sore shoulders,"

Tornstrom says. "They'll turn to massage, because it's a natural, healthy solution for the challenges they have and the discomforts that accompany menopause."

The menu of therapies Tornstrom's clients seek include myofascial work, deep tissue massage, and, the most requested, Swedish massage to relax. For those who are especially sensitive, she says energy work is an option. "We look to them for what feels good."

Whatever their course of treatment, Tornstrom says the work relieves headaches, releases tensions, increases range of motion, eases postural restrictions, and helps women reconnect with their bodies. This reconnection is especially important for women living through menopause. "It helps them connect with what's going on within themselves. It can help improve the process of going through it and cope with it more effectively." She says reconnecting is a natural process. It allows the woman to own her condition, as opposed to having it own her.

Massage is something Tornstrom often recommends to her menopausal clients for a number of reasons. "It helps with the changes they're experiencing at this time in their life; it honors their changes and allows them to nurture themselves for healing." →

Just as there are many faces of the menopausal woman and her condition, there are many avenues of treatment as well.



Shiatsu Self-Help

If you feel like the world is out to get you, here's a quick exercise to relieve tension and anxiety.

1. Locate the middle point between your eyebrows, above the bridge of your nose.
2. Apply circular massage for 30 seconds, exhale and inhale deeply, then repeat. For added relief, close your eyes during this exercise and listen to your breathing while focusing on your heartbeat.

— from Holistic-online.com

Bodywork for the menopausal woman doesn't have to end with traditional massage. A personalized selection of treatments can make the transition even more tolerable.

Acupressure has been used to stimulate the adrenal, pituitary, thyroid, and parathyroid glands in an attempt to balance hormone production and reduce the frequency of hot flashes. It can also help get energy (chi) moving to the nervous system, which will improve memory and concentration.²

In the same vein, reflexology is said to focus on the health of the pituitary, thyroid, and adrenal glands, but can also bring balance to the reproductive organs.³

Another popular option for women experiencing menopause is reiki. Reiki master Kristin Webb says reiki can balance the systems of the body, including hormonal levels. This self-balancing, she says, maximizes the body's natural ability to heal itself.

Webb uses herself as an anecdotal example of the success reiki has had on menopause. "I was receiving or giving myself reiki frequently, and I had only very mild menopausal symptoms for a brief while," she says. "Women who are facing menopause should learn reiki. It is a smart health investment."

In addition to menopause, reiki is said to be effective for most female problems, including infertility. "We have several reiki babies," Webb says of her clients, "where women could carry to full-term where they hadn't been able to before." She's also seen reiki work wonders on women who have very painful menstrual cramps, with relief coming in as little as five minutes.

More Options

In addition to massage and bodywork, Tornstrom also suggests various relaxation methods for the menopausal

woman including yoga and meditation, proper nutrition, exercise, and adequate hydration. It would make sense that the broad category of stress reduction and relaxation techniques would have something to offer women experiencing menopause. Regaining a sense of calm can help quiet a very noisy and ferocious biological clock. And research is showing the same.

For example, Alice Domar, director of Women's Health Services at Harvard Medical School found that the relaxation response decreased the frequency of menopausal women's hot flashes.⁴ Many of the studies being conducted today are looking at deep, controlled belly breathing as a meditative medium for relaxation; others are studying the effects of positive thought toward the menopausal symptoms in place of negativity.

Here are some of the other stress-reducing avenues for calming symptoms:

Yoga has long been prescribed for stress reduction and is said to alleviate other menopausal symptoms including depression, hot flashes, mood swings, and insomnia. The deep breathing associated with yoga works for menopause by improving blood circulation, maintaining muscle tone and flexibility, and increasing the mood-regulating chemicals in the brain. It also massages the internal organs, encourages strong bones, makes the heart work efficiently, and tones the interior and exterior muscles.⁵

Homeopathy — Built on the concept of "like cures like," homeopathy can offer relief for menopause symptoms in a number of ways. For example: sepia, lachesis mutus, pulsatilla, belladonna, valeriana, and ferrum metallicum work for hot flashes; nux vomica, salvia, and sulphur address night sweats; and aconitum napellus, arsenicum album, chamomilla, and passiflora incarnata

work on insomnia.⁶ Because every woman and her symptoms are different, it's best to speak with a homeopathic physician before beginning a course of homeopathic treatments.

Herbal options have been used by women for centuries to help cope with menopause. Dong quai and ginseng are two of the more popular options for calming hot flashes. Experts say these herbs reduce the intensity of hot flashes by adding plant estrogens to the body, offsetting the estrogen deficiency caused by menopause.⁷ Still, these same experts would advise not taking an individual herb for the relief of hot flashes without first consulting an herbalist, as plants can be just as powerful as pharmaceuticals. In addition to herbal help, various vitamin and mineral supplementations have shown beneficial to menopausal women (i.e., calcium, vitamin D, magnesium, flaxseed).⁸

Nutrition — We all know how important a role diet plays in overall health, and the same can be said for the menopausal woman. Most particularly, there are many foods rich with natural plant estrogens, including apples, barley, carrots, cucumbers, flaxseed, licorice, olive oil, papaya, peas, potatoes, soybeans, tomatoes, and yams.⁹ On the same note, if taking a “menopause diet” seriously, it should also include the elimination of excess sugar, caffeine,

and junk food, as these exacerbate symptoms significantly.

Aromatherapy can offer help to the 50-something woman, too. Here are some examples: Basil alleviates fatigue, lavender works against insomnia, jasmine fights depression, and sage balances hormones while easing tensions.¹⁰

Exercise — According to experts at Holistic-online.com, “without doubt, exercise is the most important alternative therapy available to the menopausal woman.”¹¹ They go on to say that exercise helps a woman control her body and emotions by using her internal resources: “Each time you exercise, your adrenal glands are stimulated to convert the male hormone adrostenedione into estrogen. A minimum of four, 30-minute exercise sessions a week will be enough to keep you ‘topped off’ with estrogen.”¹² This, in turn, can reduce the likelihood of severe hot flashes.¹³

Just as there are many faces of the menopausal woman and her condition, there are many avenues of treatment as well. Reminding clients that this is a time to honor their changes will go a long way toward their health and well-being. Tornstrom says, “You do the best you can to educate clients ... to ease some of their stress and tension, to help them cope with what they’re going through, and to just be there as a support for them.” **M&B**

Help for Hot Flashes

While we really don't know why hot flashes occur, there are some tips you can suggest to clients, or use yourself, to help calm this menopausal symptom. Menopause authors and naturopaths Angela and Mark Stengler offer these suggestions:

Stop Smoking — A good idea anyway. Smoking can even bring menopause along earlier.

Eat Your Veggies — Studies are showing vegetarians have fewer hot flashes than meat-eaters.

Stay Cool — Obviously it's a good idea to avoid very hot spots. Dress in layers so you can peel away when a hot flash attacks.

Diet Dos — Avoid caffeine, spicy foods, and alcohol, which can intensify hot flashes for some women.

Herbal Help — The Stenglers say they've had success prescribing black cohosh and vitex (chasteberry) to reduce the intensity and frequency of hot flashes.

Homeopathy — There are several remedies that are used worldwide to calm this symptom: sepia, pulsatilla, lachesis.

Seek Alternatives — Acupuncture is just one option that has gained popularity with women to reduce hot flashes.

Exercise — A little sweat has been shown to reduce the menopausal sweat.

(Consult your healthcare provider before starting any herbal or exercise regimen or other change in self-care.)

— from *Your Menopause, Your Menotype* by Angela and Mark Stengler, N.D.s

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Resources

- American Association of Naturopathic Physicians — 877/969-2267, www.naturopathic.org.
- Reiki Alliance — 208/783-3535, www.reikialliance@compuserve.com.
- www.menopause-online.com.
- The North American Menopause Society — www.menopause.org.
- *Natural Woman, Natural Menopause* by Marcus Laux and Christine Conrad (New York, NY: HarperCollins; 1997).
- *Your Menopause, Your Menotype* by Angela and Mark Stengler (New York, NY: Avery; 2002).