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I was 46 when I first started perimenopause. I experienced a pile up of symptoms out of the blue: inexplicable anxiety, panic attacks, insomnia, a low and depressed mood, nausea, faintness, achy hip joints, itchy and crawly skin, a metallic taste in my mouth, dry eyes and irregular periods. I was randomly tearful, I lost my appetite and felt relentlessly tired. In hindsight, my periods had been irregular for a year prior and I'd been waking at odd times through the night. I didn't know they were signs of perimenopause. For me, not knowing why my mind and body were changing was worrying. I thought I'd developed a cardiac condition or an anxiety disorder, despite having no history of either.

I saw my GP regularly over three months. I was referred to a cardiologist, a counsellor, a hypnotherapist and a naturopath. I went down a lot of rabbit holes until my GP suggested that I was going through perimenopause. It was a total relief. I visited my local menopause clinic to see a specialist. That's when I started hormone replacement therapy (HRT), aka menopausal hormone therapy (MHT). I also read and researched everything I could and shared everything with my partner. We talked to our son and daughter, who were 10 and seven at the time, so they understood and knew I would be OK. I talked to friends, colleagues, clients and women older than me. I did yoga. I learned how to meditate and use my breath to stay calm if I felt anxious. I took sleep hygiene seriously. I set more realistic expectations of what I could stack into my days and nights. I really paced myself.

I had no idea about menopause growing up – it was never talked about. I remember my once middle-aged mum saying, "Is it hot in here or is it just me?" I'd heard the term 'hot flush' but didn't know it had anything to do with the fluctuating hormones typical of midlife. Somehow it was a well-kept secret. I didn't hear about it from my mother or friends' mothers, my aunts, older sister or cousins. I grew up knowing about puberty before puberty, and pregnancy and childbirth before I was pregnant and had children. But I didn't know about the next stage: menopause. I knew I wouldn't get my period forever but I naively thought they'd stop one month and then life would continue as usual. I didn't know that perimenopause could last one to 10 years!

Being open about it over the past two and a half years has made me realise how much other people of all ages and genders – from my now 10-year-old daughter to my 80-year-old father-in-law – are curious to learn and understand. It seems that if you give people permission to talk about something taboo, many have a lot to say. Most people have wanted to ask questions, share knowledge, tell stories – their own or others.

I find these conversations positive but maybe that's because I'm looking for the positives. It's not that every part of perimenopause is easy because some symptoms for some people can be really tough – physically, cognitively and emotionally. But I've come to see and accept it as an inevitable transition, a stage of life like puberty, with ups and downs along the way.

If I had time to start another career, I'd study anthropology, feminism, gender studies and history to find out more. Not all cultures see women getting older as negative. For example, in te ao Māori [Māori world view], ageing comes with mana.

I founded Menopause Over Martinis as a grassroots project because I wasn't prepared for the different stages of menopause and most of my friends weren't either. I wanted to help more people feel better informed, understood, supported and celebrated through this stage of life. We learn about puberty from our friends, family and education at school. We learn about and are supported through pregnancy by our GP, midwife or obstetrician, friends and family. But there was nowhere for me to learn about or feel supported through menopause with others of the same or different ages.

It's not something to ignore, be ashamed of or apologise for. It's something to be acknowledged, respected and supported. Going through menopause doesn't make us less attractive, less productive or less valuable. Like any transition or rite of passage, I think it makes us stronger, wiser and more valuable. ☺

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