

Menopause and your mental health

During the menopause years, physical symptoms like hot flashes and night sweats get all the attention. But your mental health can be greatly affected during menopause, too. And even though it's not as talked about, it's just as much of a concern.

It's easy to feel invisible during menopause, especially when you're dealing with mental health concerns like mood changes, anxiety, or depression. Others might even dismiss your symptoms. But know that what you're going through is real and valid. Also know that you're not alone.

Maven Mental Health Provider LaTonya Washington explains more about the connection between menopause and your mental health. Plus some strategies to cope and how to get help when needed.

HOW DOES MENOPAUSE AFFECT YOUR MENTAL HEALTH?

There are a number of not-so-fun reasons menopause affects your mental health.

For starters, the aggravating symptoms you're experiencing on a daily basis are a lot. We're talking hot flashes, mood swings, night sweats, weight changes, and more. Those can result in some really tough nights and days. There will be times when you don't feel good or feel like yourself at all. You might not feel like you have a lot of control over what's happening, either. "During menopause, many of us express feeling a great sense of loss: Loss of your identity, your sexuality, your physical attractiveness, a loss of control, and decreased self-esteem," Washington explains. "Consequently, your inability to control or prevent these changes can often result in persistent feelings of sadness, emptiness, hopelessness, and helplessness. These are symptoms associated with depression." Sleepless or restless nights can increase fatigue, forgetfulness, and irritability, too. Experiencing these symptoms can cause you to feel more anxious than usual, too.

What's more, menopause tends to sneak up at a time in life when you've got so much going on, both personally and professionally. From challenges at work, to caring for others at home, your stress level might have already been at an all-time high. "Some of us may be simultaneously experiencing phases of life issues, from caring for adolescents, to preparing to be caregivers for our aging parents," Washington says. "This can make us even more susceptible to experiencing negative mental health outcomes."

HOW TO TAKE CARE OF YOUR MENTAL HEALTH DURING MENOPAUSE

It's so important to take care of your mental health throughout the menopause journey, just as you would any other part of your body. Find small ways to care for yourself. Try to fit in gentle physical movement like walking or yoga when you're up for it. Eat foods you enjoy that nourish your body and make you feel good. Limiting alcohol or caffeine might help you feel less anxious, too.

Try these other self-care ideas:

- Starting a daily meditation practice (there are many free apps that can help!)
- Deep breathing
- Practicing mindfulness (trying to stay present in the moment, not thinking about what's ahead or in the past)
- Journaling
- Resting
- Reading books you enjoy
- Connecting with family and friends
- Joining a menopause support group

Finding a mental health provider you trust is another great way to process what you're feeling and experiencing.

THE BOTTOM LINE

However you're feeling throughout the menopause years is justified. "Remember that although menopause is a natural part of aging, it's OK to feel some sadness and a sense of longing, as long as it is not impairing your ability to enjoy your life," Washington says. "Extend yourself compassion and grace as you learn how to navigate this new phase of life. Reflect on newfound freedom and opportunities that exist during this time."

Remember that you are also not alone right now. Don't be afraid or embarrassed to seek support from family and friends.