

FOREWORD

As a family physician, I find that a comprehensive, holistic, and personalized approach to menopause provides the best outcome for my patients. I see many women who are uncertain about how to cope with sleeplessness, depression, low libido, difficulty concentrating, hot flashes, and other signs of hormone imbalance. They worry that menopause marks the beginning of a decline. They want answers but frequently feel overwhelmed about where to begin. *End Your Menopause Misery: The 10-Day Self-Care Plan* by Stephanie Bender and Treacy Colbert fills a great need with a step-by-step plan to help you sort out what's best for you. At the end of ten days, you'll feel like you've gained a significant measure of control over your health and well-being.

Millions of women suffer daily from uncomfortable and bewildering hormonal changes associated with perimenopause and menopause, but they don't have to. Recognizing and proactively managing these symptoms become much simpler and more straightforward with *End Your Menopause Misery*. This concise guide will help you improve your health, quality of life, and relationships.

The powerful motto “one day at a time” applies to this book. Each chapter is devoted to one day, offering specific tips and strategies aimed at easing a particular menopause symptom. Clear and uncomplicated, the plan tells you what to eat, what to avoid, how to find new ways to enjoy being active, and how to think about intimacy with a renewed outlook. The discussion covers everything from restoring sound sleep to lifting your mood, increasing your heart and bone strength, and you’ll find flexible recommendations that let you adapt the approach to suit your lifestyle and preferences.

End Your Menopause Misery also unpacks the issue of hormone replacement therapy (HRT), demystifying the subject and explaining it succinctly. After reading this book, women who choose to explore HRT with their health care provider can begin the conversation with a solid understanding and with confidence that their decision will be well thought out and right for them.

End Your Menopause Misery reassures women that they can not only manage their menopause symptoms, but they can also rediscover their happier, sexier selves. I will be pleased to advise my patients to read this valuable guide to a healthy and happy stage of life.

Enjoy,
Fred Grover Jr., MD

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—SB

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—TC

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MARK YOUR CALENDAR FOR TEN DAYS FROM NOW

Take a look at your calendar and circle the date or put a reminder in your smartphone for ten days from now. Between now and then, you're going to find relief from your perimenopause or menopause symptoms and simply change your life for the better. That's right. Over the next ten days, you will discover how to renew your energy, lift your mood, spend more restful nights, improve your libido, savor foods that make you feel good, sharpen your wits, and brighten up your overall appearance. You'll build stamina with the right mix of exercise, and you'll increase your heart and bone strength.

And if all the noise and confusion about hormone replacement therapy (HRT) has alarmed you, take a deep breath. We've sorted and sifted our way through the medical literature so you don't have to. After all, what busy woman has time for the medical degree she'd need to fully understand the pros and cons of HRT? This should make it

a whole lot easier for you to make choices about taking or not taking medication.

Impossible, you might think. Do all that in ten days? Possible.

The advice in this guide is simple and straightforward, following the latest science on women's health. We've seen so many women try to navigate this change without a lot of help, and they nearly tear their hair out in the process. That's precisely why we wrote this book.

As women "of a certain age," we are the ultimate multitaskers—organizing and engineering our job and family responsibilities; helping our kids, stepkids, and grandkids along their path; caring for aging relatives; offering community service as volunteers; and negotiating and navigating our marriages, relationships, and friendships. But we shouldn't have to enroll in medical school, leaf through a dozen books, or consult multiple websites to piece together how to handle hot flashes, mood swings, memory lapses, dwindling libido, or other midlife symptoms that are interfering with life.

With each day in this book, you'll find new hints to help you look and feel better. The tenth day caps with an exploration of your spiritual health, so that it, too, flourishes and you can move through your days feeling centered and in control.

For Stephanie, writing this guide feels a bit like coming full circle, which is particularly poignant. Thirty years ago, she founded Full Circle Women's Health, a women's health

clinic in Boulder, Colorado, with the philosophy of blending the mental and physical aspects of women's health. At the time, her children were elementary school students ages eight and ten, playing with their beloved action figures and tearing around on their bikes. The term *premenstrual syndrome* (PMS) was only just beginning to be understood. Now her children are grown, with children of their own, and she is a grandmother who has gone through the menopausal transition too. She shares her own experiences here as well as those of the thousands of women she has met through Full Circle Women's Health and in cities all over the United States, where she speaks and gives women's health seminars.

Back in 1982, there was very little information about the ways in which hormones affect women's bodies and psyches, and hormone-related symptoms accompanying the menstrual cycle were dismissed as signs of weakness, self-indulgence, or worse—mental instability. Indeed, we have come a long way since those days. Stephanie has worked with thousands of women who were suffering from PMS, postpartum depression, and later in their lives, symptoms of perimenopause and menopause. On a societal level, there is certainly a greater understanding of women's hormonal health, but she still encounters women on a daily basis who are looking for help and information.

While it's decidedly a good thing that there is a wealth of information on women's hormonal health now, for some women approaching menopause, this information glut has

given rise to a new problem—sorting it all out can seem overwhelming. Stephanie’s previous books on PMS and perimenopause offered breakthrough information on topics that were rarely acknowledged, let alone discussed. Now Stephanie encounters women who are entering perimenopause or have reached menopause and are experiencing very uncomfortable symptoms, but they’re frightened by what they’ve heard about the harms of HRT. Often, they mistakenly believe that they just have to tough out their symptoms, fearing that HRT is too dangerous and that nothing else works.

We wrote this guide to let women know that their choices are not starkly divided between equally unfavorable options, and to provide manageable, positive steps we can all take to improve this part of our lives. Whether you’re in your forties and in perimenopause, meaning that you still have periods although they may be irregular now, or if you’re in your forties, fifties, or sixties and have stopped menstruating but still experience menopause symptoms, you’ll find help in these pages.

We were recently interested—and amused—to read that anthropologists have discovered that a surprising 25 percent of our Neanderthal sisters lived past the age of forty, contrary to earlier evidence of a far shorter life span. Scientists don’t know if these elderly Neanderthal women went through menopause, but reading the article made us speculate about how our experiences compare today, forty thousand years later. Did forty-something Neanderthal women toss off their animal skins in the cave when

night sweats came on? Did they feel unexplained sorrow or fatigue without the language to articulate these emotions? We can't know, of course, but we do know today that women experience menopause in distinct ways.

What do you know about your mother's experience of menopause? Perhaps you're reaching menopause at roughly the same age as your mother and with many of the same symptoms. Or your menopausal transition may be completely distinct from hers—with entirely different or more severe symptoms. Maybe you don't know what your mother went through and she isn't here any longer, so you can't ask.

Regardless of which is true for you, this is definitely not your mother's menopause. As a woman reaching menopause today, you have more information about your body, a wider array of choices on what to do, and greater license to be open about your physical, emotional, and spiritual health. Thankfully, we no longer live in a time when women are routinely loaded up with high doses of estrogen to “treat” menopause, a risky practice that has been abandoned. Other women of our mothers' era thought they were toughing it out alone and doing just fine, but many were self-medicating with generous lashings of chardonnay, scotch, or cigarettes. Others resorted to an array of tranquilizers or diet pills that may have kept them thin but jittery or foggy. Some of the symptoms of menopause may be timeless, but your focus on self-care for the next ten days will depart from any dated notions of how women are supposed to think and feel about this time in their lives.

Among sisters, aunts, friends, and cousins who have very similar menopause symptoms, the way they experience them and how much or how little they are bothered by these symptoms can be as varied as their background and appearance. One woman's weight gain may make her feel depressed and out of control, while another woman may accept her more generous waist size and not let it bother her. Night sweats and interrupted sleep can be what sends some women off the rails, while others find that sudden bouts of anxiety, irritability, and/or depression are the menopause symptoms that are hardest to deal with. You may find it useful to inventory your menopause symptoms. What concerns you the most? What do you most want to improve? Write down your thoughts and remember today as the date that you took the first step toward changing the way you look and feel.

There's no right way to go through menopause. But as women, we often get swept up in the millrace of others' needs and neglect our own. Resist that pattern as you pay full attention to your own health and well-being now, and in following this simple, ten-day plan, put yourself first, perhaps for the first time in your life. Tuck this guide into your purse or briefcase, or keep it on your nightstand, and make these health hints your priority for the next week and a half. You've earned this time and consideration.

You can use this guide in one of two ways, but whichever you choose, be sure to follow it for the full ten days. It's easy and effective to follow it chronologically, but if one

set of symptoms feels most bothersome to you, feel free to start with the hints for that day. For example, if hot flashes are troubling you more than mood shifts, you may want to begin with the hints for Day 8, “Moisture,” and then return to Day 2, “Mood,” and then follow the rest of the program in order. Whether you decide to follow the program chronologically for ten days or to create a ten-day sequence that fits your needs, here’s what we can tell you for sure: you’ll feel better. Check off each tip as you do it, and we guarantee you’ll say, “That made me feel good!” every time.

As always, women’s stories contribute to our shared knowledge and support. Please post a comment at www.endyourmenopausemisery.com, and tell us your story after you finish this ten-day program. We’re eager to hear what worked best for you.

MOOD

The pall that settles without warning. The flash of irritation that turns a routine conversation with a coworker or family member into a heated exchange. Gnawing anxiety that lingers even after a momentary source of stress has been resolved. Bouts of tears that come on unexpectedly. Sound familiar?

Women experience these mood changes during menopause individually. For some, the seesawing nature of their moods—feeling okay one minute and angry, blue, or nervous the next—gives life an unsettled, unpredictable feel that can be unnerving. Other women experience less abrupt shifts in mood but describe an ongoing “flat” feeling or a sense of joylessness where nothing ignites a spark of excitement, enthusiasm, or happiness.

Let’s look at how and why these mood changes occur. Estrogen strongly influences the production, transmission, and uptake of key brain chemicals that regulate your mood. As estrogen levels decline steeply during the menopausal years, the complex interplay between this hormone and others like serotonin, dopamine, norepinephrine, and acetylcholine in the brain can alter your mood unpredictably.

As ovaries retire from their job of producing progesterone, the absence of this calming hormone can manifest as increased anxiety or irritability. Women who report feeling especially well during pregnancy are feeling the effects of high progesterone levels that support the growing baby. When ovulation stops, progesterone levels drop nearly to zero.

Hormones don't govern our feelings or behaviors entirely, but they wield considerable clout, especially during menopause. That's important to remember when a shift in mood takes over without any rhyme or reason—you're not suddenly becoming unable to cope.

So don't worry. Even if lately you've felt like you're losing it, there's plenty you can do to prevent these disconcerting mood shifts or minimize their disruptiveness. First, take this short quiz to identify which aspects of your mood changes have been the most bothersome to you in the last three to six months. This will help you clarify the triggers and decide what you'd like to change.

Which statements reflect your feelings?

1. In menopause, I have recaptured my youth. I feel like I am revisiting toddler years, that is, because even a slight irritation can make me feel like I want to fling myself to the floor, drum my heels, and wail.
2. I alternate between wondering, What's wrong with me? and asking myself, What's wrong with all these people who persist in annoying the hell out of me?

3. If anxiety were an Olympic sport, I would go for the gold medal in fretting about past events, worrying about my current circumstances, and getting myself into a tailspin about things that might happen.
4. Menopause has brought about a distinct failure in other people's ability to drive the way I expect them to. While this is intensely irritating, I have built up my arm and jaw muscles by gripping the steering wheel and clenching my teeth.
5. Activities or hobbies that once brought me joy either don't interest me much now or I lack the energy to do them.
6. I swing between feeling deeply justified in roaring at a family member or snapping at a coworker, and later feeling horrified and remorseful about the anger I displayed.
7. I sometimes feel that my best days are behind me.
8. I sometimes feel that my behind's best days are behind me.
9. If outsized tissues for crying jags were available, say somewhere between the size of a hand towel and a bath towel, I would buy several boxes to keep on hand.
10. Things that once lifted my spirits, like wine, sweets, or shopping, either don't work so well anymore or sometimes make me feel worse.

End Mood Misery

Tongue in cheek aside, if depression, irritability, anxiety, or all three plague you, try giving it a rest, literally. Improving your mood can start with improving your sleep. Erratic or non-refreshing sleep—inability to fall asleep or stay asleep, waking up too early around two or three a.m., or waking up feeling as tired as if you hadn't slept at all—can wreak havoc with anyone's mood. Even the calmest, happiest, and most even-keeled person can't maintain a sense of serenity without sufficient sleep.

Scientists haven't unraveled all the reasons why women have trouble sleeping during menopause. Hot flashes and night sweats are often fingered as the culprit, but they're only one piece of the sleep puzzle. Along with its feel-good role in moods, the brain chemical serotonin also regulates the sleep-wake cycle. An unwelcome tango between insufficient serotonin levels is implicated in menopausal sleep disturbances by night and dim moods by day.

In menopause, more restful sleep may start with changing your perspective and your sleep patterns. If you go to bed anticipating that you'll be wide awake at three a.m., worrying about everything from the world economy to piles of unfinished work on your desk, start telling yourself before you go to bed that you're going to get as much rest as you can.

You've probably read and heard dozens of times that it's important to prepare for sleep, but do you really do it? Today is the day to start your sleep warm-up routine. Begin by making noon your cut-off point for anything with caf-

feine. Alcohol or exercise right before sleep will only rile you up, so if you have that glass of wine with dinner, finish it at least three hours before you're going to go to bed. A walk after dinner or gentle yoga stretches in the evening can help promote sleep, but it's best to avoid vigorous exercise in the evening. Morning is the best time for that, as you'll read on Day 7.

If it's feasible to rearrange your bedroom and place the bed on the opposite wall for a change, do it. Even a slightly different environment can help to change a disrupted sleep pattern. If your room is noisy, you can reduce sound with a thicker carpet or rug, a soundproof panel on the bottom of your bedroom door, a tapestry hung on the wall to absorb noise, heavier curtains or drapes, and caulking around your windows to limit outside noise. You can also wear earplugs while you sleep, although not everyone likes the idea of not being able to hear while sleeping.

Is the overall ambiance of your room restful? You may want to soften the lighting and choose some new bedding in soothing colors. Silk sheets aren't an indulgence or a luxury—in menopause they may help you sleep better by minimizing dampness from hot flashes or night sweats. Test your mattress and consider whether it's time for a new one. If yours is still in good shape, adding a pillow-top cover can make it even more comfortable.

Think about making your bedroom an electronic-free zone, with no laptop, smartphone, or TV within reach. That helps you avoid scanning that last website or cramming in

that last text message before you try to close your eyes. If you read before bed, choose something inspirational or humorous. Keep a selection from your favorite humor writers or inspirational leaders on your nightstand. The latest research shows that sleep not only helps with memory, but that we also continue to learn while we sleep. Make your last “lesson” before bed something that focuses your mind on tranquility or lets you laugh. You’ll keep learning how to be calmer or more lighthearted as you sleep.

When insomnia persists, use the time. Awake at three a.m.? Rather than lying in bed worrying about how tired you’ll be tomorrow or churning any family or work dilemmas in your mind, get up. Take a blanket or whatever you need to get comfortable into another room. Read, listen to soft music, knit or sew, write or sketch—do anything you enjoy. During daylight, a stolen hour or so to do something like this would be a luxury. Granted, being awake isn’t necessarily your first choice, but sometimes it works best not to fight your body when it won’t do what you want. When you’re feeling sleepy, go back to bed.

Now we come to snoring, which can be a new and troublesome issue in menopause. With less estrogen, the soft muscle tissue in your palate isn’t as firm as it once was. In some women, this means more snoring, which can disrupt your sleep (or your partner’s).

Sleep apnea occurs more frequently and severely in menopausal women, according to a University of Toronto study that compared sleep patterns in pre- and postmeno-

pausal women. Shifting hormone levels are believed to be behind the increase in this sleep disorder, which produces pauses in breathing or shallow breaths during sleep. These pauses can last from seconds to minutes and may occur from five to thirty times an hour. When breathing starts again, there is often a snorting, choking, or gasping sound. Women with sleep apnea do not get restful sleep, and they wake up feeling tired.

Diagnosing sleep apnea generally involves a sleep study, where you sleep for one night at a sleep laboratory while your breathing, heart rate, and brain waves are monitored. Sleep apnea treatment may include using a continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) device. A CPAP keeps consistent air gently blowing into your airways to keep them open and to prevent the breathing pauses. Some women find the CPAP mask uncomfortable or the noise from the machine irritating, but there are many good options available now (including much, much quieter machines than previously), and we think you'll be amazed at the double benefit—your own much-improved sleep and your partner's too, if you have one.

Sleeping on your side, rather than on your back, may also help. Some people recommend sewing a tennis ball into your nightgown to prevent you from rolling over on your back, but that seems downright silly. Seriously? Try wedging a pillow up against your back instead—long, narrow body pillows are available for just this purpose. They avoid the problem of how to launder a nightgown with a tennis ball in it.

Alcohol before bed also seems to worsen snoring and sleep apnea, so remember that a nightcap may send you off to sleep briefly only to interrupt your rest during the night. Keeping your weight in a normal range can also help ease snoring. And you may find that elevating your head slightly with an extra pillow or wedge can help you breathe—and sleep—better. If these techniques aren't enough to help with snoring, talk with your dentist. A special mouthpiece is available to guard against snoring, but it must be fitted by a professional.

Changing the way you think about sleep and preparing for sleep just as you would get ready for an important appointment can go a long way toward easing menopausal mood swings during the day and strengthening your ability to manage the emotional changes you may feel.

Menopause: The Blue Period

If you've found that depression has come along with menopause, you have lots of company. Estimates on the number of women who report feeling depressed in the menopausal years range from 11 to 33 percent, but the numbers may be even higher. Many women may not report their depression or seek help for it but instead try to tough it out. They may feel embarrassed or even ashamed of being depressed, thinking that they have no real serious life issues or crises that merit depression and that they are therefore not entitled to feel the way they do. They may scold or criticize themselves while concealing their vague, general sadness.

Other women may gradually become resigned to feeling flat or indifferent, but you don't have to adapt to a state of tedium.

Hormones strongly influence these feelings during depression. But it can be difficult to sort out how much of the blues is due to estrogen decline and attendant low serotonin levels, and how much results from life changes that tend to come fast and hard during menopause.

There's plenty of nonsense out there suggesting that we poor old menopausal biddies just can't cope with the loss of our youth and fertility or our children leaving home—don't buy into that for a minute. You haven't gotten this far in life without being able to handle whatever life has put in front of you, and that ability doesn't go away during menopause.

Remember that sadness is a normal response to some of what we face in menopause. Our roles as daughters and mothers may shift profoundly. Sometimes women in midlife become the mothers to their mothers, due to frailty, dementia, or loneliness after the death of their fathers. This revised position in the family can contribute to sadness, fatigue, and anxiety. If this phase in your life includes new responsibilities for your mother or other older relatives, the care and support you provide to yourself will greatly increase your ability to help them.

And midlife is the period when many women lose their mothers. Whether the relationship was ideal or fraught with problems, the loss is life changing. If you are coping

with menopausal symptoms at the same time that you are adjusting to a world without your mother, your self-care becomes doubly important as you grieve.

Keep fond memories of your mother alive by wearing something of hers, lighting a candle for her, or making one of her favorite recipes. Write down some of your mother's favorite expressions in a notebook, which you can pass along to one of your children or a niece or nephew as part of your family history. Reconcile difficult aspects of your relationship with your mother by writing her a letter or listing three or four things you learned from her, even if they are examples of how not to behave.

Telling stories about our mothers can be healing, too, regardless of the relationship. One woman told of going to a silver-polishing party with a group of women around Mother's Day. Each woman was asked to bring a piece of silver or any special object that had belonged to her mother. At the gathering, they polished the objects and told a story about their mothers. Some of the women's mothers were still alive and vigorous, others were in failing health, some had passed on fairly recently, and others long ago. There was a mix of laughter and tears, and the women came away understanding more about themselves, their mothers, and each other.

If you are a mother, the changes that come with menopause frequently coincide—and in some cases clash with—a transformation in the relationship with your children. Perhaps your children are teenagers, so there are days when menopausal irritability and teen sullenness form a particu-

larly combustible mix in the household. If your children are older, you may have a mix of wistfulness and delight as you watch them go out on their own into the world. Or you may find yourself feeling burdened by children who are a bit slower than you would like in leaving the nest, or who continue to rely on you financially when you wish they were paying their own way now.

Remind yourself that you still have the capacity to adjust to life's changes, just as you have in the past. You've done it before, and you can do it again. Being sad doesn't mean you are not being brave or that you can't handle life—you can. Give some careful thought to the degree to which sadness or depression is interfering with your life, and then try these strategies for dealing with it.

Don't Be Sad Alone

This piece of advice means different things to different women, depending on their personality. Women who take comfort in prayer or another spiritual practice often find solace in asking for their God's presence in their struggle, with a prayer that can be as simple as "God, please be with me in my sadness, worry, fear, or anger." Other women benefit from resolving to pick up the phone when depression threatens to get the best of them. Call someone you miss, whom you haven't talked with in a while, and catch up. Get in touch with a friend whose company you enjoy. Make a plan to do something that makes it impossible to feel sad while you're doing it and that gives you something

fun to anticipate—see a funny movie or play, take in an evening of stand-up comedy, attend a concert together, or pick a beautiful place to meet for a walk.

Decide What to Let Go Of

It's very powerful to decide to limit our suffering about the things we can't change. What are those things in your life? Write them down. Look over the list, and tear it to bits if you like. Then choose whatever ritual you prefer to symbolize letting go of these sources of sadness or stress. Bury the paper pieces in a flowerpot or in your garden. Watch them go up in smoke in your barbecue or fireplace, or stand by while they swirl down the toilet (make sure you've torn the list into tiny enough pieces, so a plumber's bill isn't an additional stress). You might even write your list of things you want to release on a wall, and then paint over it. Or do as one woman did and put them in your deep freeze where they can't live. The unburdening is symbolic but powerful. Anytime you find your mind returning to these causes of stress or sorrow, remind yourself by saying out loud, "I burned that," or "I buried that." Visualize it as gone, over, done, with no more power over your life. You're in charge.

Get a Move On

Menopause was once discreetly referred to as "the change of life," usually in a lowered tone and generally not in mixed company. Remember that "going through the change"

doesn't necessarily have to be all about hot flashes or feeling wistful for times gone by. Take stock of your personal and professional relationships. Which support your happiness and which impede it? Deciding to move on or limit your interaction with people who don't bring anything positive to your life doesn't have to involve confrontation or acrimony—it means you make the choice to emphasize the people and things that boost your spirits and make you feel good. Write down the names of people who are welcome in your life.

Work It Out

Reflect on your work and its role in your satisfaction or, conversely, in your stress or depression. In rocky economic times, there's a not-so-subtle undercurrent in many work settings that we place our foreheads in the dust to express gratitude that we have a job at all. Yes, many of us may not have the option of leaving a job now, but we can refashion the work we're doing. Take a class to boost your knowledge and talk with your supervisor about adjusting your role. If you're currently facing the stress of seeking work, look into volunteering for an organization that can benefit from your professional skills. Organizations that serve children, seniors, and veterans are always looking for help. Or if you have a friend who owns a business, see if you can help out as a temp or a volunteer.

Face Sadness and Fear

We can spend valuable time and energy fighting what we're feeling or trying to run from sadness, regret, or anxiety. Accepting a feeling doesn't mean you're stuck with it. But there may be times when the antidote to stress or despondency is telling yourself that you're going to live with it for a specific amount of time. You decide how long that will be—the next hour, afternoon, or day—and then you're going to either set it aside as something that can't be fixed or as something you'll face again when you're ready.

Count Your Blessings, Set Down Your Burdens

Many women find it affirming to make a daily note of three things they are grateful for that day. Keep a notebook by your bed just for this purpose. Take your pick from the large and small things that grace your life—a colleague who gave you a hand today, a grandchild's gummy grin, your health, the wisecracking friend who never fails to make you laugh—the people and things you would dearly miss if they were not present in your life but that were there today. Doing this each evening and leafing through this notebook at times when life seems dreary can increase your optimism, which positively impacts your health. Research shows that taking the time to place yourself in a state of gratitude lowers stress levels and may heighten immune function. What are three things you are grateful for right now? Occasionally, take the daily notebook one step further and send someone you've named on your gratitude list a card, note, or email to say, "Thank you!"

Reach Out to Help Someone, and Help Yourself

Sometimes the best way to shake a persistent cloud of unhappiness is to give someone else a hand. In your neighborhood, among your colleagues, or in your circle of friends, there's always any number of people whose day you can brighten immeasurably, whether it's a single parent struggling to do it all, someone who simply needs a friend, a neighbor going through cancer treatment, or a friend who recently lost a family member. Your gift to that person or family can be a phone call to let them know you're thinking of them, offering to give them a ride or to pick up groceries, walking their dog, or dropping off an evening meal. They will be touched by your empathy and thoughtfulness, and you'll find that turning your focus to someone who needs help will exchange your feelings of sadness or anxiety for a sense of satisfaction at having made a difference.

Breathe

Many menopausal women describe an unsettling shift of mood that seems to come on without warning, in the car, at the desk, or lying awake at night—a sudden surge of anxiety or despair often accompanied by a sprinting heart rate or sweaty, light-headed sensation. That's a great time to do a breathing exercise.

You can do this simple breathing exercise anytime, anywhere to slow down your heart rate and deepen your breathing until the uncomfortable feeling lifts. Take a deep breath in and, as you do so, say or think, “Breathe in peace,”

“Breathe in relaxation,” or “Breathe in serenity.” Breathe in slowly through your nostrils for a count of four, and then slowly breathe out for a count of four. As you breathe out, say or think, “Breathe out the nervousness,” or “Breathe out the gloom,” or “Breathe out the worry.” Picture the anxiety or discontent leaving your body with each long, slow exhale, replaced by peace and calm with each inhale.

There’s a certain irony in the fact that the National Center for Telehealth & Technology, a division of the US Department of Defense, has a smartphone app to guide you through relaxation breathing. You can find it at www.t2health.org/apps/breathe2relax. It’s effective, and you can customize it to suit your pace. But is being tethered to smartphones and computers to the point where we’re relying on them to teach us how to relax necessarily a great thing? What do you think? Please leave your comments at www.endyourmenopausemisery.com.

Ask for Help

When family or work responsibilities threaten to overwhelm you, send up a flare. For some women, this means having to relinquish a former notion of themselves as entirely self-sufficient, or as the one everyone else comes to for help, not the one asking for assistance. Handing off some of your duties can make the difference between feeling frazzled and stressed, and having a moment to yourself. Decide what you need and make your requests direct and specific. No vague, “I don’t know what to have for dinner,”

“The house is a mess,” “I have so many invoices to do,” or “I need to go check on Mom.” It’s way too easy for family, friends, siblings, or colleagues to ignore hazy statements like these. Swap them for clear requests for help: “Will you please bring home takeout or stop by the market for milk?” “Will you please (fill in what you need here—vacuum, fold the laundry, change the sheets, pick up the living room, do half this pile of invoices)?” “Could you please drive over to Mom’s and see that she’s okay and ask if she needs anything?” You’ll find that asking for help isn’t so hard after you’ve done it a few times, and when you let your family, friends, or colleagues know how much you appreciate their help, you give them a gift too.

Change the Venue, and Make the Change of Pace a Literal One

Get outside to lift your spirits. Instead of a coffee or lunch date, make a walk date and pick a new venue, a different park, lake, beach, or trail where you can walk and talk. Try the opposite of a power walk occasionally—change the pace and move more deliberately so you can listen, smell, touch, and observe what’s around you. Maya Angelou said, “A bird doesn’t sing because it has an answer, it sings because it has a song.” Go outside and replenish your well as you listen to birdsong, feel the sun pour in, hear the wind rustle or the rain fall if you like it, and breathe in the scent of the water or flowers. You’ll feel as the great naturalist John Muir did when he said, “The sun-love made me strong.”



But not all mood changes in midlife need to disquiet us. We can also feel grateful that the uncertainty and insecurity we may have felt as younger women now gives way to a more reflective and discerning way of regarding the world, and a certain sageness in viewing ourselves. Our wisdom—some hard earned, some gently and slowly acquired over time—can be trusted to serve us well as we experience menopause.

MEMORY

Former poet laureate Billy Collins gives a delightful view of memory loss in his poem “Forgetfulness.”

*The name of the author is the first to go
followed obediently by the title, the plot,
the heartbreaking conclusion, the entire novel
which suddenly becomes one you have never read, never
even heard of,*

*as if, one by one, the memories you used to harbor
decided to retire to the southern hemisphere of the
brain,
to a little fishing village where there are no phones.*

*Long ago you kissed the names of the nine Muses good-
bye
and watched the quadratic equation pack its bag,
and even now as you memorize the order of the planets,*

*something else is slipping away, a state flower perhaps,
the address of an uncle, the capital of Paraguay.*

*Whatever it is you are struggling to remember
it is not poised on the tip of your tongue,
not even lurking in some obscure corner of your spleen.*

*It has floated away down a dark mythological river
whose name begins with an L as far as you can recall,
well on your own way to oblivion where you will join
those
who have even forgotten how to swim and how to ride
a bicycle.*

*No wonder you rise in the middle of the night
to look up the date of a famous battle in a book on war.
No wonder the moon in the window seems to have
drifted
out of a love poem that you used to know by heart.*

*“Forgetfulness” from Questions About Angels,
by Billy Collins, © 1991. Reprinted by
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Today is the day you can ease your alarm about sudden memory gaps and quiet your fear that you're on the cusp of dementia. Changes in memory and concentration at

midlife are very common, but you don't have to live with them. You can improve your memory and mental sharpness with simple activities and routines you'll enjoy. And on Day 6, you'll also learn about choosing foods to support your memory.

As in mood, the twin problems of declining estrogen and lack of sleep conspire to produce the troubling “foggy” state so many women describe during menopause. Your brain—that three-pound powerhouse that controls everything you think and do—has estrogen receptors in many of its structures, notably the hippocampus. Central to memory and learning, the hippocampus has equal parts on the right and left sides of the brain. Estrogen also affects the circuitry in the prefrontal cortex, which interacts with the medial temporal lobe where the hippocampus is located. With less estrogen to promote the release of acetylcholine and other brain chemicals, the process of transmitting information between nerve cells on both sides of the brain can suffer. The interruption in these nerve pathways can make you feel like your brain is sputtering when you're trying to concentrate or remember something.

Remember that certain age-related memory changes are normal. If you can't find your keys or glasses, you draw a complete blank on someone's name, or you wander into a room and then have no idea why you went there or what you were looking for, you don't need to fret. These memory changes can be irritating, but they don't signal the onset of progressive, worsening memory loss. If lapses in memory

or cognition begin to interfere with your ability to function, it's time to see your doctor. Examples of these would include being unable to follow a recipe or balance a checkbook; feeling disoriented about the date, time, or season; or showing impaired judgment by giving money away to someone you don't know or by appearing in public in your pajamas.

Here are some straightforward tips you can use to help bring your memory out of retirement from that little fishing village.

Rest Your Brain

Review what you learned on Day 2 about improving your sleep and make sure you're allocating enough time for rest. If you're trying to do every last thing you can in the evening, that accomplishment may actually shortchange you the next day. When you're sleeping, you're not merely resting your muscles and bones—your brain keeps sorting and storing information. Inadequate sleep makes it more difficult for you to perform memory-related tasks: everything from recalling words or names to being on top of what goes in that quarterly report you've prepared dozens of times before.

Plan to Review Your Medications at Your Next Doctor Visit

Your prescription or over-the-counter medication may play a role in blurring the edges of your memory. If you regularly take an antihistamine to control allergy-related sniffles

or an antacid to calm your stomach, be aware that some of these medications interfere with the activity of acetylcholine in your brain. Certain antidepressants and antispasmodic drugs may also disrupt cognitive function. If you're among the approximately 20 million Americans who take a cholesterol-lowering statin drug, changes in your memory could be linked to the medication, according to anecdotal evidence. Medication-related changes in memory or cognition are often mild enough that it may not have occurred to you to associate a fuzzy memory with any medication you're taking. That's why it's a good idea to check in with your doctor to review your medications. You can discuss whether it's possible to discontinue taking any of your medications or if a change to another medication or dosage will lessen memory-related side effects.

Savor a Bit of Dark Chocolate Every Day

A study published in *Physiology and Behavior* shows that the flavanols in dark chocolate boost blood flow to the brain, improving recall and visual performance. Have your dose of chocolate memory medicine any way you like it—make cocoa or chocolate milk with dark chocolate, enjoy a scoop of chocolate ice cream, or let a morsel of dark chocolate melt on your tongue. If you prefer savory to sweet, make or buy mole sauce made with dark chocolate and put it on chicken, rice, or vegetables. If you enjoy about an ounce of dark chocolate daily, you'll reap the benefits without piling on excess sugar, calories, or fat. If you prefer to stay away

from chocolate, cocoa supplements offer the flavanols without the fat or sugar, too, but also without the fun.

Hike to Bolster the Hippocampus

New research shows that the hippocampus portion of the brain, the memory storehouse, increases in size with regular aerobic exercise, even among people who had been previously sedentary. MRI brain images of study participants showed increased volume in the hippocampus among the aerobic exercise group. You can meet the twin goals of boosting memory and keeping fit in menopause with thirty minutes of daily walking. Even women who insist they don't have time to walk can find three ten-minute blocks of time to walk. You can also make your walk a moving meditation by deciding that you'll keep a deliberate pace and use the time to think about a simple affirmation or prayer, such as "I feel really good today," or "Thank you for my health," or "Everything is getting better." Tell yourself, "I'm not going to think about anything negative while I'm walking," and resist the urge to ruminate about work, family, or finances as you walk. All those things will wait while you spend a few minutes building up your hippocampus, strengthening your bones, and evening out your mood. On Day 7, you'll learn more about the overall benefits of exercise in menopause.

Harness Memory Power Using All Five Senses

You can boost the effectiveness of your to-do lists and smartphone reminders by using the full power of all five

senses. If you find that you're lying in bed night after night thinking, *I forgot to call so and so*, concentrate for a moment on the sound of that person's voice. That extra sensory detail can keep you from letting that call slip your mind again. When you need to pick something up from the store—your dark chocolate, perhaps—imagine the taste or smell of whatever it is you need to buy. You can use a visual image of color to help jog your memory, such as envisioning the color of your bank logo to remind you to go online and pay your credit card bill or to mail the check for your godchild's birthday gift. If you find you're losing time and stressing yourself by looking for files, papers, or other objects over and over, engage your sense of touch to help you remember where things are. Along with saying to yourself, "I'm putting this form in the medical insurance file," or "I'm stashing the scissors in the tool drawer," take an extra second to run your hand along the file folder or drawer surface, giving your mind an extra imprint of where you are placing the object. This additional sensory experience will help you recall later when you need to find that paper, gadget, pair of glasses, set of keys, jacket, or purse.

Keep Stress in Check to Increase Memory and Concentration

We all know the feeling of being so rattled that we can scarcely recollect our own name, let alone important details we need to be present at work or at home. Stress is a major

offender in memory problems. Don't let rising panic or frustration take over when you can't remember something. Step back, step outside if you can, and practice your breathing exercises. Tell yourself, "It will come to me in a minute." Picture yourself clearing out your mind, emptying it of the things you don't need to think about, and making room for what you want to recall. Your ability to relax lets you enjoy a steady and calm mood, and it also sharpens your ability to recollect.

Lessen Overload to Help Your Memory

Some research suggests that the foggy feeling many women experience in menopause isn't a matter of being unable to remember but instead reflects difficulty learning new information, or encoding it in your brain. Women who lament feeling less sharp or alert when they reach menopause haven't become less intelligent or less able to learn, but assimilating new information may take a bit longer because it's simply become harder to keep track of everything. The glut of memories you have stored begin to interfere with each other. Are you the repository for information about everyone's deadlines, appointments, health care, meal schedules, transportation, babysitting, clothing, whereabouts, birthdays, anniversaries, and more? Are you juggling the needs of parents, partner, pets, kids, boss, colleagues, and neighbors? Think about what you can set aside and decide what you no longer need to keep track of at work and at home. Do you call family members to remind them to call other

family members on their birthday? You don't need to take on responsibility for everyone else's memory bank.



Following these hints will help you recall what's important and will ease your anxiety about those momentary wobbles in your memory. Trust that you'll recall what you need to remember, even if it takes a few extra seconds. And be aware that when something slips your mind, it might be nature's gentle hint that you don't need to be in charge of every detail.