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Teaching, menopause and flexible working

Dr Suzanne Brown

Dr Suzanne Brown is a Senior Lecturer in Initial Teacher Education at the Sheffield Institute of Education. Her research interests and publications are around flexible working in the teaching profession as part of improving teacher recruitment and retention. She established, and is the organiser of, the free to join Effective Flexible Working in Schools Practitioner Network which provides opportunities for the sharing of good practice around flexible working. She has written about the relationships between part-time working and career progression for women teachers. Additionally, she has written about flexible working as a means of helping women teachers to manage their menopausal symptoms as part of supporting the retention of teachers in mid-life.

In this article Dr Suzanne Brown explores how we might better support women to thrive and remain in the classroom during their menopause transition.

In the midst of a teacher recruitment and retention crisis (Worth and Faulkner-Ellis, 2022), we need to better support our teachers to remain in the profession. Across the UK wider workforce, 10% of people leave their jobs due to difficulty managing menopausal symptoms (Bazely, Marren and Shepherd, 2022). This is likely to be particularly pertinent in teaching, where females make up 76% of the workforce (Gov.uk, 2023).

In Western cultures, the average age of menopause, which is the cessation of menstrual periods, is 51 years old (Hunter et al, 2012). Menopause is one day in time between being peri-menopausal and post-menopausal. Perimenopause can begin up to 10 years before menopause and being post-menopausal is for the rest of life.

Menopause can be undergone by cis women, trans and non-binary people. It can occur at any time following the start of periods, naturally or due to surgical/medical interventions.

Not all women experience (peri)menopausal symptoms but according to the British Menopause Society (2021) around 80-90% of women will, and for around 25% the symptoms can be debilitating.

Perimenopausal and menopausal symptoms are wide-ranging to both physical and mental health. These can include the commonly known ones such as heavy bleeding and hot flushes but can also include joint pain, gut problems, as well as anxiety, problems with memory, 'brain fog' and a loss of confidence. Palpitations, recurrent UTIs, tinnitus, osteoporosis and cardiac disease can become more likely. Poor sleep can also be a symptom with implications to both physical and mental wellbeing (NHS, 2022).

Managing these symptoms has implications for retaining the teaching workforce. Teachers report that the pressures, workload and high expectations associated with their professional roles are exacerbated by menopausal symptoms (Steffan and Potocnik, 2023). How accommodating are we as colleagues in recognising and supporting that people may need to work differently to others and perhaps to the ways they have worked in the past?

Currently, menopause is not one of the nine specific protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010. However, guidance from the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) in February 2024 confirmed employers' existing obligations under the Equality Act,

2010. If, because of their menopause symptoms, an employee or worker is disadvantaged and treated less favourably, this could be discrimination if related to a protected characteristic, for example: age, disability, gender reassignment or sex. Employers must carry out a risk assessment of their workplace risks to ensure that menopause and perimenopause symptoms are not made worse by the workplace and make any necessary adjustments.

Loss of valuable management time, costly compensation awards and/or possible reputational damage are potential consequences of employment tribunals. These legal and financial considerations are clearly important, but for me, running alongside them is a moral argument. Being considerate, empathetic and supportive of teachers in managing their symptoms alongside their professional roles and other responsibilities should be a given. This is not just about menopause. Teachers are valuable, highly trained professionals and we cannot afford to lose them. First and foremost, they are people, who like us all, may from time to time, need and deserve additional support and kindness to help them thrive.



Whilst menopause symptoms can last for a number of years for some women, menopause is not a life sentence from which 'women of a certain age' should be written off as being less effective and/or less committed to their work. Organisations will need to follow the previously mentioned EHRC guidance and pro-actively consider ways to support employees who are going through the menopause. This includes making reasonable adjustments to the workplace.

Whilst the EHRC guidance gives examples of reasonable workplace adjustments to help in managing menopausal symptoms, teachers said they would find the following adjustments helpful in managing their menopause symptoms (Steffan and Potocnik, 2023):

- Occupational health campaigns in workplaces to increase staff and management awareness of the difficulties women may face during menopause.
- Policy or guidance on the menopause.
- Working in rooms where the temperature can be effectively regulated e.g. a fan, may be helpful along with a flexible dress code.
- Clean and well- resourced toilet and changing facilities.
- The availability of reflexive cover for classes e.g. in case teachers need to go to the toilet urgently due to sudden bleeding for example.
- Providing access to drinking water

Promoting flexible working (e.g. adjusting start times or allowing employees to work from home, where appropriate) is an important consideration that does not always require contractual change or permanency. With the Employment Relations (Flexible Working) Act 2023 having come into effect on 6th April, 2024, all workers are now entitled to request to work flexibly from the first day of employment. With the introduction of this Act, the previous onus on employees to explain how a flexible working request may work has been removed. Instead, employers will be the ones with this responsibility.

Working flexibly e.g. starting work later in the mornings might be particularly helpful if employees are not sleeping well as part of their menopause transition. Supporting requests for flexible working may enable employees to remain in the workforce rather than feeling they have to leave because their current working arrangements are not enabling them to manage their menopausal symptoms. It may help them to not be part of the ten percent who leave because they struggle to manage their symptoms alongside working.

The above guidance from EHRC (2024) is a useful starting point but what is appropriate, will depend on an individual's circumstances as menopause can affect women differently. Embedding a culture of wellbeing where school managers are equipped to have open conversations with employees who are supported to feel safe to ask for reasonable adjustments seems critical.

Finally, indulge me for a moment in a little pondering: are empathetic workplaces, where employees are supported in managing their menopausal symptoms likely to be indicators of how well schools support all their employees in navigating their lives alongside their professional roles? How would this have a positive impact on teacher retention? I do not know the answer to these questions, but I would suggest there is a lot to lose by not trying.

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