

Menopause

Like an electrical charge, menstruation and the ebb and flow of energy is an "alternating current." During menopause, the flow of energy becomes intensified and steady, like a "direct current." We are charged with energy to the degree we have opened ourselves to the wisdom of the Crone.

—Farida Shaw

*M*enopause refers to the cessation of menses—the term derives from the Greek *meno* (month, menses) and *pausis* (pause). This natural process is also known to many women as the "change of life" or simply "the change." The years surrounding menopause and encompassing the gradual change in ovarian function constitute an entire stage of a woman's life, lasting from six to thirteen years, known as the *climacteric*.

Whatever we call it, no other stage of a woman's life has as much potential for understanding and tapping into women's power as this one—if, that is, a woman is able to negotiate her way through the general cultural negativity that has surrounded menopause for centuries. This negativity is currently being challenged and changed as the women of my generation, the baby boomers, enter menopause by the hundreds of thousands. The climacteric experience will never be the same when we are finished with it.

Today, more than forty million American women are currently postmenopausal. With the post-World War II baby boom generation arriving at menopausal age, the climacteric population is expected to swell by another 3.5 million by the middle of the next decade. At the same time, longevity has increased dramatically. American women now enjoy a mean life expectancy of approximately eighty-four years, up from only forty-eight years for a

woman born in 1900. This means that a woman is likely to live thirty-five to forty years following the menopause, making menopause the "springtime" of the second half of life.

Media attention to the subject of menopause has risen accordingly. Feminist authors as well as many doctors and researchers have produced more books on menopause, including a number of best-sellers, than on any other subject in the women's health field.

Though the advice about menopause ranges from exalting hormone replacement therapy to promoting natural menopause without hormones, the important point is that the silence surrounding this process is now being broken by many different voices. The medical profession stands poised to help women through this life stage, and centers specializing in the health needs of midlife women are springing up all over the United States. Every woman, though barraged with conflicting advice, must listen carefully to her individual inner guidance to hear her personal truth about how best to negotiate this life stage with maximum access to her inner wisdom and power to create health.

In her book *Reclaiming the Menstrual Matrix*, Tamara Slayton writes, "The natural expression of personal power and wisdom available to women during [menopause] is thwarted and frustrated in our culture. This surge of energy is subsequently turned inward on oneself and can result in many unpleasant symptoms such as hot flashes, depression, mood swings, and a general feeling of being lost and unable to find a new and vital identity. Lack of support during this time and a tendency toward nutritional depletion in the American diet generate a negative and self-destructive experience of menopause. When women confront the culture's misinformation and address the nutritional needs unique to females, they have, during menopause, an opportunity to discover a deeper and freer experience of self."¹

Dr. Joan Borysenko refers to the years between the ages of forty-two and forty-nine as the "midlife metamorphosis," when a woman begins in earnest to create her life in such a way that her innermost values are lived out in her everyday activities. During this stage, she is more apt to tell the truth than ever before in her life and less apt to make excuses for others. Many women quest for peace of mind against a background of turmoil and change as they end twenty-

year marriages, have affairs, get left by their partners, face the empty nest, and explore new facets of their identity.

It is during this stage that a woman is also most likely to begin experiencing skipped periods and the early stages of hormonal changes, making this a perfect time to start improving and building on the health that will sustain her for the rest of her life.

Anywhere from about forty-nine to fifty-five, a woman's hormonal shifts will often be in full swing, and she'll want support for these changes. After that, hormonal balance ensues once again for most women, and they are often freer than ever before to pursue creative interests and social action. These are the years when all of a woman's life experience comes together and can be used for a purpose that suits her and at the same time serves others.

In Celtic cultures, the young maiden was seen as the flower; the mother, the fruit; the elder woman, the seed. The seed is the part that contains the knowledge and potential of all the other parts within it. The role of the postmenopausal woman is to go forth and reseed the community with her concentrated kernel of truth and wisdom. In some native cultures, menopausal women were felt to retain their "wise blood," rather than shed it cyclically, and were therefore considered more powerful than menstruating women. A woman could not be a shaman until she was past menopause in these cultures. "Menopause," observes Slayton, "when understood and supported, provides the next level of initiation into personal power for women. As part of the menstrual taboo which still lives in our culture, the voice of the menopausal woman is feared and denied. She has been made invisible or encouraged to remain forever young through hormone replacement therapy or other medical intervention. This cultural alienation from a vital rite of passage leaves older women feeling useless, isolated, and impotent."

In native cultures menopausal women "provided a voice of responsibility towards all children, both human and *nonhuman*, to the Earth and to the Laws of Good Relationship," Slayton notes. "These older women contained great power and scrutinized all tribal decisions. They were unafraid to say a strong no to anything that did not serve life. They also initiated and educated the younger women into this knowledge and responsibility."²

Once a woman understands that the true meaning of menopause

has been inverted and degraded, like many of the other processes of a woman's body, she will be able to make her way through the rest of her life fortified with purpose and insight.

Our Cultural Inheritance

The conventional medical mindset is that menopause is a deficiency disease, not a natural process. Just as women's bodies have become pathologized and medicalized by the patriarchal, addictive system, so too has every function unique to women, menopause included.

Dr. Jerilynn Prior, an endocrinologist and researcher, writes, "Our culture finds it easy to blame women's reproductive systems for disease. Linking the menopause change in reproductive capability with aging, making menopause a point in time rather than a process, and labeling it an estrogen deficiency disease are all reflections of nonscientific, prejudicial thinking by the medical profession."³ Since menopausal women are no longer using their energy in childbearing, their systems are described in terms of functional failure or decline; breasts and genital organs gradually "atrophy," "wither," and become "senile."⁴ Menopause, viewed through this lens, is the ultimate in "failed production"—a system that is "shut down."

For years the OB/GYN profession has been steeped in lectures and teaching on "managing the menopause." Now a new topic is appearing—"managing the perimenopause." (*Perimenopause* refers to the years leading up to the last menstrual period.) I take a deep breath when I read this, for if a woman's health care team approaches this life stage with support and respect for a natural process, she will be helped a great deal. But if the perimenopause (or any other natural process) is approached from the disease model, with the mindset that it requires management (and its subtext, control), then a woman's experience will not be ideal. In our culture, the only ages when female endocrine processes escape potential "management" are the years *before* menarche and *after* the age of seventy! (These are the years in which girls and women are even more devalued in our culture; otherwise the culture would have figured out a way to manage them then, too.)

Fear of Aging: Symptom of an Ageist Culture

We live in an ageist culture, in which most people believe that it's natural for aging people to become depressed, fatigued, incontinent, forgetful, and senile. Pharmaceutical companies and gynecologists plant in women seeds of fear that as soon as they go through menopause, their bodies will simply fall apart and waste away unless they are on medication, particularly hormones.

- An ad for Premarin (the most commonly prescribed estrogen) shows a lovely young woman wearing an exercise leotard. The caption reads, "Aerobics every week, calcium every day, bone loss every year." The implication of this ad is that without estrogen, this woman's bones will dissolve right out from underneath her, regardless of whether she exercises or eats well, unless she takes Premarin.

- An ad for Estratest, a combination of estrogen and testosterone that increases libido (discussed later in this chapter), shows an attractive middle-aged woman leaning back against an Ivy League-type distinguished gentleman in a sailboat. Both are drinking orange juice (or mimosas). The caption reads, "I feel like a woman again." What was she before?

- Another Premarin ad shows an attractive middle-aged woman with a huge grin on her face while a man kisses her neck. The caption under this one is, "You think it's good medicine. *She* thinks it's wonderful."

- On the cover of a magazine called *Menopause Medicine*, a woman stands by an open window with filmy curtains blowing at her side; only her back is visible. She is looking out on a landscape covered by dead trees and parched dry earth. The caption underneath this illustration reads, "The Fate of the Untreated Menopause."

It doesn't take a degree in psychology to understand how the pharmaceutical companies influence the sensibilities of the average doctor—many OB/GYNs now feel pressure to give conventional hormone replacement to everyone. Nor does it take ten years of feminist activism to see how the pharmaceutical companies manipulate the stereotypes associated with aging and the deep cultural fears that we women have about them: Without hormones, the message runs, we'll lose our attractiveness to men, we'll dry up, we'll become

brittle, like parched, cracked earth, devoid of moisture and nourishment. The values and beliefs of our culture are that women should retain their "fruitfulness" at all costs, and that becoming seeds of wisdom is somehow less than feminine.

The experience of aging as we know it is largely determined by beliefs that need updating. Though many people *do* decline with age in this culture, this decline is not a natural consequence of aging—it is a consequence of our collective beliefs about aging. My mother, who is now seventy-one and has never been on hormones, hiked the entire Appalachian Trail in her late sixties, skied around the base of Mount McKinley shortly thereafter, and spent the summer of 1997 going on a three-month extended hiking and kayaking trip to Alaska. She told me that as soon as she turned sixty, her mailbox was suddenly full of ads for hearing aids, incontinence diapers, and various aids for failing vision, none of which she had any need for. She resents the constant barrage of negative messages about aging. She also told me that though she doesn't feel much different from when she was thirty, she is definitely treated differently. No wonder so many women are willing to pay any price to prevent themselves from looking old.

Another reason why so many women are afraid of menopause is a misunderstanding of the Crone or Wise Woman archetype. Medical intuitive Caroline Myss points out that in fairy tales and in our collective unconscious, the Crone is often depicted as an old woman living alone in the woods. She is often associated with witches or eccentric behavior.

Caroline notes that this image of a woman alone in the woods symbolically represents a woman who has freed herself from her original tribal programming. She no longer bases her activities, thoughts, and self-image on the approval of her family. She is free to come and go as she pleases and on her own terms. She need not be alone, but her relationships are more likely to be partnerships and mutually satisfying. What we need is a new Crone archetype—a sort of "Aquarian Crone"—that reflects these new ways of perceiving this time of life.

Dr. Deepak Chopra, an endocrinologist, best-selling author, and internationally recognized authority on how consciousness affects our bodies, has reported on an experiment conducted among the

Tarahumara Indians in Mexico, a group known for their running ability. Routinely, certain members of the tribe ran the equivalent of a marathon or more every day, and had regular races between groups. The most intriguing aspect of their culture, however, was that they *believed* that the best runners were those in their sixties. A team of researchers showed that the best lung capacity, cardiovascular fitness, and endurance were *indeed* found in the runners in their sixties! Dr. Chopra points out that for this belief to translate into physical reality, the entire tribe has to believe it.

In our ageist culture, many women, instead of believing in their capacity to remain strong, attractive, and vital throughout their lives, instead come to expect their bodies and minds to deteriorate with age. Thus we as a society collectively create a pattern of thoughts, behaviors, and fears that makes it that much easier to manifest the worst physical reality. We can't reverse our collective cultural negativity about menopause and aging overnight. What we *can* do is consider ourselves pioneers on a new frontier, one at which menopause and aging will be redefined. This is clearly possible. For instance, my mother had a health reading from Caroline Myss when she was sixty-eight. Her body read energetically as though she were in her thirties. This reading is not surprising since it is well known that chronological age and biological age are two different things.

The more women like my mother ignore what is supposed to happen when we age, the better the chances are that *all* of us will stay healthy. I see this happening everywhere I go as women around the world decide to age with power, strength, and beauty.

Creating Health during Menopause

To make the most of the menopausal transition, I encourage a woman to think of it as a process during which she'll be creating the healthy body she needs to last her until the end of life. The menopausal transition is an excellent time to focus on the prevention of problems that, while not necessarily directly associated with menopause, appear to intensify at this stage.

What a woman experiences during this period of her life depends upon a multitude of factors, from her heredity, her expectations, and her cultural background to her self-esteem and her diet. At this