

Therapeutic 4: Four key takeaways to support your experience of Menopause and Mental Health

Menopause can affect much more than your physical health. It can influence how you feel, how you sleep, how you relate to others and how confident you feel in everyday life.

The good news is that there are practical ways to support yourself through this transition. Drawing on approaches used in Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) for menopause, here are four key takeaways to help you feel more in control, manage stress, support your sleep and make changes that work for you.

1. Claiming control

Recognise that thoughts are not facts, symptoms will change over time, and there are things you can do to support yourself.

Menopause symptoms can sometimes bring anticipatory anxiety: worrying about when a hot flush might happen, whether others will notice, or how you will cope if you have another difficult night. This worry can add to stress and make symptoms feel harder to manage.

One helpful approach is to pause, notice what you are thinking and remind yourself that a thought is not necessarily a fact. Rather than trying to force a symptom away, you can focus on what might help you manage the experience.

Reframe your thoughts

The way we interpret an experience can influence how we feel about it. Reframing means finding a more balanced and supportive way of looking at a situation.

Less helpful thought

"This is out of control."

"I can't cope with this."

"Everyone is noticing my hot flush."

"I should be ashamed of this symptom."

"This will go on forever."

A more helpful thought

"There are things I can do to help myself."

"Let's take this one step at a time and see what helps."

"I may notice this more than other people do."

"This is a common experience, and I don't need to feel ashamed."

"This is difficult right now, but my symptoms and how I experience them can change."

The aim isn't to pretend everything is fine or to dismiss how difficult things can feel. It's to create a little more space between what is happening and how you respond.

Try creating some distance from your thoughts

A technique known as *cognitive defusion* can help you recognise that you are a person having a thought, rather than the thought itself.

For example:

- **The thought:** "I am useless."
- **Creating some distance:** "I am having the thought that I am useless."
- **Creating even more distance:** "I notice that I am having the thought that I am useless."

Notice how the thought becomes something you can observe, rather than something you automatically have to believe.

You can then ask yourself: *What would be a more helpful way to respond to this situation?*

Get to know your triggers

Understanding what makes your symptoms more difficult can also help you feel more prepared.

Some people notice that hot flushes or night sweats are affected by things such as caffeine, alcohol, spicy foods or changes in temperature. Stress and particular situations may also play a part, although triggers vary from person to person.

You might notice that certain conversations, busy days or particular environments leave you feeling more anxious, overwhelmed or irritable.

Keeping a simple note of your symptoms and what was happening around you can help you identify patterns. You can then consider which changes might help, whether that means adjusting your routine, preparing for a stressful situation or finding ways to manage a trigger when it cannot be avoided.

Reliable information can help you understand what is happening, too. Challenging common menopause myths is an important first step in feeling more informed and confident about your choices.

Your takeaway: You may not be able to control every symptom, but you can learn to respond to your thoughts, recognise your triggers and explore strategies that help you feel more in control.

2. Resetting your stress system

Make space to pause, breathe and find moments of calm in your day.

When you feel stressed or anxious, your body prepares to respond to a perceived threat. Your breathing may become faster, your muscles may tense and your heart rate may increase.

Menopause symptoms can sometimes add to this sense of stress, particularly when you are already feeling tired or overwhelmed. Taking a moment to pause and settle your body can help you manage the experience.

Breathing exercises and relaxation techniques are often used in CBT and other therapeutic approaches to support stress management. They will not necessarily prevent a hot flush or stop a night sweat, but they may help you feel calmer and more able to cope when symptoms arise.

Try a breathing exercise

Practising when you feel relatively calm can help you become more familiar with a technique before you need it.

- **Slow, steady breathing:** Relax your shoulders and breathe gently, allowing your abdomen to expand as you breathe in. Let your breath out slowly, without forcing it.
- **A longer exhale:** Breathe in comfortably, then allow your out-breath to last a little longer than your in-breath.
- **Box breathing:** Breathe in for four counts, pause gently for four, breathe out for four and pause for four before repeating. If holding your breath feels uncomfortable, skip the pauses and breathe naturally.

You do not need to use a particular technique perfectly. Choose one that feels comfortable, and stop if you feel dizzy or uncomfortable.

Find a relaxation technique that works for you

Relaxation does not have to mean sitting still for half an hour. It can be as simple as taking a few minutes to notice what is happening around you and bring your attention back to the present.

Here are three techniques to try.

1. The 5-4-3-2-1 grounding exercise

When you feel overwhelmed, gently bring your attention to your surroundings:

- Notice five things you can see.
- Notice four things you can feel through touch.
- Notice three things you can hear.

- Notice two things you can smell.
- Notice one thing you can taste.

This exercise can help redirect your attention away from racing thoughts and towards the present moment.

2. Mindful attention

Choose something simple to focus on, such as your breathing or the sensations of walking. Notice what you can see, hear and feel without needing to judge or change the experience.

You could also try a body scan, moving your attention slowly from your feet towards your head and noticing where you feel tension. If it feels comfortable, gently relax those muscles.

3. Visualisation

Imagine a place where you feel safe, peaceful or at ease. It might be a favourite room at home, a garden or a beach.

Bring the scene to life by noticing the details: the colours, sounds, temperature and sensations you might experience there. You can return to this image whenever you want a moment of calm.

Make room for wellbeing

Supporting yourself also means making time for activities that help you feel good.

Try planning small, realistic opportunities for movement, rest and enjoyment into your week. This might mean a walk outdoors, time with a friend, a favourite hobby or a proper break between tasks.

Exercise can support general health, sleep and wellbeing, although the right type and amount will depend on your individual circumstances.

Your takeaway: You do not have to wait until you feel overwhelmed to take a break. Small, regular moments of breathing, relaxation, movement and enjoyment can help you build a more supportive routine.

3. Prioritising sleep

Support your body's natural sleep rhythm and take some of the pressure out of bedtime.

Sleep can become more difficult during menopause. Night sweats may wake you up, changes in mood can make it harder to switch off, and worries about getting enough sleep can leave you feeling wide awake when you most want to rest.

It can become a frustrating cycle: you sleep badly, worry about how you will manage the next day, and then find it even harder to relax the following night.

There are practical steps you can try to support better sleep.

Build a sleep-friendly routine

- **Keep a regular schedule.** Aim to go to bed and get up at roughly similar times each day, including at weekends where possible.
- **Create a wind-down routine.** A warm bath, reading or listening to something calming can help you transition towards sleep.
- **Make your bedroom comfortable.** A dark, quiet and comfortably cool room may help, particularly if you experience night sweats.
- **Reduce screen time before bed.** Try putting your phone and other screens away around an hour before bedtime if you can.
- **Use your bed mainly for sleep and intimacy.** If you regularly spend long periods awake in bed, your brain may begin to associate the bedroom with wakefulness and frustration.
- **Get out of bed if you cannot sleep.** If you have been awake for a while and feel increasingly frustrated, try getting up and doing something quiet in dim lighting. Return to bed when you feel sleepy.
- **Write down your worries.** Keeping a notebook nearby can help you get thoughts out of your head and make a note of anything you want to deal with the next day.
- **Get some daylight early in the day.** Natural light, particularly in the morning, helps regulate your body's internal clock. Regular daytime movement may also support sleep.

You do not have to adopt every suggestion at once. Choose one or two changes that feel realistic and see whether they help.

Take the pressure off sleep

One of the most helpful things you can do is change how you respond to a difficult night.

When you have not slept well, it is easy to think, “Tomorrow will be a disaster” or “I’ll never feel normal again.” These thoughts can increase anxiety and make sleep feel even more pressured.

Try reminding yourself that, although poor sleep can affect how you feel, you may be able to manage more of the following day than you expect. You might need to adjust your plans, take breaks or ask for support, but one difficult night does not automatically mean the whole day will be unmanageable.

This does not mean that ongoing sleep difficulties should be ignored. Persistent insomnia can have a significant impact on wellbeing, and effective treatments, including CBT for insomnia, may help.

What about naps?

A short nap can sometimes help you feel more alert after a poor night's sleep. However, long or late-afternoon naps may make it harder to fall asleep at your usual bedtime.

If you choose to nap, try keeping it brief — around 20 minutes — and see how it affects your night-time sleep. Individual needs vary, so pay attention to what works for you.

Your takeaway: Better sleep is not just about following a bedtime routine. It is also about reducing the pressure to sleep perfectly, finding ways to manage worries and getting appropriate support when difficulties persist.

4. Making wider changes

Recognise your needs, communicate them to others and seek support when you need it.

Menopause is a whole-body and whole-mind experience, but its impact does not stop with the individual. It can affect relationships, work, social activities and the everyday demands of life.

You might find it harder to concentrate, remember information or manage a busy schedule. You may be coping with pain, disrupted sleep or changes in your sex life. You might also feel that other people do not understand what you are experiencing.

Making changes around you can be just as important as finding ways to manage individual symptoms.

At work: find ways to make things more manageable

If menopause symptoms are affecting your working day, consider what might help you do your job more comfortably and confidently.

Depending on your role and circumstances, this could include:

- **Adjusting your routine:** Where possible, plan breaks, spread demanding tasks throughout the day or allow time to recover after particularly busy periods.
- **Using reminders:** Lists, calendars, phone alarms and written notes can help you keep track of tasks when concentration or memory feels more difficult.
- **Talking through tasks:** Quietly explaining the steps of a task to yourself can sometimes help you stay focused and remember what you are doing.
- **Considering your environment:** If temperature changes or hot flushes are difficult to manage, think about whether access to a fan, drinking water, suitable clothing or a cooler workspace might help.
- **Seeking support:** If symptoms are affecting your work, you may wish to speak to your manager, occupational health team or HR department about possible adjustments.

You do not need to struggle in silence. The right support will depend on your workplace and individual needs.

In relationships: make space for honest conversations

Menopause can affect how you feel about yourself, how you communicate and how you experience intimacy. Tiredness, anxiety, pain or feeling overwhelmed can also make difficult conversations harder to navigate.

Talking about what you are experiencing may help a partner, friend or family member understand what is happening and how they can support you.

You could start by explaining which symptoms you have noticed, what you find most difficult and what would help. You do not need to have all the answers before beginning the conversation.

It can also help to:

- **Name your needs and boundaries.** Be clear about what you need more of, what you need less of and what you are not comfortable with.
- **Recognise when you are becoming overwhelmed.** If a conversation is becoming difficult, consider taking a break and returning to it when you feel calmer.
- **Allow room for misunderstanding.** You and the people close to you may need time to understand how menopause is affecting your relationship.
- **Explore intimacy together.** Changes in libido, vaginal dryness or discomfort may mean that you want to approach sex differently. More time for arousal, lubricants, different positions and forms of intimacy that do not involve penetration may help. Pain during sex should not simply be endured so seek advice from a healthcare professional..

Sometimes, recognising that stress can affect both symptoms and communication is enough to help you approach a conversation differently. At other times, additional support from a therapist or healthcare professional may be helpful.

Know when to seek further support

Reliable information can help you understand what you are experiencing, but you do not have to work everything out alone.

A GP or another appropriately trained healthcare professional can help you explore symptoms, discuss treatment options and consider whether anything else may be contributing to how you feel. Psychological support may also be useful if anxiety, low mood, sleep difficulties or relationship concerns are affecting your quality of life.

You can find further evidence-based information and support options in the accompanying signposting resource.

Your takeaway: Supporting yourself through menopause is not just about changing how you think or managing individual symptoms. It is also about recognising what you need, communicating those needs and making changes in your wider environment.

Bringing it all together

Menopause can bring challenges, but you do not have to navigate them without support.

Remember these four key takeaways:

1. **Claim control:** Notice your thoughts, challenge unhelpful assumptions and learn what triggers your symptoms.
2. **Reset your stress system:** Make time for breathing, relaxation, movement and activities that bring you enjoyment.
3. **Prioritise sleep:** Build supportive routines and reduce the pressure to have a perfect night's sleep.
4. **Make wider changes:** Recognise your needs, talk to the people around you and seek help when you need it.

You do not need to put all these strategies into practice at once. Start with one small change that feels manageable today. Over time, you can build on what works for you and find an approach that supports your own menopause experience.