

The Normal Course of Menopause, a talk given at

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Summary

My Perspective: Holistic, Biopsychosocial

Menopause = Physical Changes + The Meaning Given
To Those Changes By A Woman And By The People
Around Her

**Why do women have a menopause? We don't know
for sure.**

One common perspective:

The Biomedical Model: Menopause is aging.

The reproductive system is wearing out, becoming less
efficient, until the ovaries ultimately “stop working.”

Senescence = the process or condition of deterioration
with age. (Oxford dictionary)

For example, the World Health Organization (1981,
1996) defined menopause as “The cessation of
menstruation associated with *loss* of ovarian function.”

WHO used the word “loss,” not “completion” or “change.”

With this perspective, it’s logical to be wondering whether menopause and the transition to menopause cause problems, as other deterioration with age can cause problems.

However, there are varying perspectives on menopause.

“Menopause is “medicalized” in contemporary U.S. society. There is a great need to develop and disseminate information that emphasizes menopause as a normal, healthy phase of women’s lives and promotes its demedicalization.” National Institutes of Health State-of-the-Science Conference Statement, Conference on Management of Menopause-Related Symptoms, 3/21-23/06

Another view: Women have a time of relatively healthy, mature adulthood after reproduction ends. This is a natural, meaningful part of the female lifespan.

Does this idea make sense biologically?

What do biologists study? There are many subfields of biology. Life history theory is a subfield of biology in which the sequence of life stages of various species are studied and compared.

What is the human life course?

It’s sometimes said that women rarely lived past menopause before the beginning of the 20th century.

However, this was based on life expectancy.

Life expectancy: Average age of death. Before the twentieth century, this was about 47 years at birth because large numbers of babies and young children died. However, women who lived to adolescence had a pretty good chance of living past menopause.

Life expectancy vs. life span: Life span is the longest a member of a species has been known to live. It's typical of a species. In humans, it's about 120 years.

Another view: Human menopause: An oddity in nature

Unlike other animals, humans have a long lifetime (that is, possible lifespan) after menopause, menopause is universal, humans stop ovulating (run out of follicles). (as seen in Menopause: A comparative life history perspective. Yearbook of Physical Anthropology, 34, 13–38. Pavelka and Fedigan (1991).

Menopause occurs decades before significant senescence of other body systems.

Women in their fifties and sixties in hunter/gatherer groups are healthy, active, have important leadership roles. e.g., Hadza—Tanzania, !Kung San—Botswana

Why do women live so long after menopause, when other animals typically don't? Why is old age so long after menopause? There are different theories: Grandmother hypothesis, social and technical skills are needed in human groups, wisdom.

There is nothing unusual about humans having unusual life stages compared to other animals.

Implications of this viewpoint:

If a period of relatively healthy adulthood after menopause is part of the human lifespan, this implies that: Menopause is not the entry into old age. Positive changes as well as senescence may exist. Menopause may be associated with unpleasant experiences or health problems, but maybe not.

Still a question: Is this life stage the continuation of younger adulthood, or is mature adulthood a new developmental stage?

Still a question: Physiologically, menopause is an ending, but what is this if not a breakdown, or in addition to being a breakdown?

Derry and Derry research results: Menstruation is part of a nonlinear, dynamical system. Menopause reflects change in the system, but it's still a system not random or disordered.

Menopause Nuts and Bolts:

Menopause: The end to menstruation or the last menstrual period. One point in a much longer physiological process. Usually defined retroactively after a year of not having a period. Average age 51, often occurs at ages 45-55, or even earlier or later.

Perimenopause, also called the change, the menopausal transition, climacteric—all are terms for a transition leading to menopause. Often reported: Lasts an average of 4 years, may last 1-10 years.

Perimenopause: A Useful Idea

Women notice changes in their bodies and experiences.

Many symptoms/distresses peak.

Can be a time of uncertainty when many women are trying to make sense of menopause and of the changes in their bodies.

May become intertwined with, or symbolize, adult developmental issues.

Perimenopause: A Problematic Idea

When does perimenopause begin?

No specific change has been found that defines the beginning of perimenopause.

Perimenopause is often defined by changes in the regularity of menstrual cycles, which are the most noticeable indications of change in the underlying reproductive system. Irregular cycles are normal. They can last for unpredictable amounts of time, often for

years.

Two Stage Model: First: Menstrual irregularity without skipping periods. Then: Skipped periods.

Vs. Three stage model: There is an earlier stage when periods are not irregular, but there are changes in flow or cycle length. Prior to cycle irregularity, cycles may get longer or shorter, lighter or heavier, etc.

During the transition, periods may change: clots may appear, period may stop for a day or two and start again. Hot flashes can occur while menstrual cycles are regular. Medical people have guidelines for when changes need to be looked into vs. not.

Hormones: After menopause, there is permanently low estrogen, high follicle stimulating hormone. During perimenopause: Irregular levels of estrogen with spikes above those found in earlier life. Some experiences may be high-estrogen-related, such as breast tenderness, heavy periods, possibly migraine. Fibroids may get larger.

Many women don't go through these stages one after the other. Women go back and forth, stay in stages for different amounts of time, etc.

Women's pattern of menstrual cycles and how they change over time, both during perimenopause and before, vary from one person to the next.

Tremin research project conclusions:

“The first appearance of a single indicator [of perimenopause], such as unusually short or long intervals between flows, proved illusory as a general sign. However, the complete charts of pre-menopausal history left no doubt that, in most cases, the entry into a phase of progressively expanding variability preceding menopause could be discerned with satisfactory confidence.”

“...the [Tremin research] program has convincingly demonstrated [that] each woman in her menstrual cyclicity is a person apart.” Treloar et al., 1967, 1981.

Conclusions:

Define your own experience. Even at the level of physiology, women are similar to each other in some ways and different from each other in other ways.

Menstruation is characterized by variability and unpredictability throughout life.

I suggest thinking about a life course to menstruation rather than stages leading to menopause.

I suggest that we don't know enough about distinguishing between symptoms of menopause vs. complications of menopause.

A woman's place is in her body.

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