

Why We Need School And Workplace Policies For Menstruation & Menopause

THE IMPACT OF THE MENSTRUAL TABOO

Menstrual taboos in patriarchal societies have been a core method for diminishing women through the shaming of a fundamental female-only experience, with corresponding prohibitive and limiting behaviours. This taboo is gradually changing as our world becomes more equal in gender terms, but there is still much work to be done. Centuries of shaming have left a legacy of inhibition and silence that impacts women's health today.

The menstrual cycle has been called the 5th vital sign of a woman's health,¹ and clearly has great significance as both a health indicator and determinant. But due to longstanding taboo, menstruation has been astonishingly under-researched. It is staggering how little we know about the causes of menstrual symptoms such as pain, PMS, endometriosis and excess or lack of bleeding and how these might be related to causative factors such as nutrition, genetics, stress, or lifestyle. However, this field of research is now developing fast, making this an ideal time to dispel myth and ignorance and to update women's understanding of their own bodies to the latest information.

The stigma associated with menstruation in patriarchal societies has also had a major influence on how women behave during menstruation. From childhood on, women absorb a powerful social message to 'grin and bear it' during menstruation, and to carry on 'as normal'.

Yet anecdotally, women report feeling better in body and mind when they adjust their activity to the cycle. Most significantly, they report enhanced wellbeing in

¹ a) On September 21, 2004, advocates for women's sexual and reproductive health met at a scientific forum titled, "The Menstrual Cycle is a Vital Sign," held at the New York Academy of Sciences (Rubinstein et al., 2004). b) "A woman's reproductive cycle (menstrual cycle) is the 5th vital sign of her health which depends on healthy and regular ovulatory and menstrual patterns from menarche to menopause." Geraldine Matus PhD, <http://justisse.ca>

general when they have some time for rest and relaxation during the heavy bleeding part of their period.

A recent international survey of 3,346 women and girls showed that a majority (70%) expressed a need and wish for much more consideration regarding both menstruation and menopause in the context of school and the workplace.²

MENSTRUATION

Menstrual Symptoms

Women's experience of menstruation varies considerably, with some women hardly noticing it and others being severely debilitated. The most frequently reported menstrual symptom is pain (dysmenorrhea), followed by PMS (premenstrual syndrome), then fatigue, endometriosis, and irregular bleeding. It is estimated that 25-50% of adult women and 75% of adolescent girls experience period pain, with 5-20% overall suffering pain to a seriously debilitating level,³ often because they have endometriosis (10-20% estimated currently). PMS is frequently experienced for several days, often for a week prior to bleeding, by an estimated 85% of women.⁴

Symptoms tend to be most pronounced in the first few years and last few years of menstruating. So we also need to consider girls and young women in school and college as well as working women.

Menstrual Education and Awareness

Women often minimise their needs at menstruation as a self-protective and pragmatic response to actual or perceived prejudice, so they need to feel safe to talk about menstruation or menopause in school and in the workplace. This is an education issue for staff and management.

² Owen, L. & Bogard, A., (2015). Research Report, Dugdale Trust for Women & Girls.

³ American Academy of Physicians

⁴ American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists

Menstrual Leave

The concept of menstrual leave (where all women in a workplace get an allowance of time off for their period) is a problematic one. Men and non-menstruating women can feel left out, as well as menstruating women who feel they don't need any time off. Historically, where menstrual leave has been offered (in some Asian countries) once you get above shop floor level women don't take it for fear it will impact on their job tenure and chances of promotion.

Menstrual Leave Flexibility

I advocate the concept of menstrual leave flexibility rather than blanket menstrual leave.

Does Menstrual Leave Flexibility Impact Productivity Overall?

1. Energy levels: Many women report having much more energy in the middle of the month and feel their productivity is not lessened overall by taking time out at menstruation. Depending on the nature of the workplace, it may be possible for female employees who request flexibility for their menstrual cycle to work longer hours during the rest of the month to make up the time.
2. Working from home: Where home-based work is possible, this can be an excellent solution during the symptomatic days of menstruation, relieving women of the time and energy spent in travel and extroversion.

Benefits of Menstrual Leave Flexibility

Anecdotal research⁵ shows that women feel that their symptoms in following months decrease if they are able to have more rest during their period, with the implication that adjusting the rhythm of working life to the natural monthly cycle is of benefit for long-term physical and mental health and wellbeing.

⁵ e.g. Owen, Lara, *Her Blood Is Gold*, HarperCollins 1993, Archive Publishing 2008.

MENOPAUSE

Menopause In The Workplace

Recent research has found that what women most want is access to better information and unbiased responses from employers -- both before and during this significant period of change.⁶ Women become more symptomatic in the years leading up to menopause, and in a climate of silence can become unnecessarily unwell.

Women often have less energy for a while during the peak time of menopause, and some leave their jobs because of this, feeling that they cannot cope. Flexibility and informed HR consultations during this time can help to keep valuable and experienced employees in the workplace.

The majority of women today experience some kind of discomfort during the menopause transition. This is often due to a temporary change in the way the body handles changes in temperature and makes women more vulnerable to environmental conditions.

A recent study from Monash University Business School and Yale University⁷ showed that small changes in the workplace environment have a big impact on women's ability to work.

WHY MAKE THESE CHANGES NOW?

In the last five years mainstream media interest and comments made by public figures show that we are ready to move beyond this tiresome old taboo.

⁶ Owen, L. & Bogard, A., (2015). Research Report, Dugdale Trust for Women & Girls.

⁷ Jack, G, Riach, K. et al, Menopause in the workplace: What employers should be doing, *Maturitas*, 2016.

It is time to acknowledge and make adjustments for the fact that 51% of the population deals with a menstrual cycle that impacts them for five or so days every month, for around 40 years of their lives.

It is time to face the fact that the menopause transition is temporarily problematic for many women, and to understand that workplace accommodation through education, flexibility and small environmental changes can keep valuable experienced female employees happy in their jobs.

Telling women they should just 'grin and bear it' isn't a good strategy for long-term health and wellbeing, at any stage of life.

Forward-thinking employers who value their women employees and want to be known as Employers of Choice⁸ are beginning to embrace this philosophy of wellness, taking the realities of menstruation and menopause into consideration when creating employment policies.

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⁸ "The Australian Business Award for Employer of Choice recognises organisations which have developed leading workplaces that maximise the full potential of their workforce through practices that demonstrate effective employee recruitment, engagement and retention."
<http://www.australianbusinessawards.com.au/2016-categories/employer-of-choice-awards>