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Redefining menopause: Why it's essential to normalise menopause in the workplace

The menopause revolution has gained momentum in recent years, yet the topic continues to be shrouded in secrecy across workplaces in the UK.

Although menopause is an entirely natural phase of life, women still go to great lengths to hide their menopausal experiences and symptoms from family, friends and colleagues.

Fear of being judged, fear of being seen as incapable or incompetent, and fear that menopause and its accompanying symptoms could negatively impact their career - are just some of the reasons many women suffer in silence at work.

In fact, for some women, the mental and physical symptoms of menopause - such as hot flushes, headaches, sweating, brain fog, erratic moods and negative emotions - can be so overwhelming and distressing they feel they are left with no other option but to quit their job and leave the workplace all together.

A report from the Fawcett Society showed that one-in-10 women who worked during the menopause has left a job due to their symptoms and a quarter of employees experiencing menopause are likely to retire early because of it.

More eye-opening statistics from the report show that there are 14 million working days lost in the UK to menopause a year.

The hidden toll of suppressed menopause dialogue

Evidently, the cost of leaving women to suffer in silence is not just borne by the women themselves, their partners and their families, it is borne by employers and the wider society, too.

The reality is that menopausal women are the fastest-growing demographic in the workplace - according to the Faculty of Occupational Medicine, almost eight out of 10 menopausal women are in work.

And yet, even with these figures and the growing body of evidence around the benefits of supporting menopausal employees, many organisations continue to weigh up whether the menopause agenda is worth their time and resources.

In reality, companies that choose to ignore this issue not only risk alienating a crucial talent pool, they also risk falling behind industry competitors who've shown their hand of support.

Undeniably, the menopause will continue to impact talent retention, skills gaps and diversity for those organisations that do not respond well.

Dispelling the menopause stigma - finding a way forward

To dispel the longstanding stigma surrounding menopause, it's imperative organisations work to normalise conversations on the topic.

Individuals who experience the menopause should feel comfortable disclosing their challenges and seeking assistance without the fear of backlash. Whilst those supporting colleagues going through the menopause - irrelevant of age or gender - should feel confident, equipped to offer their support and able to navigate colleagues through their experience from an organisational perspective.

Ensuring employees feel psychologically safe is particularly important. Why? Because every individual's experience of menopause is unique and it would be impossible to accommodate an employee if they do not feel comfortable to share their individual needs.

The important role of managers in menopause support

Managers have substantial influence over an individual's workplace experience - new research has found that almost 70% of people feel their manager has more of an impact on their mental health than their therapist or doctor.

Given this significant influence, it's essential organisations invest in training managers - particularly those who have no experience of the menopause, and those who've experienced the menopause without symptoms. Whilst some women suffer debilitating symptoms - studies show that 60-86% of women experience symptoms so bothersome that they seek medical care - others may experience the menopause with no symptoms at all.

Alongside training geared toward building confidence on the topic of menopause and improving communication skills, organisations should also ensure managers understand the menopause policies and benefits available to employees so they can correctly inform their colleagues.

Getting people talking about menopause is key to accessing support

Research demonstrates that women in the UK take more time off during menopause compared to any other country, indicating a pressing need for change.

Menopause discrimination is deeply embedded into our society and dismantling the menopause taboo won't occur overnight.

Nonetheless, responsible employers hold the power to effect real change by normalising conversations about menopause and ensuring employees have access to necessary support and training.

If you're contemplating when the right time is to cultivate a menopause-friendly workplace, recognise that the time is now.