

# Menopause and stress

**Paula Driscoll explains how self care and compassion can help mitigate the stresses of midlife.**



□ Paula Driscoll

**D**uring the menopausal stage in our lives, there are so many changes happening to us that sometimes that in itself may cause overwhelm and stress. Worrying about what symptoms we're experiencing, or going to experience, what if we have symptoms and we're not sure if they're even from the menopause. There are a lot of factors which can cause stress. →





- The feeling of fear reaching out for us can cause stress even though no specific event may have occurred.



## Good and bad

Stress isn't always a bad thing. It can be helpful for a burst of energy, or focus, like when we're playing a competitive sport, or speaking in public. In the short term it can be an advantage. However, when stress is constantly present in our daily lives, it can begin to change the brain, and the brain's responses. As our hormones are fluctuating during this time, added to that the sleep disturbance, exhaustion, low self-esteem, it's no wonder a lot of women feel stressed constantly.

Chronic stress is stress that's embodied, it's felt in the body through bodily mechanisms. It can be caused by overwork, unhappy relationships, financial problems, and lots of symptoms which may be experienced during the menopausal stage. It can change the brain's size, structure, and function.

If we have chronic stress, we can feel challenged and overwhelmed. Stress is more than an emotion; it is a hard-wired physical response that travels through your entire body. There is strong evidence, through research, that there is a link between stress and our thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations.

Neurochemical levels and neuronal connections are influenced by chronic levels of stress, which can influence change in the volume and structure of the brain. Due to the fluctuating hormones, our emotions will also be changing, and we may feel vulnerable.

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## Triggers

Stress can be triggered by a lot of things, including many menopausal symptoms that we may have never experienced before, sleep disturbance, depression, anxiety to name a few. A lot of women experience quite a lot of symptoms, which may become heightened when stressed. Even if we think of an event that causes us to feel stress, even though it hasn't even happened yet, it can cause a similar level of stress.



## □ Mindfulness



Being aware of when we are feeling this way and why can make all the difference to how we can deal with it.

### What happens

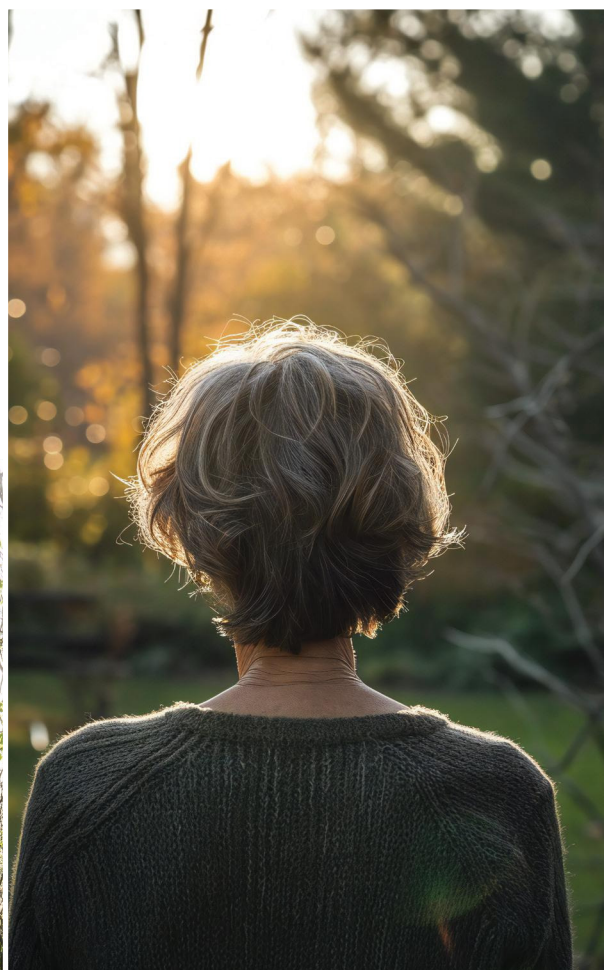
There are changes to the body when stress is present. It lowers our immune system so our bodies find it harder to fight infection, and bacteria can get a better hold.

Our hormonal system can also be affected by stress, putting hormones and glands out of balance. This adds to the already fluctuating hormone levels due to menopause.

Stress can cause tightening of the muscles, which may lead to pain, especially the shoulder, jaw, and neck areas. Tinnitus which a lot of women suffer from, may be caused by stress due to the compression of nerve roots, as tightening of muscles caused by stress can restrict nerve impulses. Tinnitus can come and go. If you suffer from it, make a note of when it happens and notice if you feel stressed in the lead up to it occurring.

When we feel stressed, there is an increase in blood flowing around the body, therefore the heart beats faster. This can cause headaches and migraines.

The digestive system can also be affected and may not function as it should. When we're stressed it affects our breathing, restricting it. When this happens less oxygen is getting to our cells, so there may be more of a build-up of waste products, causing bloating (which a lot of women experience), and digestive problems.





Eating a healthy diet can reduce the negative effects of stress on your body as a balanced diet can help support the immune system. It provides the extra energy to cope with stressful events.

There are so many factors which can cause stress, however there are lots of ways we can help alleviate it.

### What can you do about it?

Give yourself some self-care.

- Go for a mindful walk, maybe in a park, noticing the beauty of nature around you.
- Join a yoga or Pilates class.
- Have a nice bubble bath and light some candles.
- Meet up with some friends.
- Do a mindfulness practice to calm your mind.
- Go on a retreat, even just one for the day.
- Start reading, maybe you've been so busy you haven't found the time.
- Think of something you love doing and haven't done for a while.

Self-care doesn't have to be something big, every little bit of caring for yourself helps. It will help calm the mind and reduce stress levels.

A big part of self-care is giving yourself some self-compassion. We are so busy sometimes caring for others, that we can fall into the habit of putting ourselves last. Time caring for ourselves we may think is taking time away from caring for others, children, friends, parents, but we need looking after too. A lot of people have said they feel guilty looking after themselves, but to care for others, we need to be in the right frame of mind and balanced ourselves. It's like

the analogy of what the flight attendant tells us' if we need to get out of the plane, put your own oxygen mask on before helping anyone else.'

Self-compassion requires giving yourself kindness and understanding with ourselves and not judging or being critical. A way you can do this is ask yourself, how would someone who loves you, describe you, see you? What would they say to you to bring comfort to you? You deserve to be looked after, especially with all the changes you are going through.

By acknowledging when we're feeling stressed instead of doing nothing, can make all the difference to the effects the stress has on your mind and body. By exercising, resting, giving self-care, and having a healthy balanced diet can make all the difference. Keep a journal of how you're feeling each day, or as often as you can, what you've done for yourself, exercise, and diet. This way you'll be able to see what balances you out more and works better for you.

I'm putting together a day's 'Wellness Retreat.' If anyone would like more information, please email me on [paula@innerwings.co.uk](mailto:paula@innerwings.co.uk) **MM**

**Paula Driscoll practices complimentary therapies. Her passion is to make a difference to people's lives, especially women going through challenging times in their lives. "Through facing my own challenges in life and coming out the other side more resilient using the modalities I practice, I know how powerful the tools I use can be. These include Menopause - Facial Hand and Foot Reflexology." She is also a teacher of The Danielle Collins Face Yoga Method.**