



I HAVE CHANGED PERIMENOPAUSE TO MENOPAUSE

How to manage poor sleep during the menopause

BY DR. KAT LEDERLE

Dr Kat

sleep well feel good

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A case for compassion

Many women going through the menopausal transition experience disturbed sleep. It's one, if not the, core symptom of this period. According to research, up to 60% of menopausal women suffer from poor sleep – which also has a knock-on effect on their family, work and social lives.

Sleep (or the lack of it) doesn't happen in isolation; sleeping and waking form a bidirectional relationship. What you do during the day impacts on your sleep and, crucially, how you sleep at night impacts on your day. Your performance, your mood and communication, your mental and physical health and resilience – all of these are affected by sleep. Poor sleep adversely affects your quality of life and productivity, as well as impacting on how you interact with those around you.



What causes sleep disturbances?

Several factors are at play here. While not all factors will apply to every menopausal woman, I do think the sheer number of factors probably contributes to poor sleep being such a widespread problem. They include:

- Biological and chronobiological factors: physiological changes related to ageing, menopausal symptoms caused by fluctuating hormone levels, such as hot flushes and night-sweats, menstrual cycle phases, age-related sleep disorders, such as insomnia, obstructive sleep apnoea and restless legs syndrome)
- Mood: depression, anxiety, psychological stress
- Health conditions, such as obesity, diabetes, thyroid disease, pain, etc.
- Lifestyle: smoking, alcohol, lack of movement, diet, etc.
- Social factors and socio-economic status: work-related stress, social support, financial strain, etc.
- Cultural norms: caregiver mentality, expectations about the menopausal transition and ageing, support from others, etc.

This is quite a long yet not exhaustive list. Many factors interact, including poor sleep itself, making it an even more complex network.



What are the consequences of poor sleep?

Many of the consequences of poor sleep are the same as those associated with the menopausal transition: lower quality of life, as well as reduced performance and productivity.

Perhaps the most severe consequence though is change itself: A change in how you feel in and about your body; a sense of not knowing your body anymore, and not trusting that it will play along when it needs to. With that can come a sense of limitation and loss of **control**.

Your body becomes a source of uncertainty. You may feel that you are not performing or providing as well as you should; that you don't feel happy or look good enough anymore... You experience the menopausal transition as a threat to who you are and what you have. Naturally, all of this is scary, and makes you feel **vulnerable**.





Responding with compassion

Consider for a moment how you relate to yourself when you wake up after a poor night's sleep, feeling unrefreshed and sad, or angry with yourself for not being able to sleep. Thoughts about the day ahead, and what a struggle it will be, run through your mind. And lo and behold, during the day you find it hard to concentrate on the task in front of you. Then a hot flush comes over you just as you are about to start a video call with a client. You feel your anxiety levels rising out of nowhere, your mind racing and worrying what the client will be thinking of you. Nothing good, of course, says that inner voice. So you slump down even more and the anxiety rises further.

When you finally get to bed at the end of the day, there's again a lot of chatter in your mind, reminding you how important it is to sleep through the night – because, if you don't, you'll have another day from hell tomorrow. The pressure continues...

Are you aware of this inner voice? How do you react to it? How do you talk to yourself in those moments? What does the voice sound like? Is it cold and harsh, telling you off for not being able to perform absolutely perfectly? Is it beating you up for not looking like you did in your twenties? Are there self-critical thoughts such as, 'Get on with it', 'Pull yourself together', 'Why is this happening to me?' or 'I hate my body'? How do you feel in that moment? Which emotions show up? What's your body's position in response to this inner bully?

Many of us carry with us our very own inner critic, and have done so for many years. Often the inner critic is actually very anxious and tries to protect us – so that other people like us and we survive any threats. However, while this might have helped us in some far distant past, it does not serve us anymore. Like being bullied in real life, being bullied by our inner critic makes us feel small, sad, anxious and powerless – and so the vicious circle of helplessness continues.

Alternatively, do you respond in a gentle and warm voice, by saying things like, 'This is really hard for me at the moment.' Do you put a hand on your heart and kindly say, 'I'm awake and I notice my mind is racing with a lot of difficult thoughts'? Do you respond kindly to waking up in a sweat at night, or to experiencing a hot flush and menofog during the working day? Do you treat yourself with care, and an understanding that so many other women are going through the same?

What does it feel like if you turn towards your suffering and vulnerability in a compassionate way, instead of harshly turning away? Compassion is more than being warm, caring and kind. Being compassionate entails turning towards a difficult, unpleasant experience, and having the wisdom and desire to alleviate that suffering. You need to notice the suffering first, in order to alleviate it, and you need to know how to be helpful. Viewed in this way, compassion is practical and courageous at its heart – as Prof Paul Gilbert, and others, have written about.

Self- assessment

To start this process of responding kindly and practically to your feelings of vulnerability and suffering, first objectively assess your situation and circumstances. The following four questions can help you with this:

1. How are you experiencing your struggle?
2. What is causing or contributing to the struggle?
3. What can you do to alleviate your struggle with this experience?
4. Why do you want to take action? What's your motivation?

Being compassionate and emotionally courageous with yourself empowers you to practically address your suffering. Instead of trying to avoid the experience and acting to get rid of the symptoms, try turning towards the unpleasant experience, for example, by talking gently to yourself. Something powerful can happen in that moment: you start to feel safe within your experience, and the scope of your attention and thinking opens. Acknowledging and allowing that unwanted experience enables you quite literally open up your awareness and access your inner wisdom. That's when you can identify genuinely helpful actions to do more of the things you enjoy – including sleeping well.



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If you are struggling with sleeping well during the peri-menopause and would like some help, simply book an exploratory call with me:
+44 (0)7711541474

Or send me an email:
kat@drkatsleep.com