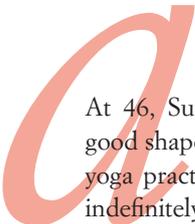


re-imagining menopause

Menopause, the Big M, is for many women a time of dread and drugs. But with scientific studies casting doubt on the safety of

– discover the yoga of transition

Hormone Replacement Therapy, Suzanne Eggins finds that yoga offers powerful alternative strategies for re-thinking menopause. Although yoga is no guarantee we'll escape the discomforts of menopause, yoga practices allow us to make the most of the opportunity to change.

 At 46, Sue thought she was in pretty good shape, and was convinced that her yoga practice would keep her that way indefinitely. She complemented her 10 year habit of two or three yoga classes a week with a twice a week home practice and daily meditation. She ran or walked for an hour per day on average. She and her husband of 20 years were happy, healthy and financially secure. With her teenage son embarking on university, Sue was planning a long overdue career move in the New Year.

BUT AT THE START OF THE CHRISTMAS holidays, Sue's energy levels plummeted. Instead of looking forward to her yoga practice, it and her running became a reluctant obligation. Always tired, Sue soon ceased home practice altogether. Only by a severe effort of will did she force herself to keep attending two classes a week. Once there, she felt lethargic, irritable, disappointed and unable to enjoy poses she'd loved for 10 years. She put on several kilos and lost strength and flexibility. Holding

standing poses like Virabradasana (Warrior) I and II became agony, and lifting her head off the floor in the backbend of Urdhva Dandasana (Upward bow pose) was no longer possible. Sue felt she'd regressed five or six years in the space of six months.

AWAY FROM THE YOGA MAT, THINGS WERE no better. Instead of the excited anticipation she'd previously felt at her imminent career change, Sue developed insomnia. She'd wake gripped by anxiety in the early hours, weighed down by oppression and indecision about her future. But not all the time – the mood changes were as unpredictable as they were extreme.

Overwhelmed by the loss of energy and motivation, Sue visited her GP. The male GP immediately diagnosed depression and prescribed a popular anti-depressant medication. Sue confessed to an older female friend at work that the diagnosis was a blow. "I can't believe it, with my healthy lifestyle, yoga, exercise and meditation! Besides, my life's so

good. Why would I get depressed? And why does it hit me only sometimes?"

"Are you sure it's not just menopause?" her colleague replied. "I felt all over the place for years!"

"Menopause!" Sue's first reaction was dismissive. But doubt crept in. "Menopause? Could it be?" After years as a distance runner, Sue rarely had menstrual periods, so that key indicator was not available. "I'm too young – aren't I?"

"Peri-menopause, then," the friend replied. "The lead-up: It lasts for ages, you know. Welcome to the long haul."

Silence and confusion

Sue's failure to recognise her body/mind changes as the beginning of menopause, and her doctor's pharmacological reaction, are unfortunately not unusual. Most women I know don't expect the Big Change that marks the end of their reproductive capability to happen until they are into their 50's. That may be accurate for the decisive change itself: most women cease menstruating around

the age of 53 to 55 because the ovaries gradually stop producing eggs and hormones. But, like Sue, what many women don't realize is that the reduction in the female sex hormones (oestrogen and progesterone) can begin many years before. Peri-menopause, or the pre-menopause phase, occurs typically in the mid 40's and can last for five or more years. During these years of hormonal instability an estimated 55–65 percent of women may experience a range of confusing, intermittent and debilitating physical and mental changes, including mood swings, anxiety, depression, insomnia, hot flashes, night sweats, aching joints, skin irritations, weight gain, fatigue and short-term memory loss or mental fuzziness.

LIKE THE EXHAUSTING STRUGGLES OF NEW motherhood, the myriad irritations of the Big M can seem like a well kept secret. While there's a benefit to the species in keeping mum about the tough side of having babies (if women told the truth, the species might die out!), it's harder to understand the silence around perimenopause. Perhaps it's a willed ignorance; a refusal to speak openly for fear the change might be hastened. It may be that the women's movement, so determined to de-bunk Freud's patriarchal insistence that "biology is destiny", has silenced the communicative solidarity that previously characterised women's interactions. Or perhaps it's that in a society driven by the worship of beauty, youth, achievement and social status, any message hinting that these attributes inevitably decline in all of us does not deserve air time. What it does deserve, apparently, is drugs.

The drug based response: Hormone Replacement Therapy

During the mid 20th century, Western medicine poured a fortune into the development of drug treatments which artificially elevate a woman's oestrogen and progesterone levels. HRT was a booming industry – and for many women a welcome chance to feel 'normal' again – until 2002.

In 2002, because of the results, a major North American study into HRT was halted as the rates of invasive breast cancer in patients taking combined



Lakshmi is the household goddess of most Hindu families, and a favorite of women. Image courtesy of Art Gallery of NSW. Exhibition details [here](#).

oestrogen plus progesterone therapy had risen above the safety level deemed acceptable to the research committee. Results from follow up studies remain inconclusive.

With HRT a dubious solution, many women have returned to natural methods to deal with menopausal changes. Yoga practitioners sometimes rather smugly think they've already found the natural method par excellence. But what evidence is there that yoga, or other natural approaches, can help? And what kind of practice is most beneficial?

The evidence on exercise

A common belief among women yoga practitioners is that yoga will somehow protect them from the worst health problems our culture has to offer: cancer, obesity, diabetes, stroke, rheumatoid arthritis and osteoporosis. The reality is difficult to establish because so little

scientific research has looked at yoga's benefits in controlled, scientifically designed studies. On the down side, we all know yoga practitioners who've developed cancer or osteoporosis.

IN ANY CASE, MENOPAUSE IS NOT A DISEASE.

It's a natural, inevitable transition. Despite the fact that women outnumber men in yoga classes by about eight to one, and the average age of women yoga practitioners in Australia is late 30's to early 40's, there is in fact no empirical evidence that yoga can help during the peri-menopause or menopause proper.

However, there is research based evidence that shows that exercise makes a difference. In 2005, the results of a three year German study of women who had been menopausal for between one to eight years suggested that newly menopausal women who exercise experienced benefits which included:

- Better bone density
- Lower cholesterol and blood fats
- Stronger muscles
- Slimmer waists
- Improved endurance
- Fewer mood swings
- Fewer migraines
- Reduced insomnia

The ‘exercise group’ in the study took part in four 65–70 minute sessions per week. These sessions included a 10 minute warm-up followed by a mixed program of aerobic movements, weights work for strength and resistance,

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callisthenics and stretching. After three years, the exercise group had not lost any bone mineral density, but they had lost about two per cent of their body fat. The exercise group also reported fewer menopausal symptoms, although hot flashes and depression rates were the same in both the exercise and non-exercise groups.

While exercise gets the thumbs up, we all know there's more to yoga than its exercise dimension. Yoga's holistic, integrated approach to a healthy lifestyle, with emphasis on the interconnections between the physical, mental and spiritual dimensions, is where the distinctive benefits of yoga may lay for women seeking natural strategies to manage their menopause.

Yoga's contribution to menopause management

While the empirical evidence may be lacking, there's plenty of anecdotal, first-hand evidence that suggests women who practice yoga have at their disposal strategies to manage the physical, mental and spiritual challenges of the Big M, although individual women will find different practices to suit their needs.

Eve Grzybowski, who turns 62 in December and has been a yoga teacher since 1980, agrees that menopause can be “kind of frightening” to Western women.

“With the huge hormonal fluctuations that women experience, the body is changing in lots of unpleasant ways,” Eve says. “And that upsets routines and women let go of some of their habits of taking care of themselves.”

Eve suggests the first strategy that yoga offers is simply the discipline to keep moving: “If you've had a long-time yoga discipline, you know that physically moving, the physical benefits of that will help you. If you've got that mentality, then you probably won't tend to give up

or gain as much weight as otherwise.”

Use yoga to change your attitude

Eve suggests that another benefit of yoga practice may lie in yoga's ability to change our attitudes. When she knew she was approaching menopause, Eve decided to throw a menopause party. “I gathered together my women friends, especially women a little older than me, and said they could come in any kind of costume,” Eve says. “We had dance music. People were encouraged to bring their most sensual kind of food and everybody could provide some kind of entertainment.”

Eve's party was a heap of fun, but it had a serious motivation. “What I was trying to do was to draw on a yoga idea – to re-direct your mind, from a fear mentality to some way that I could look forward to what was going to happen to me,” Eve explains. “Some of the symptoms of menopause can be so insulting, but if you can find something to look forward to, you can have an easier time.”

Eve's approach echoes that of many contemporary Western writers on yoga and menopause. While some dig deeply into the ‘Wise Woman’ heritage, urging women to value their transition into the once respected ‘crone’ stage of life, Eve was more pragmatic. She identified activities she'd never previously had time to pursue.

“I really turned it around to looking at it as a time where all my life experience would bear some fruit, and a time when I would start to retire from some of my activities and foster creativity, which was something I hadn't had time for before when I was making a living, running a studio.”

Talk to other women

Changing your view of menopause isn't just about ‘thinking positive’; it's about ‘acting positive’. Part of Eve's project involved establishing contact with other women on a regular basis through informal women's groups. Although at first she felt she didn't have time with all her work and family commitments, she found the two women's groups she eventually joined provide enormous support and friendship.

“It's so helpful to talk to each other and to get educated,” Eve point out. “Just to know ahead of time that those menopause symptoms might come up and not to feel that there's a kind of hopelessness about growing old. And that this will be happening for a period of time but that on the other side of it there's something really wonderful.”

All it takes to form a women's group, Eve says, is that you identify three or four women you'd like to spend some time with, and schedule to meet once or twice a month. “If you think about it, it is something that's done in traditional societies. We're much more separate in our culture. Those are the places where you can talk about menopause.”

Establishing your menopausal practice

Describing her menopausal years as an “absolutely positive” time, Eve turned to the work of Geeta Iyengar, particularly her book *Yoga: a gem for women*, for suggestions for a menopausal practice. “I think the inversions helped a lot and I tried to encourage my menopausal students just to keep at it. To do the little bit that they can and substitute for headstand if they can't do headstand, the simpler or less confronting asanas, such as Viparita Karani (Legs up the wall pose Inverted lake pose). I tend to go to the inversions more and more, and build up longer timings, because I think they do have an

[Tips for managing your menopause practice]

1. If possible, develop a regular, well rounded yoga practice before you reach your menopausal years: don't just practice asanas. Incorporate pranayama and meditation practices as well and develop an appreciation of the wholistic philosophy of yoga. This will help you avoid the trap of measuring your well-being purely on the criteria of physical flexibility or strength. Equanimity and insight are at least as valuable.
2. Break the silence: read about menopause (see some suggestions at the end of this article) and talk to other women about their experiences, either informally or through women's groups.
3. Make sure you tell your yoga teacher(s) if menopause is having an impact on your practice. Your teacher will have useful suggestions and, where appropriate, can offer you alternative asanas during class. Cultivate a positive attitude towards menopause by pursuing creative or new career activities. Now is the time to initiate projects you've been putting off for years.
4. Recognise fatigue as a common but temporary symptom. Accept that you may need to modify your lifestyle for a while, but plan a response that keeps you moving. For example, design yourself a restorative practice as well as an active one. If you can't run, at least you can walk. Don't give up and sit on the couch for five years.
5. Draw on published resources (see the end of this article) but also your own experience of how you feel, to develop and adapt your practice to the changing stages of the menopause process. What works for another woman may not suit you – seek advice, but trust yourself.
6. Prepare an inventory of the poses that work best for you to relieve your specific symptoms. For example, forward bends can alleviate anxiety and stress; back bends can lift the mood. Then, when a symptom strikes, you can move straight into the asanas that bring relief.
7. Make inversions a large part of your daily practice, using supports if necessary. There really is evidence that inversions affect the endocrine system, which is where the hormonal chaos is going on.
8. Use pranayama techniques to breathe through hot flashes, with an emphasis on exhalation. Some writers re-label hot flashes as 'energy bursts' and regard them as a quick prompt to get on with doing new things.
9. Care for yourself and stay flexible – don't punish yourself if your routine changes and your practice is sometimes less active than you'd like. Always remember, menopause is natural and temporary. Life on the other side is worth the inconvenience.

effect on your neurology and your endocrine system.”

At 62, Eve practices five or six days a week for an hour and a half. “Where that was a really physical practice years ago, now in looking towards my future, I've tried to integrate pranayama, meditation, yoga nidra – more the reflective practices. No matter how well you take care of your body, you want to have your psyche in good shape too!”

Restorative or active?

Experiment with what suits you

Many yoga writers urge menopausal women to slow down and not push themselves. “Nurture, nurture, nurture” is often the message. Eve admits that for a while, when one of her symptoms was fatigue, she turned to restorative practices. But the risk with ‘going passive’ is that you can exacerbate some menopausal symptoms, such as weight gain and mood swings. For these women, a more active response is possible and beneficial.

JUDY FINCH, AN IYENGAR YOGA TEACHER IN the Blue Mountains now in her early fifties, found that her yoga was “a fantastic boon” as she dealt with menopausal symptoms. “I can't say forcefully enough that I believe yoga is the best ‘cure’ or modifier of the effect of menopause on the market.”

Like Eve, Judy suggests that building up a strong yoga practice in the years before menopause puts women in the best possible position to manage the challenges. “Yoga not only makes you physically strong and healthy and gives you resilience and stamina; it also gives you mental vigour and mental stamina, a capacity for immediate engagement and for dispassionate remove. It teaches you ways to modify your mood, to enliven or to tamp down.”

Judy points out that a strong yoga practice offers the potential to counter the aging process, and this means far more than simply maintaining a younger appearance. “More profoundly,” Judy writes, “yoga offers the very real

experience of simultaneously getting older in years while you get stronger, more flexible, more proficient and more vibrant.”

Based on her own experience, Judy recommends “a good balance” between vigorous, active sequences and soothing, passive sequences. Judy recommends:

- Handstands.
- Pincha Mayurasana (Feathered peacock pose).
- Easy balances like Vrksasana (Tree pose).
- Plenty of standing poses – particularly those that open the front of the body and the heart: Trikonasana (Triangle pose), Ardha Chandrasana (Half moon pose), and Uttitha Parsvokanasana (Extended side angle pose).
- Back bends to maintain energy levels.

Judy identifies several asanas as ‘outstandingly beneficial’ during her menopause:

- Sirasana (Headstand) and Saravagasana (Shoulder stand): these

inversions impact on the pineal and thyroid glands to pacify the brain and quieten the consciousness.

- Ardha Mukha Svasana (Dogward facing dog pose) with a support under the forehead.
- Supta Baddha Konasana (Reclining cobbler pose).
- Dandasana (Staff pose).
- Seated Baddha Konasana (Cobbler pose) to open the chest and the heart and expand the consciousness.

A strong advocate for back bends “because they elevate the mood, are optimistic and because of the massaging of the internal organs”, Judy recommends Viparita Dandasana (Inverted staff) over a chair, Ustrasana (Camel pose) and, for those with the strength and experience, Urdhva Dhanurasana (Upward facing bow pose).

As for poses that she finds less beneficial during menopause, Judy mentions that twists can bring on hot flashes.

Enjoy the transition

After Sue’s accidental conversation with

her colleague at work, she logged straight on to the internet and read up about menopause. She talked about menopause to other women, including her yoga teachers. As a result, she discarded the anti-depressants, and visited a female GP who confirmed peri-menopause was likely and advised only that, as a vegetarian, she boost her energy levels with a vitamin B12 supplement. Sue returned to her classes and a modified but still active home practice with renewed vigour. When anxiety and insomnia struck in the middle of the night, she’d get up and practice pranayama and forward bends. Gradually the mood swings evened out. As she regained a sense of control over what was happening to her, Sue was able to make the transition to a new career and is enjoying a challenging, fresh phase of her life.

She agrees with Judy Finch, who says: “Yoga is a great assistant, a great teacher. Menopause is a bit inconvenient, but it can also be a good teacher. Combine the two and the journey has to be an interesting one!”

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