

Appendix 4 - Celebrating Menopause as a 'life transition'!

Although many societies across the world see older women as role models and as respected members of their communities - in the west, generally, older women are usually the least well paid, least valued and least respected members of society. This may be one of the reasons why so many women do not respect and value themselves properly and why depression is common amongst women and actually increases at the menopause.

I think it also explains why so many women admit that they do not want to think about menopause before it affects them - and why many are in denial even if they are having classic menopause symptoms!

As our society places great emphasis on celebrity values of 'young, beautiful, sexy and wealthy' it inevitably becomes more difficult to value ourselves as we get older if we accept those values for ourselves. The advice - "Don't spend time with people who don't respect you" can also apply to the groups who accept those values in society!

One of the most important things women can do at menopause is to take time out to rethink their core values for themselves - and reject the values of society which no longer fit with their experience or give value and meaning to their future lives.

As we have such a mountain to climb in this process many women are now looking for symbolic ways to leave values that they no longer believe in and celebrate the new ones they have chosen for their elder years - ie. to create their own simple rituals or ceremonies to affirm their important life transitions.

In her book "Ritual Making Women - Shaping Rites for Changing Lives" - Jan Berry's PhD research shows how women are seeking personalised ways of letting go of past patterns and moving on to new ways of living and defining their future roles in life. She found that instead of accepting traditional 'set in concrete' rituals women chose to create their own - maybe in a group - maybe with a trusted friend - and enacted the symbolic changes they wanted to make in their lives. This enactment was found to be really empowering. One essential factor in this for most women is that someone is there with them to 'witness' the ceremony - as this grounds the ideas and provides one or more people who will be there for them in the future - to support them in the changes they are planning when the going gets tough!

This process has no innate religious content but if you feel some women may feel uncomfortable with the words 'ceremony' or 'ritual' just use a word such as 'activity'. This idea could be used in session 8 - or as part of a day or weekend workshop, but is not really suitable for a one-off session.

Who am I at menopause?

One way of helping women to value their menopause transition and future life is to get them to make a short statement about who they are at this point in their lives - if this is limited to less than twenty words it concentrates the mind on their real core values. As we almost universally define ourselves by what we DO rather than who we ARE - encourage women to start their statement with "I am she who....." and only use words about WHO they feel they are - not WHAT they do.

It might be useful to have some discussion of this beforehand as some women may find this quite difficult - but it is potentially a very liberating experience.

Menopause - what you lose on the swings you gain on the roundabouts!

When the women have written their personal statement create a way of letting them read it out to the group (only if they want to) in a setting where there is respectful attention from everyone and no interruption from outsiders.

This could be enhanced by asking each person to bring a small gift to the session - either home made, something found in nature or something from the 'Pound shop' which they feel represents **something special about the menopause** - and the gifts are given to the woman next to them, and their relevance explained, around the circle to finish the session. Keep some time at the end for the women to feed back what was special for them in the session.

What do I want to Change in my life at the Menopause?

In our residential weekends "Rhythms and Thresholds in a woman's life" we have used simple ceremonies or rituals to help women focus on what they want to leave behind from their current lives - and what new thing or things they want to introduce as they face the future.

One way to do this is to find two tree branches about the height of a smallish christmas tree - one already dead or with the leaves pulled off - and one green with life. These are then placed firmly into two containers so they stand upright - not always as easy as it sounds so check it works before going to the group!
(If you can't manage this the cards can be hung on a thin 'washing line' with pretty pegs or stuck onto the flip chart - but will be more effective if there is a strong visual image to remember and they can do something physically as part of the process.)

The group is given two different coloured pieces of folded card - about four inches or ten centimetres square - with a looped ribbon attached through a hole at the top of the folded corner. They are asked to write on one card whatever it is that they want to leave behind - and on the other whatever they want to introduce for the first time or develop in the next phase of their lives.

They are given plenty of time to think about this (overnight if a weekend workshop) - and are able to decorate the cards with art materials, textiles or things they have found out in nature.

Hanging the 'leave behind' cards on the 'dead' branch and the 'future' cards on the 'alive' branch - becomes a solemn commitment to a life-enhancing change for the future - and is often remembered much more clearly than something that is just verbal or written.

They can explain what they have written to the group if they want to or keep things private. They can take the 'future' cards home - and burning the 'leave-behind' cards on a bonfire can be a liberating way of moving on!

Either you can all do this as a group if you are able to arrange that - maybe with some mulled wine too - or you can take them and burn them, for the group, somewhere safe.

A beach is an ideal symbolic space to do this - and is a lovely excuse for the group facilitators to have a beautiful walk and a relaxing time for themselves!

There are many other possibilities you could try - perhaps the group could design their own simple ceremony when you have explained the idea that it is to **celebrate their living through 'The Change' and achieving the status of elder in their community!**

For more ideas see Jan Berry's book above - ISBN 978-1-84553-415-8