

How small businesses can support women who are both neurodivergent and menopausal.

It's crucial for employers to understand, support and champion neurodiversity in the workplace – understanding neurodiversity at work means that employers are better able to support their employees and enable them to do their best work and add the most value as well as having high levels of job satisfaction and engagement.

We wanted to find out about the impact of neurodivergence and the menopause – and in particular how can small businesses support women who are both neurodivergent and menopausal.

We called upon expert Professor Amanda Kirby to give her perspective:



Professor Amanda Kirby MBBS MRCGP PhD

Amanda is the founder and CEO of Do-IT Solutions, an internationally recognised tech-for-good company that provides neurodiversity screening and web-based support tools for children and adults in education and employment.

These profiling tools are also used in many settings including fire, police, justice, workplace, education and apprenticeship settings. The data findings are published with research partners.

Amanda is a medical doctor and an emeritus professor at the University of South Wales, an honorary professor at Cardiff University and a Visiting Professor at Faculty of Health Sciences Trinity College Dublin.

Amanda has lived experience of neurodiversity firsthand, as she sees herself as neurodivergent as well as being a parent of neurodivergent children, and grandchildren. Amanda's passion to make changes in society and increase the chances of showcasing talents for neurodivergent children and adults especially in work settings remains as strong as it was 30 years ago.

Interview

Before we begin I would just like to say thank you very much Amanda ,we are really grateful for you taking the time to answer these questions.

Do we know how many neurodivergent women are currently in the workplace in England – and what proportion of them might be peri-menopausal or going through the menopause?

The population of women aged 50 and over, that are likely to be menopausal, is 9.31 million, comprising 36.8% of total females. If about 7.5% are assumed to be female and neurodivergent then that would be around 698,250 women would be neurodivergent and menopausal.

“The population of women aged 50 and over, that are likely to be menopausal, is 9.31 million, comprising 36.8% of total females.”

Determining how many are in work as well is difficult to give exact figures.

How does being neurodivergent impact women at work in general?

The impact for neurodivergent women may be like many neurodivergent men but many women may only have recognised they have neurodivergent conditions or traits in adulthood, because of being misunderstood in younger days and this may have impacted on their self-esteem and confidence as a result. We see that women are more likely to have learned to camouflage to fit into situations and within teams. This may impact their confidence also in asking for support or adjustments to be put in place.

Neurodivergent women may face unique challenges in the workplace depending on their spiky profile of strengths and challenges and the type of work and tasks they are needing to complete and the environment they are placed in. This could affect their ability to navigate office dynamics and advocate for their needs. There are different combinations of challenges intersecting being female and being neurodivergent. Other factors may also intersect such as being a parent or carer as well. It can be additionally challenging navigating your child's educational needs if also neurodivergent. These compounding factors can have an impact on talent progression.

In the latest City and Guilds 2024 Neurodiversity Index report we see that parents, especially females, may as a result of balancing home and work challenges (e.g. being neurodivergent and having neurodivergent children) may affect their choices regarding type of work chosen, where they work, and if they choose a higher pressure job. Being near home may be a real factor if there is a need to be around for children when they come home from school each day.

Does this impact change when women are peri-menopausal or going through the menopause, and do neurodivergent women experience peri-menopause and menopause differently to neurotypical women?

The perimenopausal period refers to the first signs of ovarian function decline until one year after the last menstruation in women. Oestrogen deficiency in postmenopausal women will damage the normal bone turnover cycle, thus increasing the potential rates of osteoporosis and fractures.

The impact of being neurodivergent at work may become more pronounced during perimenopause or menopause due to hormonal fluctuations exacerbating existing challenges. Issues like sensory sensitivities, emotional regulation and/or executive functioning difficulties might intensify, impacting productivity and well-being. The challenge may be being concerned about flagging these when you are already asking or having adjustments made for you.

In recent studies it has been shown that neurodiverse women had more hot flushes, night sweats, poor sleep, poor concentration, and memory lapses than the neurotypical group in comparison. Impact may vary depending on the neurodivergent.

What else do we know?

ADHD

For so long ADHD was thought of as a 'male condition' and because of that few studies considered the impact of varying levels of oestrogen or lack of oestrogen on ADHD symptoms.

Some women with ADHD may experience changes in their symptoms during menopause. ADHD symptoms tend to be less at times when oestrogen levels are higher in your body, like during and shortly after your period. When oestrogen levels start to drop in the peri-menopausal phase ADHD symptoms can increase.

Hormonal fluctuations can influence mood, concentration, and executive functioning. Cognitive changes that can occur with aging, such as reduced attention and slower reaction times, may also contribute to falls.

In some recent published research that surveyed women with ADHD, 61% reported that ADHD had the greatest impact on their daily lives between 40 and 59 years of age. Interestingly the largest group of respondents (43%) were first diagnosed between ages 41 and 50.

More than half indicated that a sense of overwhelm, brain fog and memory issues, procrastination, poor time-management, inattention/distractibility, and disorganization had a 'life altering impact' during the critical menopausal/perimenopausal window". Symptoms seemed to get less over 60 years, and this may relate possibly to changes in life demands. Again, more research is needed.

Autism Spectrum Conditions/Disorder (ASC)

Sensory sensitivities, communication preferences, and routines may need to be considered when providing healthcare and support for women with ASC. Hormonal changes during menopause may interact with existing sensory sensitivities and sensory processing differences in autistic individuals.

Individuals with autism spectrum conditions/traits also have increased risk of other endocrine health issues e.g. being pre-diabetic.

How can small businesses take steps to support neurodivergent women experiencing peri-menopause and menopause in the workplace?

Small businesses can support neurodivergent women experiencing perimenopause or menopause by implementing flexible work arrangements, providing sensory-friendly workspaces where possible and fostering a culture of understanding and inclusivity.

Male allyship is always helpful by being supportive and having empathy.

There are some really useful resources available - its worth looking at www.doitprofiler.com – where there are downloads such as “10 Neuro-Inclusive tips for the workplace – Getting Started” – where there is guidance and helpful suggestions around supporting individuals with neurodiverse conditions at work, and “Manager guidelines for neurodiversity” which is really helpful for managers who have neurodivergent team members.

Is there anything that neurodivergent women can do for themselves to make progressing through the peri-menopause or menopause as smooth as possible?

Neurodivergent women can take steps to support themselves during perimenopause or menopause by practicing self-awareness, advocating for their needs, seeking accommodation/adjustments in the workplace, prioritising self-care activities, and accessing appropriate medical support and therapies if they are required.

Understanding yourself and being educated about the symptoms and signs you are feeling really can make a difference. Apps and devices designed to track menstrual cycles, mood changes, or sleep patterns can help in managing symptoms and understanding patterns.

What are the biggest challenges for you? For example:

- Vaginal dryness
- Flushing
- Impact on sleep
- Aching
- Brain fog

Social support and community engagement

Build a supportive network:

Connect with groups or communities (online or in-person) for neurodivergent individuals and share experiences and support each other going through the perimenopause.

Educate and advocate:

Educating close friends and family about the unique challenges at the intersection of neurodivergence and perimenopause can help in fostering understanding and support.

Create a comfortable living and working environment:

Adapt your surroundings to reduce sensory overload; consider clothing being worn; access to portable fan.

Diet and exercise :

By taking simple steps including eating a balanced diet with plenty of calcium and Vitamin D, and engaging in a mix of weight bearing exercise and cardiovascular exercise, the risk of osteoporosis can be reduced in the typically vulnerable areas of the spine and hips.

Once again thank you Amanda for your insight and advice to this important topic, we hope other businesses read this and consider ways to support both neurodivergent and menopausal women in their workplace.

Other useful links include:

Neurodiversity 101 newsletters:

<https://www.linkedin.com/newsletters/neurodiversity-101-6749245972842446848/>

Do-IT Profiler and resources:

www.doitprofiler.com

Book- Neurodiversity at Work:

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Neurodiversity-Work-Performance-Productivity-Neurodiverse/dp/1398600245>

BSI PAS guidelines

<https://knowledge.bsigroup.com/products/design-for-the-mind-neurodiversity-and-the-built-environment-guide/standard>

ACAS neurodiversity guidelines:

<https://www.acas.org.uk/archive/neurodiversity>

GMB guidelines:

https://www.base-uk.org/sites/default/files/knowledgebase/neurodiversity_workplace_toolkit.pdf

City and Guilds Neurodiversity Index report 2024

<https://cityandguildsfoundation.org/what-we-offer/campaigning/neurodiversity-index/#report>

Accessibility at a glance (Microsoft):

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLtSVUgxlo6KqBBGqNdPQG64f-hTs1YxFM>

ADHD Foundation:

<https://www.adhdfoundation.org.uk/>

Equality and Human Rights Commission:

https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/sites/default/files/working_better.pdf

<https://www.nhsinform.scot/self-help-guides/self-help-tool-menopause-and-mental-wellbeing/>

<https://www.nhsinform.scot/healthy-living/womens-health/late-years-around-50-years-and-over/menopause-and-post-menopause-health/menopause-and-the-workplace>