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NCC Conversations: Menopause – A personal journey that we need to talk about

In August, we introduced NCC Conversations, a series to help us to drive dialogue around a number of important topics that our colleagues care about.

So far, we've designated a month each to two of our four focus areas, Neurodiversity and Race and Ethnicity.

This month, we're looking forward to taking a deeper dive into Gender, where

we'll be touching on mental and physical health at work. In this blog, Yvonne Harley chats with Sara Farrington as they share their thoughts on why we need to talk about this at work.

Watching my three year-old granddaughter go from happy to sad, to mad and back again in the space of 60 seconds I feel copious amounts of empathy with her.

Wind the clock back nearly 25 years when her Mummy was a toddler, and I'm not sure I felt much more than utter frustration. They say as a grandparent you have more patience, but I never knew why, until I sat down and thought about it this weekend in the context of writing about the menopause at work. And suddenly it all made sense.

I'm 50, there I said it out loud. I am, I believe, in the peri-menopause phase. After a hysterectomy at the age of 29 I thought I was done. I had a few mild symptoms and then nothing – I honestly thought that was it. However like my granddaughter – I can feel those hormones playing havoc with my mind and all of a sudden after years of no hormone activity – BANG! I now fully appreciate what she's going through.

My reaction of course has to be a tad more grown up – but I'm not going to lie, some of those hot flushes have resulted in night-time raids of ice-cream or my always available chilled chocolate almond drink, which gives me the necessary comfort without worry about the impact on my hips!

My colleague Sara describes that realisation more as a WHAM: "I vividly remember my first hot flush... it was in a pub on a cold evening and I had dressed accordingly. The WHAM, it was like my feet were on fire, and the heat radiated upwards. Within seconds I was bright red, perspiring like I'd just run a 5k."

Those hot flushes – they're a nightmare. You learn to layer up so that in an emergency you can strip fast while preserving some sense of dignity. And just as fast as you heat up, you then have to deal with the shivers. During a pandemic where fever is a symptom – trust me, it's one more thing to mess with your head.

I'm not sure dealing with hot flushes is better or worse while working from

home. Certainly you can switch off your camera to deal with it, and hope that your colleagues are kind by not making a big deal of it when you do. I certainly do this, as for me with hot flushes comes nausea too, so I just need a moment to compose myself.

“It’s not just during the day though,” adds Sara as we share experiences on our menopause journey. “It’s the night-time that can be worse. Not only do you wake up drenched in sweat one minute, cold the next – it’s the effect this has on your sleep pattern, which of course then makes coping with the other symptoms so much harder.”

Sara went down the herbal route at first to help her manage her symptoms, and for a while things like Sage tablets, Black Cohoosh and Ginseng helped. However as her journey toward full menopause progressed, the emotional symptoms became harder to manage: “I could cry at the drop of a hat, the mere act of dropping a pen could set me off: I could become short-tempered and completely irrational. And it was my poor partner who bore the brunt of this. I just couldn’t help myself and of course that just made it worse as I felt so guilty.”

Speaking to girlfriends and colleagues about their experiences, everyone cites the impact this has on their day to day work. I have some friends who have seriously contemplated giving up their careers as they just can’t cope with what’s happening and there’s virtually no support to help them manage through this.

“You get so tired from not sleeping,” says Sara. “I couldn’t concentrate on anything and just felt completely exhausted, mentally and physically. I felt I couldn’t trust myself and had to keep checking work, and when I found a mistake, I had to check again. I ended up going to the Doctor and it was almost a relief to have it confirmed that I was peri-menopausal.”

Getting support and advice though can be a lottery. Sara was lucky as she had an incredibly good health care provider who guided her and helped her create a plan that suits her particularly journey. That journey is different for every woman.

Sara has elected to take Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT), I can’t take that as I have the added complication of having endometriosis. I said at the start I believe I’m peri-menopausal because it’s not really top of anyone’s

priority list right now so getting any medical advice is hard.

Sara highlights the stories she's heard of women being refused HRT because their doctor doesn't agree with it or insisting that they take anti-depressants instead.

That lack of consistent care can be a big issue for women in the workplace. Three out of four women will experience symptoms but there's over 30 different symptoms and some will affect you at work, while others might not directly but they might indirectly. Confused? Welcome to our daily occurrence!

We've started this conversation at NCC Group to help women now and in the future to see that despite all the efforts of our hormones trying to wreak havoc with our lives, this is an environment where you can succeed.

Peri-menopause can last on average four years from your last period and symptoms can start a few months or years before that. The age it starts and finishes is different for every woman, although on average it affects women in their late 40's to their early 50's.

On top of other female health and wellbeing issues, because those hormones live with us on a daily basis, having an understanding of why someone might have an off day or where someone who was once confident has 'lost their edge' is important.

We want to attract more women to work in cyber security, and right now, it's no secret it's a male dominated industry. So it's important that we create an environment where women can see themselves being supported and welcome – hormones and all. We need to create shared understanding and normalise the conversation about how we're feeling.

I often feel that the symptoms are a bit like a wave – once it's over, it's over only until the next one comes along. Being able to deal with it when it does and then move on, helps with the coping mechanism. The understanding has to be built not only with women but men too. While some women are very lucky and only experience mild symptoms, others might not be so lucky.

And as we're exploring this month in our workshop hosted by Simone Burgon

from Take a Pause, it's not just shared understanding of female hormones that's required, but also the male – andropause – is something equally as important to learn about.

So let's build each other up, and remember it's okay to not be okay, and the invisible hormones that live within all of us are part of who we are. Let's rock them and be kind. Listen to learn and then take action to make this world a better place for all!

About NCC Group

NCC Group exists to make the world safer and more secure.

As global experts in cyber security and risk mitigation, NCC Group is trusted by over 15,000 clients worldwide to protect their most critical assets from the ever-changing threat landscape.

With the company's knowledge, experience and global footprint, it is best placed to help businesses identify, assess, mitigate and respond to the evolving cyber risks they face.

To support its mission, NCC Group continually invests in research and innovation, and is passionate about developing the next generation of cyber scientists.

With over 1,800 colleagues in 12 countries, NCC Group has a significant market presence in North America, continental Europe and the UK, and a rapidly growing footprint in Asia Pacific with offices in Australia and Singapore.

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