

Mid-Life Matters: The role of male partners during menopause

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The MATE (Men's perception and Attitudes Toward mEnopause) survey, a recent article published in the Menopause journal, has begun to scratch the surface on what role men have to play in their partner's menopause transition. There currently exists less than a handful of studies assessing the awareness and feelings of male partners towards menopause, but this survey is the biggest one to date.

This study included 450 predominantly married men, who were mostly between age 50 and 69. The participants answered a mix of 35 multiple choice and open-ended questions regarding how well they understand menopause as well as how menopause has impacted them.

In the survey, 2/3 of men realized how negatively menopause affects their partners, their relationships and themselves. Commonly cited effects included increased arguments, decreased intimacy and frustration at seeing their partner struggle.

Three quarters of participants reported having discussions about menopause with their partner. However, most of these conversations had been initiated by the woman. In response to the menopause discussion, one third of men reported trying to be more patient, supportive and compassionate. Other actions taken included 10% of men choosing avoidance by "staying out of the way" or "giving space", 10% doing more research about menopause and 10% advising their partner to seek medical advice.

Only 1/4 of men reported that their partner had already made some change to feel better in regard to menopause, such as employing healthier lifestyle choices or starting a medication. Though the majority of men felt their knowledge of management options was limited, 65% felt comfortable working with their partner to find the right treatment.

This study suggests that better information for men and women and better communication between partners is key to a smoother menopause transition.

Being informed could increase a male partner's empathy, but also his confidence in how to be a good support. The North American Menopause Society's website, www.menopause.org, would be a reliable place to start some initial reading.

As mentioned, these survey findings encourage women to share more of their experience with their partners. No one can be expected to be a mind-reader. The study also encourages men to be open, sensitive and sympathetic about hearing the details of their partner's symptoms. Men can consider asking a woman how to help, without assuming they will be able to provide all the answers or a definite solution. Listening, rather than actively fixing things, is often all that is needed.

A few other points that may assist men in supporting women through the menopause transition, but that were not specifically highlighted in this study, include:

- Try not to take menopause symptoms personally. Whether a woman exhibits grouchiness or decreased sex drive, it rarely about the partner, but rather about the effects of hormone fluctuation.
- Consider leading by example. Women who eat healthier and get enough healthy exercise feel better. These lifestyle changes are easier to make when everyone in a household is participating in them together.
- Show your partner that you still care. Menopause often leads to a woman's loss of confidence and increased body consciousness. Increased reassurance and compliments help alleviate this.

Men have a greater role to play during the menopause transition than many may have

anticipated. Armed with knowledge and good communication, couples can better support each other during this potentially rocky time.

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