

The Crone: Menopause Empowered

Final part of “Women’s lifecycle”

By Sue Mauer Morningstar, CNM

Traditional and tribal societies often divide a woman’s life into three honored stages: Maiden, Mother and Crone.

As pregnancy is the life event that defines motherhood, so menopause marks the beginning of cronehood. During these later years, the elder woman’s role shifts from nurturing her family to caring for the whole community.

In matriarchal and egalitarian cultures, menopause is a woman’s time of arrival into her full wisdom and power. The word “crone” means crown, and is a title of honor and respect. Elder women perform these societies’ most important and challenging roles. As village wise women, they serve as healers, midwives and mediators. They are often consulted as authorities on the entire lifecycle, from child rearing, sexuality and marital difficulties, to care of the dying and the dead. For example, when traditional Native American women reach menopause, they may join the “Grandmother Lodge”. They are then considered “Keepers of the Law”, and are empowered to review even the chiefs’ decisions.

In contrast, our modern society typically reveres the glamour of youth, often at the expense of maturity. The media incessantly bombards us with images promoting the ideal of eternal youth, trying to convince us that we need to purchase a variety of anti-aging products and even cosmetic surgery to avoid appearing old. Our culture commonly discriminates against older workers, rather than embracing their superior wisdom and life experience. The writer Anna Quindlen describes our society as dividing women’s lives into three phases: pre-Babe, Babe and post-Babe. Menopausal women, as “post-babes” are conditioned to feel they have outlived their usefulness.

But how we experience our cronehood has a lot to do with our own attitudes and expectations.

Menopause can be an exhilarating time of freedom, growth and empowerment. Or, it can be experienced as a quagmire of hot flashes, unpredictable mood swings and broken dreams. If we direct our energy toward preserving the illusion of youth, rather than developing the deeper beauty and wisdom of our elder years, we may find menopause to be a time of diminished vitality, and drying up of our sacred fire.

It’s better instead to focus on celebrating our unique powers as mature women. Let’s remember that the word “hag” derives from “*hagia*”, meaning holy. In our cronehood we can take on the

sacred tasks of nurturing the entire community and mothering our wounded planet.

Menopause

At the average age of 50 (48 for smokers), a woman's female hormone levels diminish. Ovulation becomes sporadic, and the unpredictable bleeding pattern of menopause begins. In a couple of years, estrogen levels fall to a point where ovulation and menstruation cease completely. This marks the beginning of a woman's postmenopausal or 'crone' years.

As in all life transitions, our attitude will help determine our experience of menopause.

Some women eagerly embrace their crone status, sailing through this life passage on liberating waves of ecstasy. Freedom from fears of pregnancy may allow more spontaneous sexual expression. The "empty nest" that mothers experience as their children leave home also grants more personal time and energy. This is a time when many women learn to liberate themselves from others' expectations and finally become their authentic selves.

All women experience a variety of physical symptoms and emotional changes during menopause. Although at times these can be distressing, menopause is no more a medical condition than menstruation or childbirth. It is a natural transition of the female body and a universal rite of passage into the wise woman years.

During menopause, a woman's adrenal glands take over from the ovaries the production of female sex hormones such as estrogen and progesterone. So, it's crucial to keep your adrenal glands healthy, especially since they also control your body's response to all kinds of stress.

To strengthen your adrenal glands eat a healthy and wholesome diet, with lots of whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables and high fiber foods. Buy (or better yet; home-grow) organic, locally produced fresh foods whenever possible. It's best to emphasize vegetarian protein sources, such as nuts, seeds and beans. It's important to minimize your consumption of fatty and highly processed foods, especially those containing artificial chemical additives and refined sugars. Regular use of alcohol, caffeine, nicotine and a variety of recreational and prescription drugs can also deplete the adrenals.

Your ability to handle emotional stress greatly affects your health. Make sure you are sleeping restfully, and build regular stress-relievers into your life. Meditate, chant, drum, pray, connect with nature, talk with a friend, have a good cry, or do whatever it takes to let go of your cares. Find time to take a soul-nourishing sabbatical for an hour every day, or better yet, a day each week. Slowing down lets us appreciate the beauty of the here and now, relieving stress by reminding us to be grateful for each moment.

Adrenal tonic teas made with nettles (*Urtica dioica*), oatstraw (*Avena sativa*) and licorice root (*Glycyrrhiza glabra*) can help support adrenal function during menopause. Avoid licorice if you

have high blood pressure or tend to retain fluid.

Hot flashes affect four out of five menopausal women, and range in intensity from mild to totally debilitating. Some women find that spicy foods, hot drinks, caffeine, and repressed anger may trigger hot flashes. Instead of suppressing hot flashes, we can learn to ride the waves of a 'power surge' or in Margaret Mead's words: "postmenopausal zest", much the way we learned to breathe through the contractions of labor.

Regular aerobic exercise can prevent and relieve uncomfortable hot flashes for many women. So can herbs and foods rich in plant estrogens, such as black cohosh (*Cimicifuga racemosa*), red clover (*Trifolium praetense*) and soybeans. The progesterone-like compounds found in Wild yam root (*Dioscorea villosa*) can also be very helpful. Motherwort (*Leonora cardiaca*) and garden sage (*Salvia officinalis*) have been used by women for millennia to alleviate the discomfort of night sweats. Chastetree (*Vitex spp*) is especially useful for relieving hot flashes during early menopause, as it helps balance hormone production, keeping menstrual cycles regular for as long as possible.

Sexual changes: As a woman proceeds through menopause, diminished estrogen causes the vaginal tissues to lose collagen and become thinner and more delicate. Vaginal lubrication decreases, often resulting in itching, burning, and painful intercourse. Because of thinning of the urethra and bladder muscle relaxation, many women will also experience stress urinary incontinence.

One way to remedy this is to remain sexually active, since increased blood flow during sexual arousal strengthens the vaginal walls and pelvic muscles. If dryness is a problem, lubricants such as vitamin E or wheat germ oil may be helpful. Black cohosh (*Cimicifuga racemosa*) and ginseng (*Panax spp*) are also useful for strengthening delicate vaginal tissue.

Some menopausal women are troubled by decreased libido. Changes in patterns of sexual desire may be due to hormonal shifts, or may result from the stresses of a hurried lifestyle. Throughout all of life, a fulfilling sexual relationship depends on sharing intimate, undisturbed moments with your partner.

Kegel exercises of the pelvic floor muscles will enhance sexual pleasure as well as alleviate stress urinary incontinence. Research studies show that performing as few as 30 of these simple exercises a day can significantly reduce urine leakage within a month.

Osteoporosis: The reduced estrogen levels that accompany menopause also reduce your bones' ability to absorb calcium. Over the years, this can lead to the thin, fragile bones of osteoporosis. This tragic epidemic continues to cripple and prematurely kill many thousands of American women a year.

Prevention is by far the most important treatment for osteoporosis. It's best for a woman to start a high calcium diet and regular weight-bearing aerobic exercise program in her teens and twenties, when bones are best able to absorb calcium. As little as ten minutes of sunlight a day

helps your body activate vitamin D, crucial for calcium absorption. Be sure to eat lots of calcium rich foods, such as dark leafy greens, tahini, kelp, molasses, sardines, and yogurt and other dairy products. Important herbal bone tonics include horsetail (*Equisetum arvense*), nettles (*Urtica dioica*), and dandelion (*Taraxacum officinalis*).

Many women benefit by supplementing their diets with calcium, magnesium and a variety of trace minerals essential for strong bones. Calcium is best absorbed during sleep, when the parathyroid glands are more active. Minimize your intake of fatty foods, animal proteins, caffeine and soda pop, as these can deplete your bones' calcium stores.

Estrogen and Hormone Replacement Therapy

At menopause, estrogen levels sharply decrease, affecting those areas of the body that are especially sensitive to estrogen, including the uterus, vagina, bladder, heart, blood vessels, skin, bones and brain. What's the best way for a woman to deal with the withdrawal of such an important substance as she ages?

The issue of hormone replacement therapy remains controversial. Some believe that virtually every menopausal woman should take hormone replacement therapy (HRT) for life to reduce their risk of long term health consequences of menopause, especially osteoporosis and heart disease. Others believe that synthetic estrogens used for HRT unacceptably increase a woman's risk of developing breast and uterine cancers and so should not be used by any woman.

It's clear that HRT can make a tremendous improvement in the quality of some women's lives. Women who decide to try HRT may now choose plant-based bio-identical estrogens that contain the same hormone molecules that our bodies naturally produce. These can be compounded individually for a woman based on her personal hormonal profile and needs.

Women who are at low risk for osteoporosis and heart disease, as well as those at higher risk for breast cancer may prefer to use phyto-estrogen rich soy products and herbs such as red clover (*Trifolium praetense*) instead of HRT. These not only can effectively relieve menopausal symptoms, but may also lower a woman's risk of breast cancer.

Many women prefer to manage menopause with a more natural approach that emphasizes dietary changes, exercise, sunlight, meditation, and herbal and homeopathic remedies. These powerful healing tools can keep our bones, hearts and adrenals strong for many decades, while deepening our connections with Mother Nature's own healing rhythms.

Croning:

Ultimately, *menopause* is a time to reflect and take stock of your life. It's a time to look back at

where you have been in your youth, and ahead to where you think you might be headed as you age. Most importantly, it's a time to look within for your deeper purpose, embracing with passion all that life sends your way.

In the words of Lao Tsu:

"Life is a series of natural and spontaneous changes.

Do not resist- that only creates sorrow.

Let reality be reality

Let things flow naturally forward in whatever way they like"

If we could anticipate and look forward to menopause, working with our natural energies and not against them, our transition to cronehood would be more fulfilling and liberating. Let us celebrate and honor the crone within us and the crones among us!

These suggestions are intended for educational purposes only. It is wise to consult your health care provider for questions regarding your personal health circumstances.

This article originally appeared in ***Sentient Times***.

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