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When your body needs more understanding

Following up on the theme for this year's World Menopause Day Amanda Bailey looks at chronic pain in midlife and why it's important to listen to your body.



Amanda Bailey

Chronic pain may not always be visible to other people, and yet it can affect almost every part of our lives. It can influence how we sleep, move, work, socialise and feel about ourselves. Sometimes it can even change the way we imagine our future.

For women in midlife, there can be another layer to this. Our bodies may already be going through significant changes as we move through perimenopause and menopause. Sleep can become disrupted, energy levels can change, and we may find ourselves experiencing symptoms we haven't encountered before.

When ongoing pain becomes part of this picture, it can feel as though our body is asking us to slow down at a time when life may already feel very full.

As a counsellor, I often think about the emotional impact of living with something that cannot simply be fixed or switched off. Chronic pain isn't only a physical experience. It can affect our thoughts, emotions, confidence, relationships and sense of identity too.

When your body doesn't feel like your own

Many of us grow up with an expectation that our bodies will allow us to get on with life.

We work, look after families, exercise, make plans, travel, socialise and perhaps take pride in being someone who can "just get on with things".

Then something changes.

Perhaps the pain begins gradually. Perhaps it follows an injury, illness or diagnosis. Or perhaps there doesn't seem to be one clear explanation for it at all.

You may find that something which once felt effortless now requires planning. Going for a walk, doing the gardening, exercising or simply getting through a busy day can take more energy than it used to.

Not necessarily grief for the person we were, but for the freedom we once had without having to think about our bodies quite so much.

And that grief deserves acknowledgement.

The emotional side of pain

When pain continues for weeks, months or years, it can understandably affect our emotional wellbeing.

We might feel frustrated because we can't do what we want to do. We might feel angry with our bodies. We may become anxious about whether something will hurt, or worried about making plans because we don't know how we will feel on the day.

Sometimes there can be sadness too.

It can be particularly difficult when other people cannot see what we are experiencing. You might look perfectly well while quietly managing pain in the background.

This can leave someone feeling misunderstood or even questioning themselves.

"Am I making too much of this?"
"Other people seem to manage so much more."
"I used to be able to do this."

These thoughts can be painful in themselves.

There is a difference between accepting that something is difficult and telling ourselves that we simply have to put up with it.

When pain affects our sense of identity

Midlife can already be a time of reflection.

Children may be growing up or leaving home. Relationships can change. Careers can evolve. Parents may need more support. We may begin asking ourselves what we want from the next chapter of our lives.

At the same time, menopause can bring changes that make us feel less familiar to ourselves. Add chronic pain to this, and it can sometimes feel as though several parts of our identity are shifting at once.

Perhaps you have always been the person who organises everything, looks after everyone else, exercises regularly or says yes to plans.

If pain means you have to say no more often, you may begin to wonder who you are now.

Counselling can offer somewhere to explore those feelings without needing to have everything worked out.

Sometimes we need to give ourselves permission to acknowledge that life has changed before we can begin to work out what we want it to look like now.

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• How can you do things differently?

The pressure to keep going

There can be a particular pressure on women to keep going.

We may have spent years putting other people's needs before our own. We may be accustomed to carrying on regardless of how tired we are. But chronic pain can make that approach much harder to sustain.

There may be days when resting is what our body needs, but we feel guilty for doing so. It can take time to recognise that rest isn't laziness and that adapting isn't failing.

Perhaps instead of asking, *"How much can I get done today?"*, we might sometimes ask, *"What does my body need from me today?"*

That small change in question can be surprisingly powerful.

Making space for the person behind the pain

When someone has been living with pain for a long time, it can become easy for the pain to take up all the space.

Appointments, medication, treatments, symptoms and limitations can become part of everyday conversation.

But you are still a whole person. You are not your diagnosis. You are not the number of things you can or cannot do. And you are certainly not a failure because your body has different needs from the ones it had a few years ago.

This doesn't mean pretending that the pain isn't there. It means making room for the other parts of you as well.

Your relationships. Your interests. Your humour. Your hopes. Your creativity. The things that make you feel like yourself.

Finding a kinder relationship with yourself

When we are in pain, our inner voice can become surprisingly harsh.

We might compare ourselves with how we used to be, or with people around us who seem able to do more.

But our bodies aren't machines, and midlife isn't a competition.

Perhaps the kinder question isn't, *"Why can't I do what I used to do?"* Perhaps it is, *"What might I need now?"*

That could mean asking for help. It could mean changing expectations. It could mean taking something off the list rather than continually adding more to it.

It could simply mean acknowledging that today is a difficult day.

Self-compassion doesn't make pain disappear. But it can change the way we experience ourselves while living alongside it.

You don't have to navigate the emotional impact alone

If chronic pain is affecting your mood, relationships, confidence or enjoyment of life, talking to someone can help.



• What do you want life to look like now?

Counselling cannot take away physical pain, and a counsellor isn't there to tell you how you should manage your body.

Instead, counselling can provide an opportunity to talk about everything that sits around the pain — the frustration, sadness, anger, uncertainty, changes in identity and perhaps the sense of loss that can come when life doesn't look quite as it once did.

Sometimes simply having somewhere to put those feelings can make them feel a little less overwhelming.

And if you're also navigating menopause, there may be many different emotions and experiences competing for your attention.

You don't have to make sense of everything at once.

Perhaps midlife is also an invitation to listen

We often talk about menopause as a transition, and perhaps chronic pain can bring its own invitation to pause and listen.

Not because we have done anything wrong. Not because we need to accept limitations without question. But because our relationship with our bodies may need to change.

There may be things we can no longer do in quite the same way. There may also be things we discover we can do differently.

Midlife doesn't have to be about becoming the person we once were again. It can be about getting to know the person we are becoming.

And sometimes that begins with something very simple: listening to what our body is telling us, being a little kinder to ourselves, and recognising that we deserve care too. MM

Amanda is a registered counsellor, an advocate for women's health and wellbeing, and a registered member of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP). She offers gentle, flexible online counselling for women navigating midlife and menopause, creating a supportive space where women can feel heard, understood, and less alone. If this article has resonated with you, you're very welcome to get in touch to find out more.

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