

When Women Stop Coping: Perimenopause, Emotional Labour and the Misrecognition of Midlife Distress

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Abstract

Perimenopause is increasingly recognised as a biopsychosocial transition, yet women's midlife distress is still often misread through narrow medical, psychological or relational frameworks. This conceptual paper examines how perimenopause may collide with the gendered expectation that women continue to provide emotional labour, caregiving, sexual availability, relational stability and professional competence while their own bodies and identities are changing. Drawing on feminist health scholarship, psychotherapy, menopause research and theories of emotional labour, the paper argues that midlife women's anxiety, anger, exhaustion, cognitive shame, sexual withdrawal, body distress and relationship strain are frequently misrecognised as individual pathology, hormonal instability or personal failure. A woman who can no longer tolerate unequal care, emotional over-functioning or self-silencing may be understood as depressed, difficult, irritable or 'not coping', rather than as responding to the cumulative burden of gendered relational labour during a major reproductive life-stage transition. The paper proposes that menopause literacy must include not only knowledge of symptoms, but also awareness of power, care, culture, work, sexuality and relational context. It calls for practitioners across psychotherapy, medicine, social care, occupational health and women's health education to ask more precise questions about who women are expected to care for, what they have been required to silence, and what becomes visible when their capacity to keep coping begins to change.

Keywords: biopsychosocial transition; feminist health care; gendered care; relational wellbeing; self-silencing