

Issues related to menopause and perimenopause.

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Finance Sector Union

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Background

The Finance Sector Union (FSU) is a registered industrial organisation under the *Fair Work (Registered Organisations) Act 2009*. FSU represents members in the finance and insurance industry in Australia. This industry consists of approximately 541 500 employees nationwide (approximately 4% of the workforce) with women making up approximately 48% of the total number of workers within the sector¹.

The finance industry has been forefront among employers who have been early adopters of policies and frameworks that address gender equality at work such as the early introduction of paid maternity leave in the late 1980s and early 1990s and paid domestic and family violence leave.

Despite this progress the finance industry still produces the largest gender pay gap, year on year and the gap itself has barely narrowed in the past 20 years. The pay gap is exacerbated by senior women choosing either to retire early or not applying for promotions due to suffering symptoms of menopause. The finance industry has started to consider the impact that menopause and menstruation can have on employees and some employers have begun introducing frameworks to support their employees. The FSU produced a policy framework in 2021 that was based on available research on Australian and international experiences and drew heavily on the experience of finance workers in the UK. In 2023 the FSU conducted our own research on the impact that menopause and perimenopause on Australian finance workers. This submission draws heavily on the results of that survey.

The discussion of menopause and perimenopause remains taboo and the inability to discuss the impact of symptoms can affect a person's self-confidence and ability to work productively. Workplaces can be places that cause stress for workers as they struggle to balance the competing demands of work and their bodies as they experience perimenopausal/menopausal symptoms.

This submission will detail the impact of menopause on both individual workers and employers.

Notes on language

Trans women and trans men may also experience a variety of symptoms of perimenopause and menopause. As a result, this submission uses the gender neutral term "worker" or "employee" when discussing these issues. The only exception to this is when direct quotes from other sources are used.

The understanding of perimenopause and menopause in the general community is very low. As such this submission does not differentiate the symptoms of perimenopause and menopause. We understand that these terms have specific medical definitions and that generally people experience symptoms during the period of perimenopause and that menopause generally marks the end of this

¹ [Financial and Insurance Services | Jobs and Skills Australia](#) [accessed 24.01.2024]

period of change. The references in this submission to menopausal symptoms generally include both perimenopause **and** menopause unless specifically indicated.

The impact of perimenopause and menopause at work.

It is vital that we increase the awareness of the impact that menopause has on individual workers, their colleagues, and their employers. Menopause is not an illness. The symptoms of menopause are not well known in workplaces, and the culture of silence means that the impact of menopause on workers is often hidden. Of the respondents to the FSU survey who reported that their menopausal status was having an impact on their work, over 75% chose **not** to disclose their menopausal status at to their line manager. Concerns about the social stigma are a greater barrier to workers than concerns about privacy – but workers generally support action being taken to address the taboo².

The finance industry has one of the largest gender pay gaps in Australia and some of that can be attributed to the lack of women in senior roles. Menopause often hits workers at a point in their careers when they are in the pipeline for senior roles and instead of progressing, they hold themselves back due to their experiences of menopausal symptoms. This was certainly the experience of finance workers who responded to the 2023 FSU survey. More than 35% of respondents said that their experience of menopause meant that they were more likely to retire early. Even more concerning was that over 50% of respondents said that their experience of menopause meant that they were less likely to apply for a promotion.

Menopause is a workplace issue.

On average, those who experience menopause experience the onset at age 50 and the experience can last anywhere from two to ten years. In Australia, women retire, on average at age 52 (there is no available information on trans men and trans women). As many as 8% experience early menopause which means that a significant number of people experience menopause while they are still active participants in the workforce³. Of those who are still in the workforce when they experience menopause a substantial number are in roles that are dependent on their ability to command respect – they are high value workers.

The ability of the finance sector to eliminate the gender pay gap is largely dependent on not only addressing gender segregation within the industry but ensuring pathways for workers to progress into senior roles. Workers are clear that the issue of menopause at work needs to be addressed in much the

² “Menopause in the Workplace: Impact on Women in Financial Services. October 2021. Standard Chartered. Financial Services Skills Commission. Available at: <https://av.sc.com/corp-en/content/docs/Menopause-in-the-Workplace-Impact-on-Women-in-Financial-Services.pdf> Accessed June 2022

³ “Driving the change: Menopause and the workplace” A report by Circle In supported by the Victorian Womens Trust. Available at <https://circlein.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Circle-In-Menopause-and-the-workplace.pdf> Accessed June 2022

same way as the issue of mental health has been addressed. Stigmas and taboos need to be broken to allow those who are experiencing the menopausal transition to ask for flexibility and to be supported. The government has an opportunity to take the lead in breaking these stigmas and taboos, to provide a nationally led education campaign which will in turn encourage employers to provide education and support to their workforces.

Symptoms of menopause experienced by finance workers

Menopause is not the same for everyone. Some people only experience mild symptoms while others have more serious symptoms. Some people go through the transition quickly while for others the transition can take up to 10 years.

An Australian survey completed in 2021 found that almost 60% of those who were working during their menopausal transition found the experience to be challenging. Menopausal symptoms are both physical and mental. Physical symptoms may include tiredness, night sweats, aches and pains, hot flushes, bloating, headaches, changes in menstrual cycles, the need to urinate more frequently and/or urgently, a racing heart and feeling faint or dizzy. Non physical symptoms may include difficulty sleeping, anxiety and worry, memory problems, difficulty concentrating, mood swings, increased irritability, a loss of confidence, depression, feeling invisible and increased PMS. The figures in Chart 1 are taken from responses to the 2023-24 “FSU Survey on the Impact of Menopause and Menstruation on Finance Workers” and show the cross section of symptoms that Australian finance workers have reported.

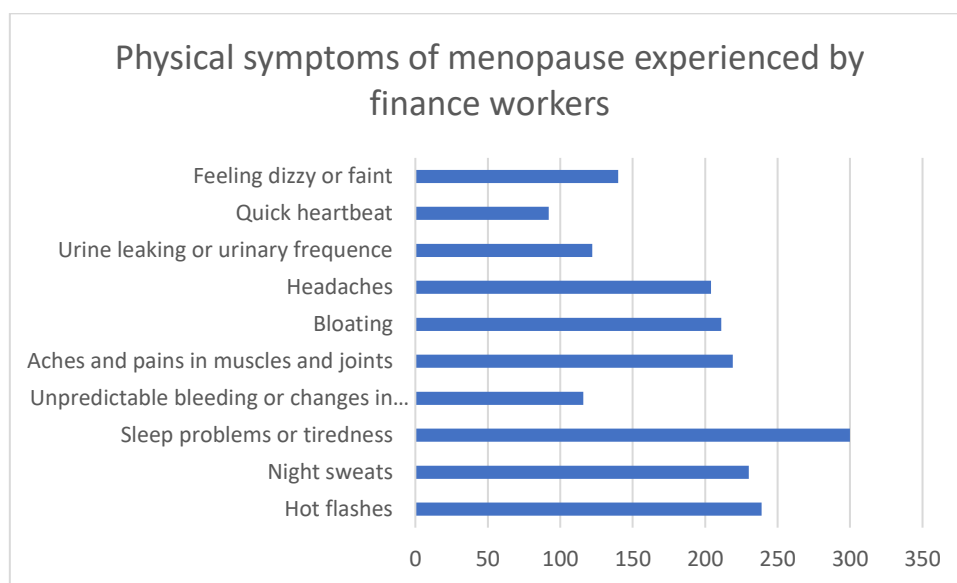


Chart 1 - Physical symptoms of menopause experienced by finance workers

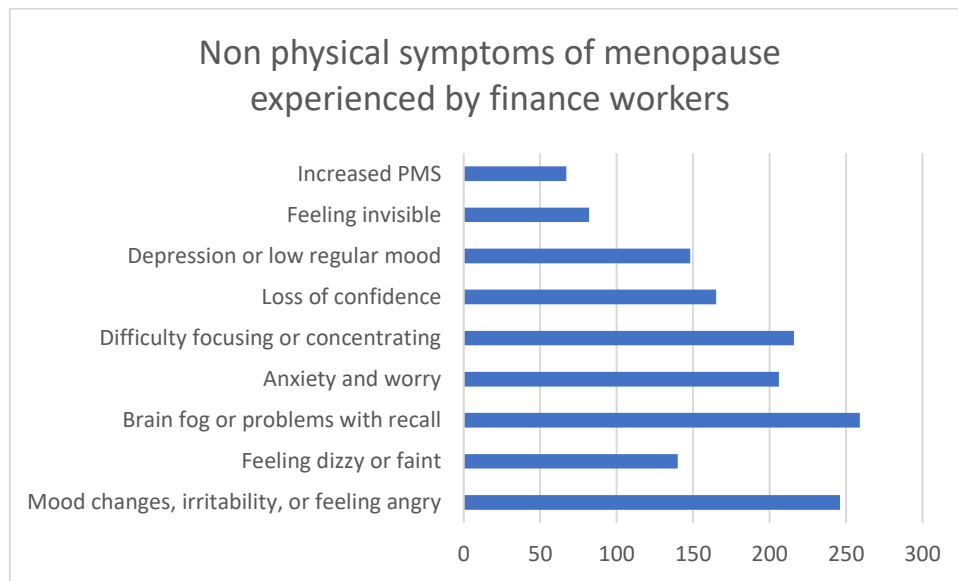


Chart 2 - Non-physical symptoms of menopause experienced by finance workers.

Due to the taboo and stigma some workers who experience menopause are unaware that the cause of their symptoms is menopause. Workers who are aware that they are experiencing menopausal symptoms often express frustration that the lack of general understanding of symptoms of menopause and their often-debilitating impact means that it is common for some people to believe that it is a mildly inconvenient part of life and that impacted workers just need to “suck it up”.

Just 24% of finance workers who had experienced menopausal symptoms at work reported that they had disclosed to their line manager the impact that the symptoms were having on them at work.

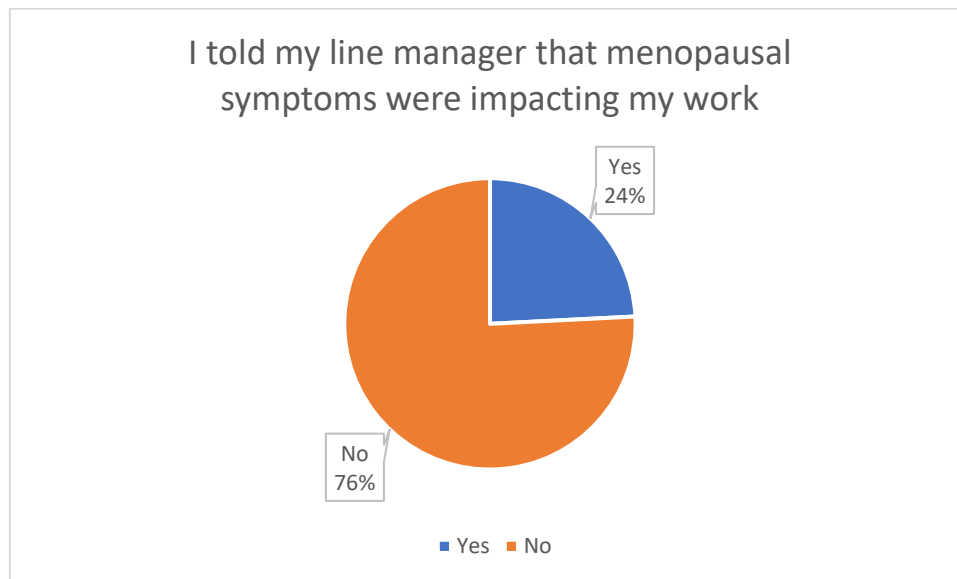


Chart 3 – Workers' choice to disclose impact of menopausal symptoms at work.

The most common reasons workers identified for **not** disclosing their menopausal status was a fear that they would be perceived negatively, that their abilities would be questioned, or that they believed menopause was a private issue they weren't comfortable discussing at work (chart 4). The minority of workers who did disclose their menopausal status the most common reason for disclosure included having a supportive line manager (chart 5).

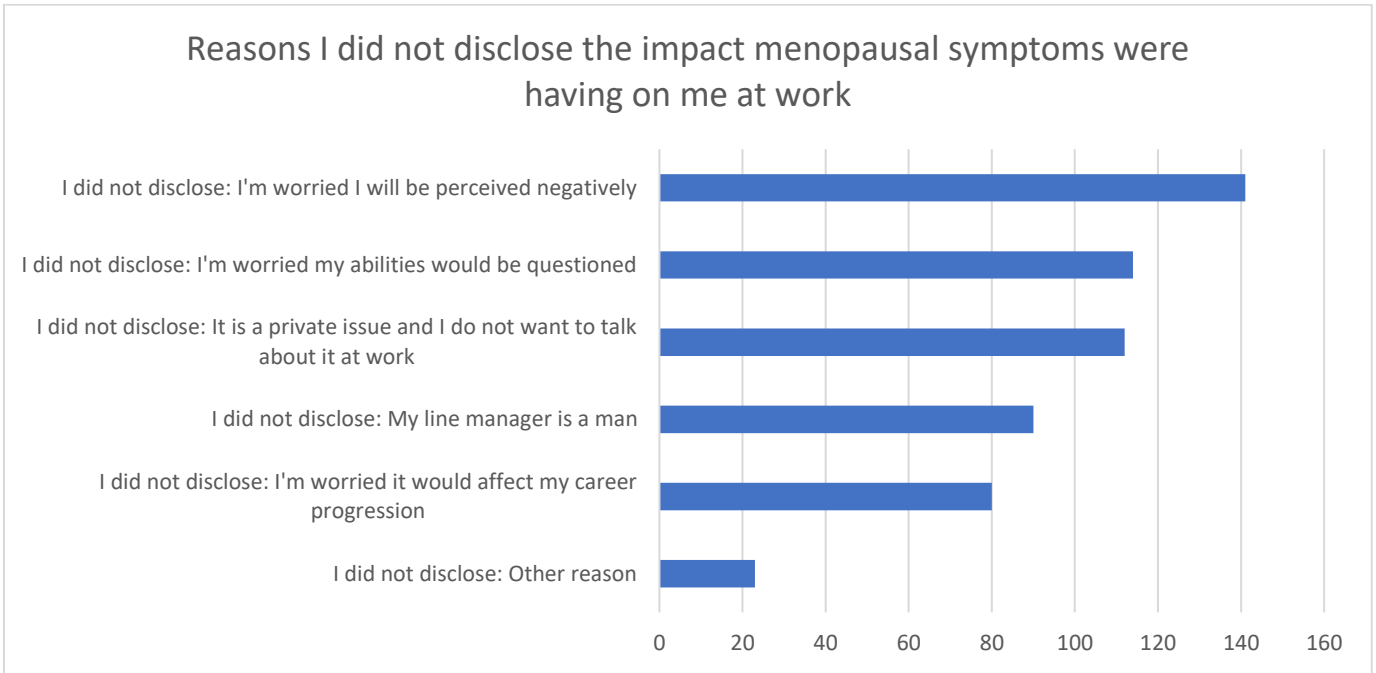


Chart 4 - Reasons workers did not disclose menopausal status.

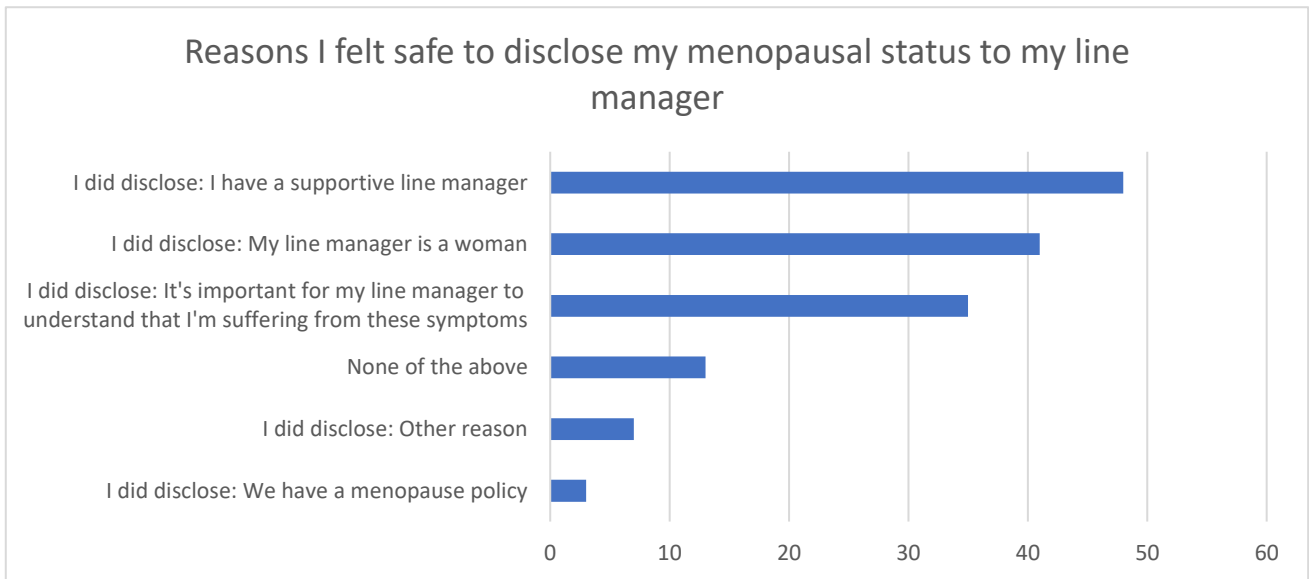


Chart 5 - Reasons workers feel safe to disclose menopausal status at work.

The level of awareness amongst employers and workers of the symptoms of menopause and perimenopause, and the awareness, availability and usage of workplace supports.

The FSU has been providing employers with information on the best ways to increase awareness of menopause and provide workplace support since we adopted our “Menopause and Menstrual Policy Framework” in 2021. This framework is being updated with the results of our 2023 research on the impact of menopause on Australian finance workers.

Australian finance workers were asked how helpful workplace flexibilities and various initiatives would be in managing their experiences of menopause at work. Some of these initiatives (Chart 6 and 7) are simple and cost effective while others require an investment in training and education for workers and their managers. All these initiatives will provide a return on investment if they are successful in reducing the number of workers who retire early or who don't apply for promotions due to their menopausal symptoms.

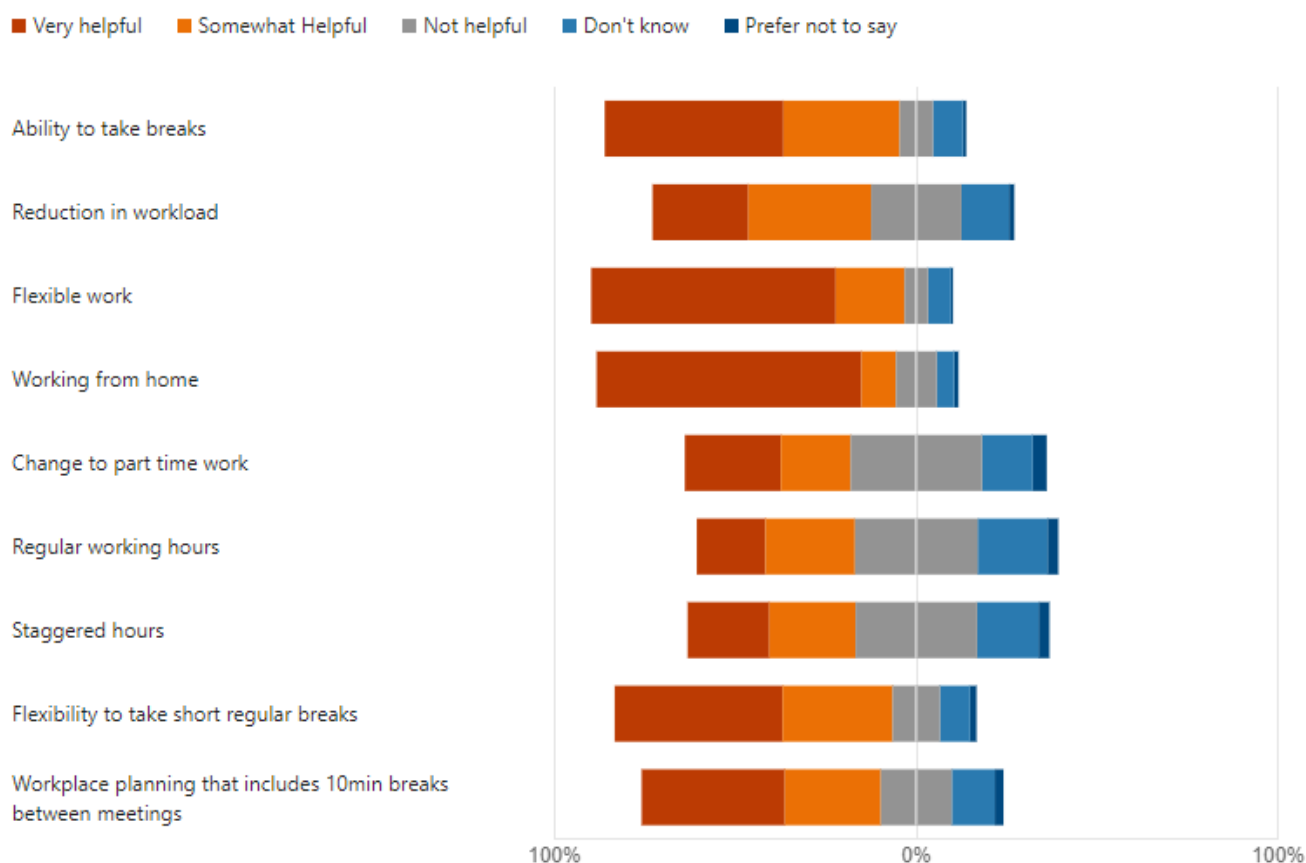


Chart 6 - Would any of these flexibilities be helpful in managing your menopausal symptoms?

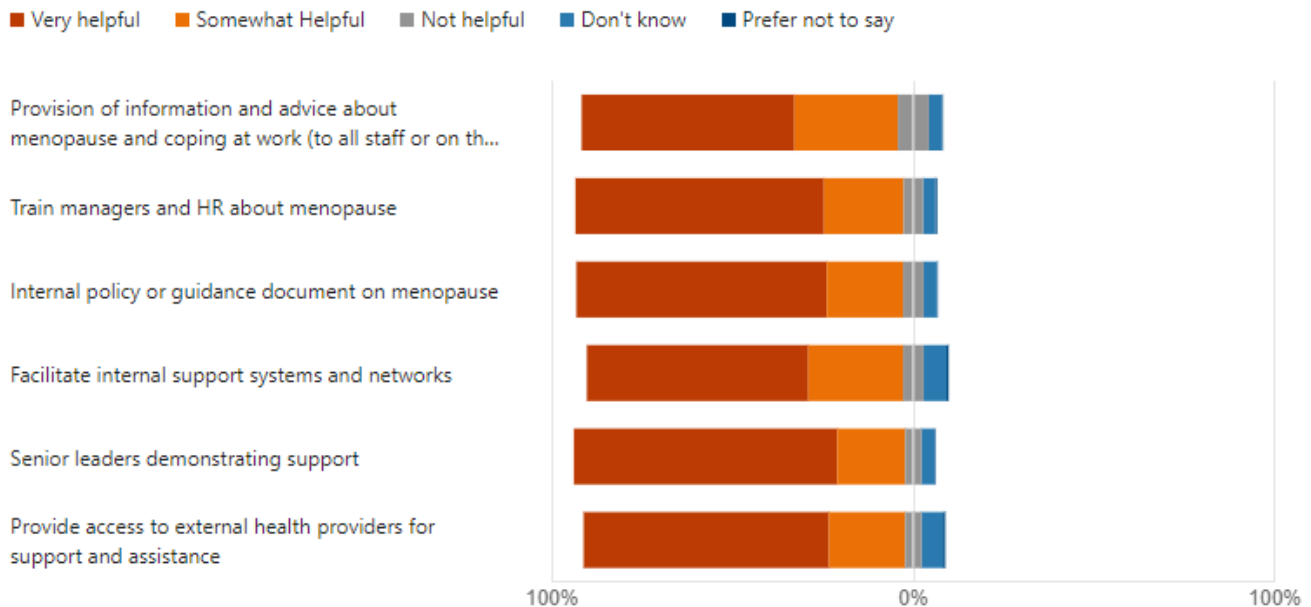


Chart 7 - How helpful would these initiatives be in managing your experience of menopause at work?

Australian finance employers introducing support for workers experiencing menopause

The finance industry has in the past been an early adopter of initiatives that provide support for women in the workforce. They were some of the first private sector employers to introduce maternity leave in the 1990s followed later by paternity leave. Finance industry and were some of the first private sector employers to introduce paid superannuation on unpaid parental leave and paid family and domestic violence leave.

In the same tradition there are employers in the finance industry who are already providing support for workers impacted by the symptoms of menopause. CBUS on of the largest superannuation funds was the first in the finance industry to introduce 12 days paid menopause and menstrual leave in their enterprise agreement. This was followed by Police Bank who also provide paid menopause leave in their enterprise agreement. Recently Aware Super has introduced a menopause policy aimed to provide support and paid leave for workers who need it.

It can be done.

While the gold standard is to provide workers with menopause education, workplace flexibilities and paid leave we recommend the Federal Government begin by amending Section 65 (1A) of the Fair Work Act to include the right for a worker who is suffering from perimenopause or menopausal symptoms to apply for flexible work.

Conclusion and recommendations

Menopause is not well understood. Neither workers who experience menopausal symptoms nor their managers are well informed about the breadth of symptoms that can be attributed to menopause. The finance industry has one of the highest gender pay gaps that has barely reduced, despite attempts by industry. This gap is exacerbated by senior women retiring or not applying for promotions in some cases due to suffering the symptoms of menopause. There are a wide range of simple workplace flexibilities that can be quickly, and cost effectively introduced to support workers, their managers and their colleagues to understand and manage the impact menopausal symptoms can have at work. Employers are slowly beginning to adopt some of these flexibilities to attract and retain workers as they age and experience menopausal symptoms.

Recommendation 1

The FSU recommends that the government introduce a public education campaign to increase the understanding of the range of symptoms of menopause and the impact they have on those who experience them as well as their workmates, managers, friends and family.

Recommendation 2

That the FSU recommends that the Federal Government amend Section 65 (1A) of the Fair Work Act to include the right for a worker who is suffering from perimenopause or menopausal symptoms to apply for flexible work.

MENOPAUSE AND MENSTRUAL LEAVE POLICY FRAMEWORK

August 2022



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INTRODUCTION

The finance industry has been forefront among employers who have been early adopters of policies and frameworks that address gender equality at work such as the early introduction of paid maternity leave in the late 1980s and early 1990s and paid domestic and family violence leave.

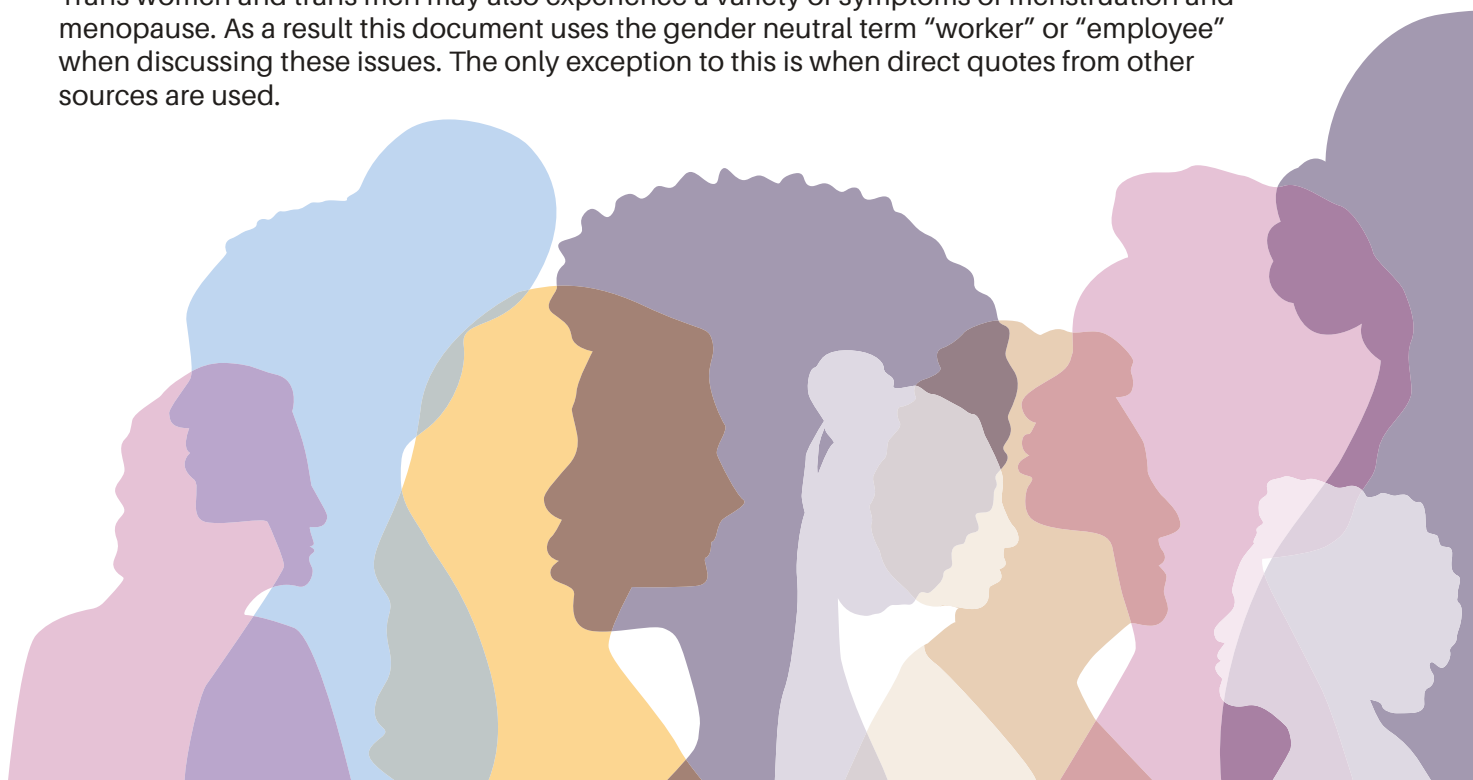
Despite this progress the finance industry still produces the largest gender pay gap, year on year and the gap itself has barely narrowed in the past 20 years. It is well past time that the finance industry considers the impact that menopause and menstruation can have on employees and introduce a framework to support their employees.

The discussion of menstruations remains taboo and the inability to discuss the impact of menstruation can affect a person's self confidence and ability to work productively. Workplaces can be places that cause stress for workers as they struggle to balance the competing demands of work and their bodies as they experience menstruation and menopause.

This policy framework seeks to detail the impact of menstruation and menopause on both individual workers and employers and set out the case for the introduction of a menstrual and menopause policy framework. It covers the impact on menopause and menstruation in detail separately before providing a framework that employers can make use of to better support their workers and their business make the most of their workforce.

Note on language

Trans women and trans men may also experience a variety of symptoms of menstruation and menopause. As a result this document uses the gender neutral term "worker" or "employee" when discussing these issues. The only exception to this is when direct quotes from other sources are used.





MENOPAUSE POLICY

Why do we need a menopause policy framework?

We need a menopause policy framework to address the impact that menopause has on individual workers, their colleagues and their employers. Menopause is not an illness. The symptoms of menopause are not well known and the culture of silence means that the impact of menopause is hidden. Studies have shown that as little as one in five workers who are experiencing menopause disclose their status at work. Concerns about the social stigma are a greater barrier to workers than concerns about privacy – but workers generally support action being taken to address the taboo¹.

The finance industry has the largest gender pay gap in Australia and much of that is due to a lack of women in senior roles. Menopause often hits workers at a point in their careers when they are in the pipeline for senior roles and instead of progressing, they hold themselves back due to the experience of menopausal symptoms. An October 2021 report commissioned by *Standard Chartered* in the United Kingdom found that as many as half of employees currently experiencing menopause were less likely to want to apply for a promotion². The report went on to say that with the right support framework in place workers experiencing menopause can stay and progress in the finance industry. It is for these reasons that the introduction of a *Menopause and Menstruation Framework* are essential.

Menopause is a workplace issue

On average, those who experience menopause experience the onset at age 50 and the experience can last anywhere from two to ten years. In Australia, women retire, on average at age 52 (there is no available information on trans men and trans women). As many as 8% experience early menopause which means that a significant number of people experience menopause while they are still active participants in the workforce³. Of those who are still in the workforce when they experience menopause a substantial number are in roles that are dependent on their ability to command respect – they are high value workers.

The ability of the finance sector to eliminate the gender pay gap is largely dependent on not only addressing gender segregation within the industry but ensuring pathways for workers to

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1. "Menopause in the Workplace: Impact on Women in Financial Services. October 2021. Standard Chartered. Financial Services Skills Commission. Available at: <https://av.sc.com/corp-en/content/docs/Menopause-in-the-Workplace-Impact-on-Women-in-Financial-Services.pdf> Accessed June 2022
 2. Ibid
 3. "Driving the change: Menopause and the workplace" A report by Circle In supported by the Victorian Womens Trust. Available at https://circlein.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Circle-In_Menopause-and-the-workplace.pdf Accessed June 2022

progress into senior roles. Workers are clear that the issue of menopause at work needs to be addressed in much the same way as the issue of mental health has been addressed. Stigmas and taboos need to be broken to allow those who are experiencing the menopausal transition to be supported. The finance industry has an opportunity to take the lead in breaking these stigmas and taboos, to provide education and support throughout the workforce which will in turn, create both productive and diverse leadership. UK research in the finance industry demonstrates that workers who experience menopause are negatively impacted and it has an impact on retention and developing a pipeline to senior executive positions⁴

What are the effects on workers of going through menopause?

An Australian survey completed in 2021 found that almost 60% of those who were working during their menopausal transition found the experience to be challenging. Menopausal symptoms are both physical and mental. Physical symptoms may include tiredness, night sweats, aches and pains, hot flushes, bloating, headaches, changes in menstrual cycles, the need to urinate more frequently and/or urgently, a racing heart and feeling faint or dizzy. Non-physical symptoms may include difficulty sleeping, anxiety and worry, memory problems, difficulty concentrating, mood swings, increased irritability, a loss of confidence, depression, feeling invisible and increased PMS. The figures below are taken from the UK report “Menopause in the Workplace: Impact on Women in Financial Services” and show the cross-section of symptoms that workers have reported.

4. “Menopause in the Workplace: Impact on Women in Financial Services. October 2021. Standard Chartered. Financial Services Skills Commission. Available at: <https://av.sc.com/corp-en/content/docs/Menopause-in-the-Workplace-Impact-on-Women-in-Financial-Services.pdf> Accessed June 2022

Menopause and Menstrual Leave Policy Framework

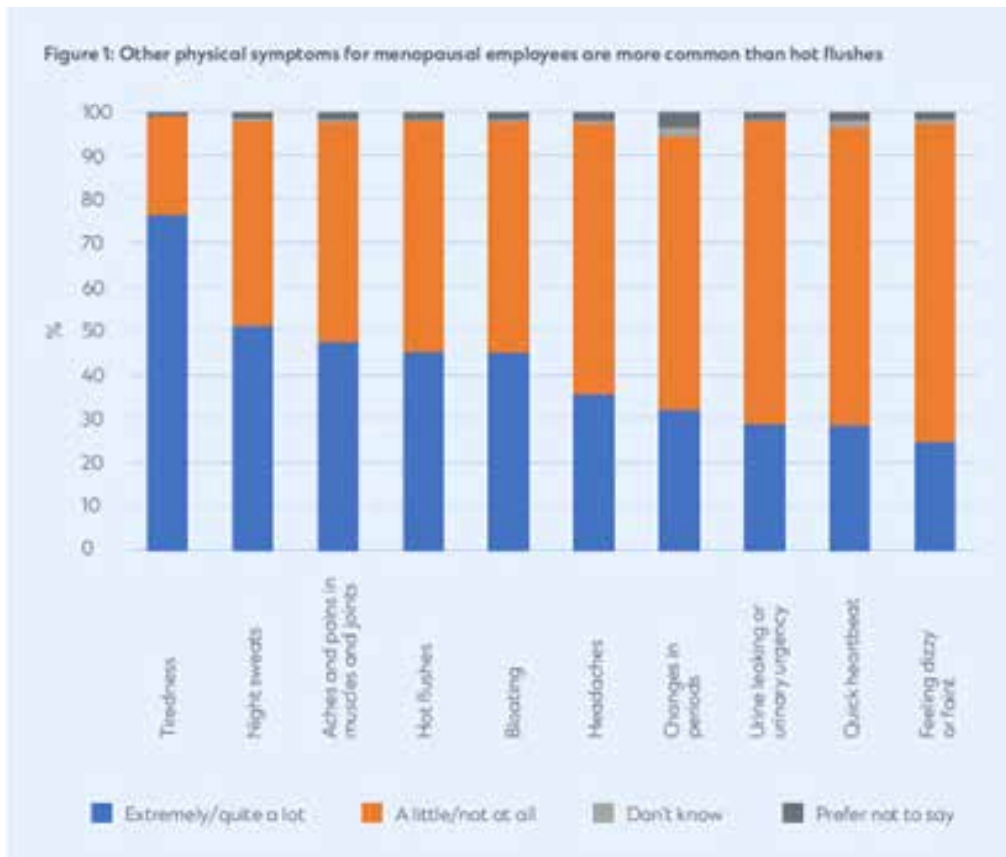


Figure 1 - Other physical symptoms are more common than hot flushes - Menopause in the Workplace

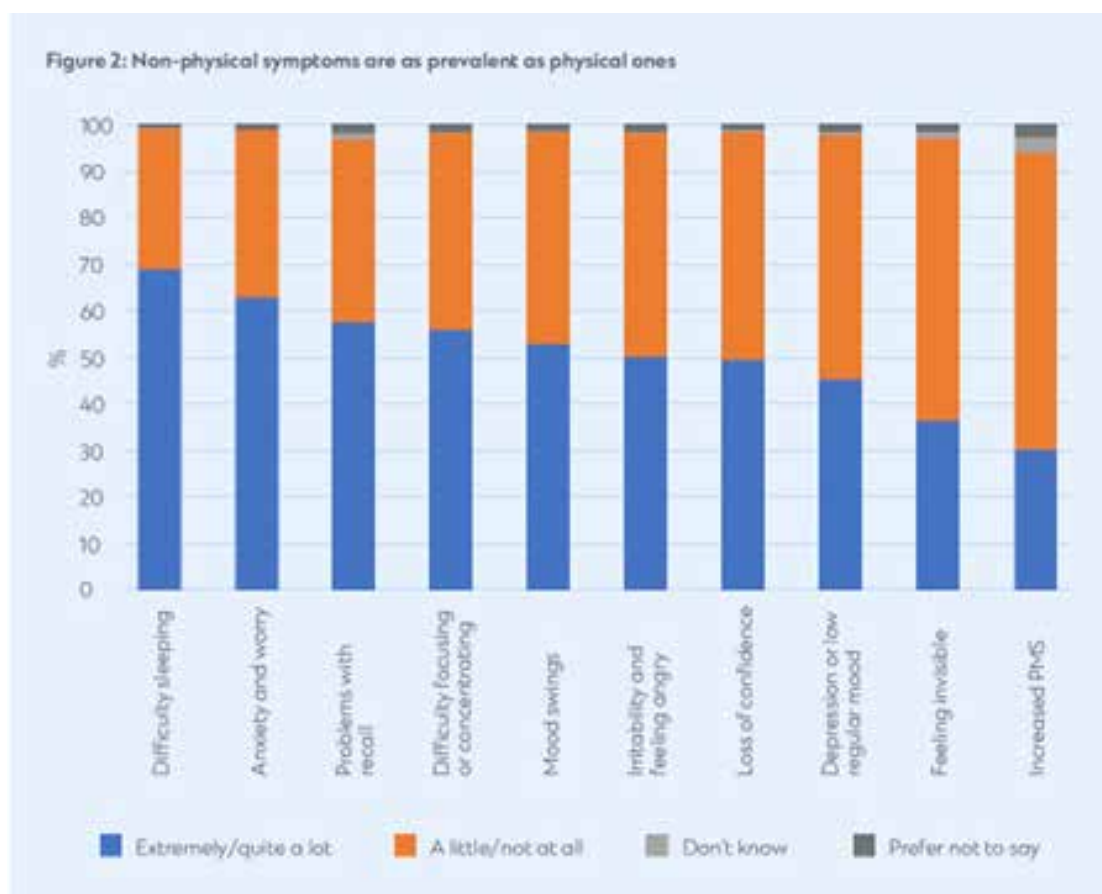


Figure 2 - Non-physical symptoms are as prevalent as physical ones - Menopause in the workplace

Women’s experience of menopause at work

Menopause is not the same for everyone. Some people only experience mild symptoms while others have more serious symptoms. Some people go through the transition quickly while for others the transition can take up to 10 years. Due to the taboo and stigma some workers who experience menopause are unaware of the cause. Workers often express frustration that the lack of understanding means that some people believe that it is a mildly inconvenient part of life and that you just need to “suck it up”.

In recent years studies in the UK and Australia examined the experience of workers going through menopause.

Figure 3: Stigma holds back employees from disclosing menopause status

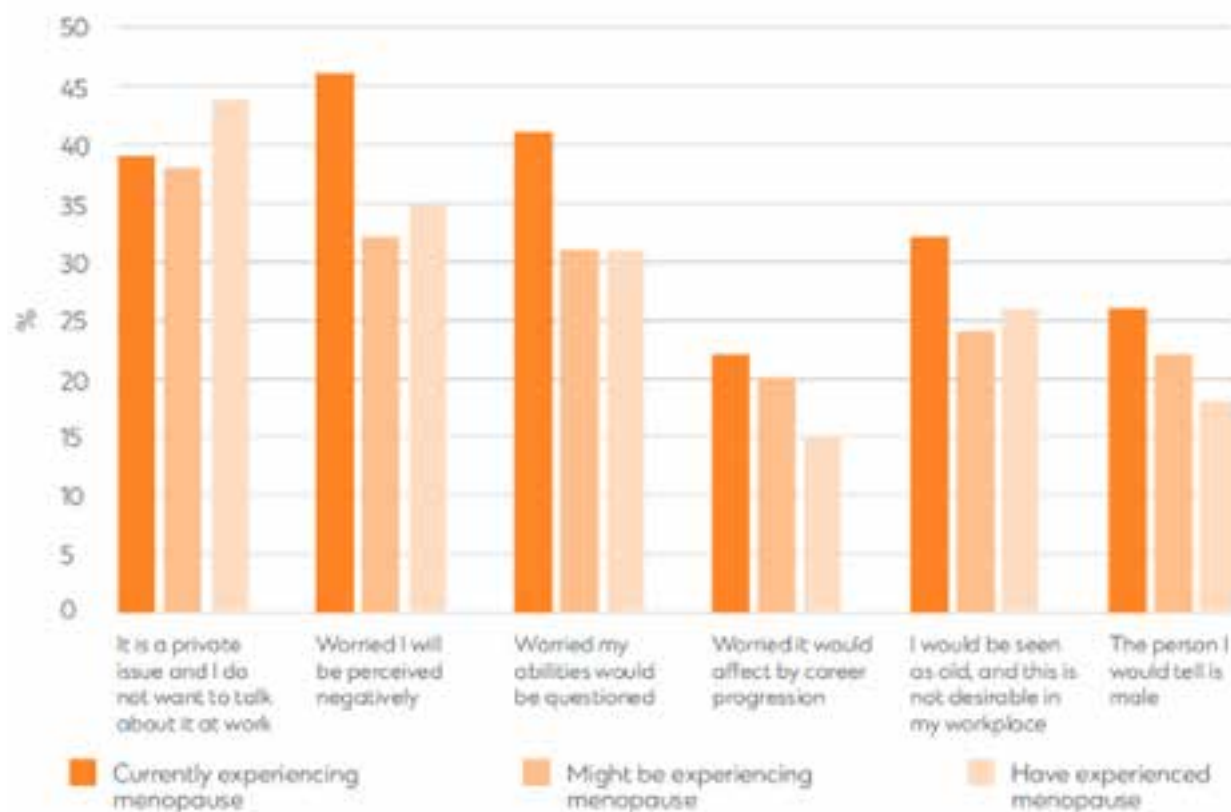


Figure 3 - Stigma holds back employees from disclosing menopause data. Menopause in the Workplace

The business case for the introduction of a menopause framework and policy

Up to one quarter of workers experiencing menopause identified it as a factor in early retirement while others cited menopause as a reason to either reduce their seniority or decide not to pursue promotional opportunities. Workers who had already left the workforce explained that menopausal symptoms including severe migraines were incompatible with the pressures of the job. These workers felt as though there was little choice when faced with the combination of a lack of understanding and the stigma and taboo associated with discussions of menopause.

Finance sector employers undertake a variety of strategies to retain talented and high value workers. They are also under increasing pressure to continue to improve the number of women in senior manager and executive roles to drive down the stubbornly high gender pay gap.

A relatively simple and cost-effective way to retain high value workers experiencing menopause is to introduce a framework that provides advice, support, flexibility and paid leave to workers who are experiencing menopause.

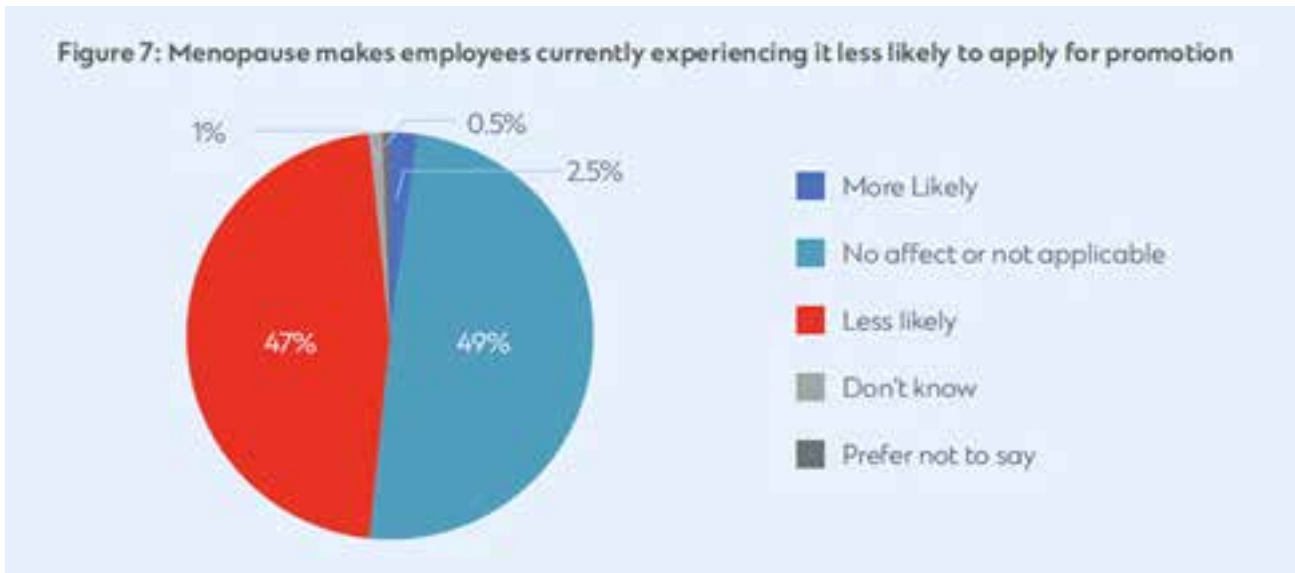


Figure 4 - Figure 7 Menopausal workers are less likely to apply for promotion. Menopause in the workplace.

What can employers do?

There are a variety of tools available to employers to provide support for workers who are going through the menopausal transition. These are set out below:

1. Culture training and education
 - a. The provision of information
 - b. Training of managers and HR on the symptoms and impact of menopause on the workforce
 - c. Provide a menopause framework and guides
 - d. Facilitate support systems and networks
 - e. Provide support from senior managers
2. Workplace flexibility and working arrangements
 - a. Working from home
 - b. Staggered hours
 - c. Flexibility to take short breaks
 - d. Build in breaks between meetings
 - e. Allow part time work and job sharing
3. Alternation of the physical workplace and provisions
 - a. Provide a quiet room to relax
 - b. Provide desk fans
 - c. Allow workers to request a fixed desk
 - d. Provide a good range of sanitary products in the bathrooms
 - e. Provide loose fitting and layered uniforms for staff

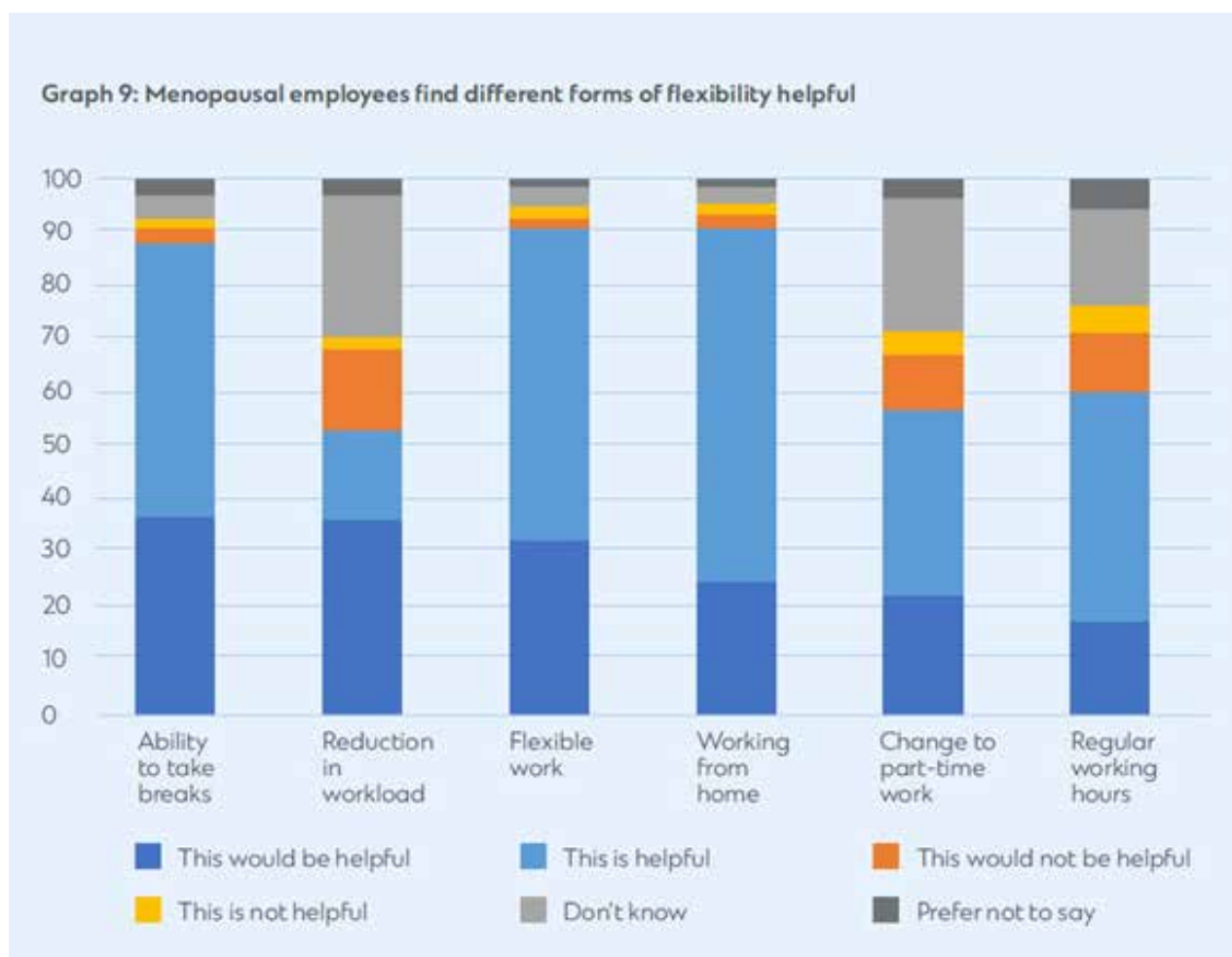


Figure 5: Graph 9. Menopausal workers and flexible work. Menopause in the workplace

QUOTES



“The weird thing about menopause is that suddenly you go from what you think to be quite an intelligent person to feeling like you’re losing your mind.”

“I think I ended up having 9 weeks off of work because I was quite bad but then it was just assumed when I went back ‘Oh Sophie’s fine, everything is okay, just crack on with where we left off’. No, your menopause isn’t a 9 week window and then it’s all done.”

“If I’d known what I was going through, I may have chosen not to stand down from our senior leadership team. I just thought I couldn’t hack it anymore, I was no good at my job, and I chose to stand down.”

“There is a fear of saying something because you fear it will affect you...I really want to progress, move into leadership and I do feel this is holding me back. Those people I want to show that I am really good, I don’t want them to see there are things that are affecting me that could affect their judgement of me.”

“If you talked about it in the workplace, everyone would just stare back at you thinking ‘What are you on about?’ In my workplace the average age is 27...So no I don’t talk about it.”

“When I’m in meetings with colleagues, I tend to feel quite withdrawn and don’t want to participate, and I was never like that, I was always outgoing and confident.”

“I never told my employer – I was a full-time executive and I kept up the pace. However, I got a lot of support from other women in the workplace”.

“At varying times during my cycle, the impact of pain and other symptoms meant I needed time off from work and didn’t reveal the reason for my ‘illness’. I had not experienced pain or the other quite debilitating symptoms prior to perimenopause”.

“I have a male manager and they are awkward conversations. It’s also not something that tends to get discussed openly more generally. A little bit like mental health a few years ago”.

“For the first time ever, I was consistently feeling overwhelmed. And hot - damn hot”.

“My employer couldn’t care less. In fact, I felt I had to keep it secret as menopausal women are regarded as slightly dumb and can’t be trusted to work effectively”.

Case studies

There are a number of companies in Australia and around the world that have introduced a menopause and menstruation framework. These are some of their experiences.

Case study: A positive response by her new employer

A middle manager in financial advice left a high-paying job because the menopause lowered her confidence. She did not feel supported or able to discuss what she was struggling with in her male-dominated workplace where menopause, or women's health in general, was never discussed: "One of the reasons I looked to move jobs was my confidence had taken a really bad dip...I took a huge pay cut to work where I'm working...I'm happy I did it on reflection but at the time, it felt a step out of my career." In contrast, her new organisation held an information session on the menopause two years ago, spurring an organisational effort: there is a menopause policy, information about the menopause is available on the intranet, managers receive menopause training, the male (D&I) lead holds drop-in sessions, and there is a support group that holds menopause breakfasts once a month. As a result, the menopause is discussed regularly: "I hear people in meetings say, 'I'm having a hot flush, get the windows open.' Now that as a topic of conversation would have been the most verboten thing in my previous workplace. It's getting normalised." Her employer's effort to acknowledge and address the menopause has fundamentally improved her life: "For the first time ever, I am happy to make quips in meetings about the menopause and I'm really happy and confident to talk about it to any age group or gender. I now personally take HRT ...I wouldn't have been brave enough to take that step because I didn't have the information or education. And I've told my D&I lead that my workplace has given me back my life. Because they've spoken about it."

Accredited Menopause Friendly Employer: HSBC

In July 2021, HSBC UK, along with first direct and M&S Bank, became the UK's first accredited Menopause Friendly Employers, as certified by Henpicked because of the portfolio of actions it has taken to address the menopause. HSBC has been working on the menopause as part of its diversity and wellbeing work for a number of years. Working with an organisation with expertise in menopause and work, HSBC has developed a comprehensive menopause programme. There is a network of 43 advocates and 34 champions who raise awareness on the menopause. The advocates are based in different parts of the business and drive the organisation's strategy on the menopause and deliver information sessions. They support the champions who are based in across the UK and provide on the ground support and information to colleagues day-to-day. Most advocates and champions are women, but there are some men who got involved because their partners or family members were experiencing challenging menopause symptoms. Two different information sessions are delivered: one for all employees with key information about the menopause and where to go to for support and one for people managers in which they are encouraged to view the menopause as something that could affect performance and learn how they can better support their employees.

The firm also hosts 'lunch and learn' series on the menopause that are held weekly. The sessions cover a range of topics including information about symptoms, treatments, diet and nutrition, and how to have conversations with your manager about the menopause. Between 70 to 200 employees join in each session, depending on the topic. Each session is recorded for employees who work in customer facing roles and are not able to join the event live. Currently, 'gynaecological issues' is a valid reason for taking time off ill - the firm is working to include menopause as a specific reason so that they can better understand how many women this is affecting, and will they believed this will help to reinforce that the menopause is a valid reason to take time off.

References and further reading

Menopause in the Workplace: Impact on Women in Financial Services. October 2021. Standard Chartered. Financial Services Skills Commission. Available at: <https://av.sc.com/corp-en/content/docs/Menopause-in-the-Workplace-Impact-on-Women-in-Financial-Services.pdf> Accessed June 2022

"Driving the change: Menopause and the workplace" A report by Circle In supported by the Victorian Womens Trust. Available at https://circlein.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Circle-In_Menopause-and-the-workplace.pdf Accessed June 2022

MENSTRUAL POLICY

Menstrual silence, shame, ignorance and awkwardness are not only counter to women's fundamental health and wellbeing, but also to the realisation of their full human rights – to be able to avail themselves of the opportunities and resources in life, to live without discrimination; and to be able to participate fully and freely as citizens and consumers in their communities, workplaces and society at large. ⁽¹⁾



Figure 1. Karen Pickering, and Jane Bennett, *About Bloody Time: The Menstrual Revolution We Have to Have*

Why do we need a menstrual framework?

The costs of menstruation to companies are difficult to determine because it is often hidden by individuals who feel the need to “soldier on” and work through their discomfort. When employees take leave due during their menstrual cycle it is generally sick (personal) leave that they access and as such it is not counted in any specific economic measures. The costs include loss of productivity - for companies - and opportunity costs - for workers - when workers struggle with period pain. Developing workplace policies and workplaces that support workers who struggle with period pain is an important step towards gender equality.

Companies in the finance industry usually have a suite of policies that sit alongside enterprise agreements and the modern awards that complement their legislative requirements and help determine workplace culture. Increasingly as the number of women in senior leadership roles increases, employers have come to recognise that providing support for workers who struggle with period pain is a win for productivity, workplace culture and developing employee talent.

Including a menstrual framework to an enterprise agreement will improve and regulate workplace standards, culture and behaviour. This framework will promote a consistent, safe and constructive working relationship for everyone and provides a simple guide for how to approach these matters for both employees and employers.

A note on language

Trans women and trans men may also experience a variety of symptoms of menstruation. As a result, this document uses the gender neutral term “worker” or “employee” when discussing these issues. The only exception to this is when direct quotes from other sources are used.

What are the effects on workers of menstruation?

It would be disingenuous to suggest the workers who menstruate all experience the same symptoms, or that the symptoms experienced do not change over a worker’s reproductive life. Some workers experience very, if any symptoms, some have only mild discomfort, while for others it is not unusual for the symptoms to be severe and debilitating. The fact that some workers menstruate is well understood, but there is still stigma and taboo attached to the discussion of menstruation. This stigma and taboo can mean that workers who experience severe symptoms are less likely to speak up and ask for modifications to their work while they deal with these severe symptoms. Introducing a framework for workers and their managers to assist them deal with the symptoms of menstruation helps to remove the stigma as it normalises and acknowledges this reality and allows workers to know it is acceptable to attend to their needs.

Menstruation is a workplace issue

Workers who menstruate at some points in their lives make up over half of the workers in the finance industry⁵. This is a normal biological reality that occurs monthly for half the workforce and can have a detrimental impact on workplace productivity and wellness. Menstruation isn’t a sickness and in most cases is a reasonably predictable event. Workers who menstruate need a framework through which they can request modifications to their regular working arrangements. There needs to be a framework that can be applied consistently and without stigma by all workers. The provision of such a framework has been found to deliver benefits to both workers and employers.

Worker’s experience of menstruation at work

In 2019 the Victorian Women’s Trust published the results of a survey of workers in Australia and overseas that asked about their experiences of menstruation at work. Respondents overwhelmingly said that their workplaces were judgemental and that they did not feel comfortable disclosing to their co-workers or managers that they were suffering menstrual symptoms. Workers did not receive appropriate support or understanding and in many cases were subject to additional performance scrutiny at a time where they were struggling.

5. <https://data.wgea.gov.au/industries/27>

The business case for the introduction of a menstruation policy

A 2019 study of over 30 000 Dutch women was published in the British Medical journal and found that lost productivity amounted to almost nine days a year⁶. The analysis found that productivity losses due to “presenteeism” – where an employee is physically present at work but is not productive – was 7 times higher than the loss due to absenteeism. The study found that the average absenteeism related to menstruation was 1.3 days per worker per year, while the average loss of productivity due to presenteeism was 8.9 days per worker each year. The study concluded that menstruation related symptoms cause a great deal of lost productivity mostly due to presenteeism. The introduction of a framework to support menstruating workers would cut down on these productivity losses as well as support a better workplace culture. The case studies below from Australian companies that have introduced this type of framework demonstrate that they are improving both workplace culture and productivity at a very small financial cost.

What can employers do?

The good news is that the study found that simple changes could be made to workplaces which would increase worker’s productivity while they were suffering menstrual symptoms. These included the flexibility to do less physically demanding tasks, working from home, additional time for personal care as well as being able to take time off work. The same question was asked by the Victorian Women’s Trust in their survey and the responses are outlined in Figure 2.

What would make their period a better experience?



Figure 2: What would make workers menstrual experience better. *Ourselves at Work*. Victorian Women’s Trust 2021

6. Schoep, M et al “Productivity loss due to menstruation related symptoms: a nationwide cross-sectional survey among 32 748 women” <http://bmjopen.bmj.com/> Accessed 5 June 2022

QUOTES⁷



“I’d like to feel free to use a heat pad at work and not have to hide a tampon to go to the bathroom. And, to never again hear a man accuse my bad mood on my period”⁸

“going to the toilet every two hours to change a pad or tampon was obvious to everyone and seen as time wasting”⁹

“Now having the option to work from home on my first day has made an amazing difference. I can make myself comfortable with a hot water bottle on my belly, I can avoid spending an hour and a half on my feet commuting and I can still get my work done. One of my colleagues said recently that she realised

Continued 

that, 'understanding your cycle is a feminist act' and I really think that's true. Also, I think that the conversation has created a more compassionate atmosphere at work. We feel more able to look after ourselves and our wellbeing is respected both for its own sake and also for the overall productivity of our workplace"¹⁰

"on some occasions I'm very unwell and need a day off work, but feel unable to be honest about it because of the stigma attached to being 'weak' or 'a princess' for not being about to cope. This forces me to lie to my employer"¹¹

7. Pickering, K and Benner, J (2019) "About Bloody Time: The Menstrual Revolution we have to have" pp175-176
8. *ibid*
9. *ibid*
10. Victorian Women's Trust (2021d) "Ourselves at Work: Creating positive menstrual culture in your workplace". Available at <https://www.vwt.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Ourselves-At-Work-DIGITAL-V5.pdf> Accessed 5 June 2022
11. Pickering, K and Benner, J (2019) "About Bloody Time: The Menstrual Revolution we have to have" pp175-176

Case studies

Case study - shame stops workers asking for help

“Several months ago, on the first day of my period I was in a meeting at work and the cramps built to the point I nearly passed out. I left the meeting because I couldn’t function, and a female co-worker came to help and eventually I found myself back at my cube, which I share with a guy. At that point I had to talk openly about what was going on and that I might need his help to go to the ER because I was so lightheaded. I suddenly felt very exposed and vulnerable, having shared a level of personal information I try to keep out of the workplace. However, he’s a good friend and his focus was only on getting me help if I needed it and that helped me feel less ashamed.”¹²

Case studies of employers that have introduced a menstrual and menopause framework

Victorian Women’s Trust (VWT)

The VWT introduced their framework in 2017. The framework included 3 practical options for workers who were experiencing discomfort during menstruation.

1. The ability to work from home.
2. Making practical changes to their workplace that allowed them to be more comfortable, for example providing a quiet rest area.
3. The ability to take a day’s paid leave. Employees were able to access up to 12 days paid menstrual leave per calendar year (non cumulative, pro-rate for part time workers) if they were unable to perform work duties due to menstrual symptoms. This leave is separate from sick leave and does not require the provision of a medical certificate.

What was the impact of the introduction of this framework?

After 5 years a total of 37 days of leave had been taken which averaged 7.5 days/year total (for all staff). Menstrual products have been provided in all toilets, desk fans are available for workers, there is a relaxed uniform policy and workers know that they can stop out of meetings as needed.

12. Ibid

Studio MayDay (Gaming industry)

Studio MayDay included a menstrual framework in their studio handbook when they were first founded in 2018. They include paid leave under the frame of “healthcare leave” and report after 6 months that these policies have been used by staff – they simply email in that they need to access a Healthcare day and leave is assigned without question. They also provide menstrual products to staff onsite in their bathrooms.

Future Super

Future Super have a menstrual and menopause framework that provides for up to 6 days of paid leave per year (separate from personal sick leave) for workers who can't comfortably work due to menstrual or menopausal symptoms. Their framework includes options for:

1. Working from home
2. Making practical changes to their workplace that allowed them to be more comfortable, for example providing a quiet rest area.
3. The ability to take a day's paid leave. Employees were able to access up to 6 days paid menstrual leave per calendar year (non cumulative, pro-rate for part time workers) if they were unable to perform work duties due to menstrual symptoms. This leave is separate from sick leave and does not require the provision of a medical certificate.

Will there be a backlash? This section provides some responses to commonly asked questions about the introduction of a menstrual and menopause framework.

Is it unfair?

Discussion of menstruation is not something that is common in Australian workplaces and the Victorian Women's Trust (VWT) has written about the “menstrual taboo” that we often see in Australian culture, and that the taboo is often reinforced to ensure that people think that the costs of implementing a menstrual framework outweigh the benefits. The VWT suggests that:

“For those who like to maintain hierarchical relationships in the patriarchal mould, the menstrual taboo provides a type of ‘proof’ that women are weaker and less capable. Anyone who sees periods as a particularly unpleasant necessity are benefited, in that the taboo keeps outward signs of menstruation hidden to a large extent. In truth, it's difficult to view them as genuinely beneficial to anyone other than a very small group of people who may profit from the continuation of menstrual shame and stigma.

Arguments for better medical research, social justice, targeted education and specialist healthcare for menstruation and menopause, are much harder to make in the atmosphere of the taboo, which effectively silences those who seek it and diminishes awareness. This saves money in the short-term¹³.

The taboo means that menstrual leave can seem controversial if those who don't menstruate or those who don't suffer from the symptoms of menstruation feel as though it's unnecessary. It is hardly fair that workers who do suffer from menstruation symptoms should need to hide their symptoms or make excuses for a perfectly natural phenomenon. Employers are already making provisions for the physical needs of workers by providing rest breaks, meal breaks and toilet breaks as well as ensuring the workplaces meeting health and safety standards in terms of their physical comfort. Adding a menstrual and menopausal framework is long overdue and should be considered an equity issue. Workplaces should be redesigned to accommodate workers who menstruate rather than forcing these workers to conform to workplaces that have not evolved to meet their needs.

Won't people take advantage of it?

Do people take advantage of general sick leave allowances or other flexible working arrangements? This framework is no different from any other framework or policy that is introduced. Workers taking advantage of any leave policy is indicative of different issues at the workplace and this is no different.

Can't people just take sick leave?

Menstruation (and menopause) is not an illness. These are regular biological processes that impact a large proportion of workers. When workers menstruate, their bodies are doing what they were designed to do. It is true that there are common conditions that impact up to 30% of workers who menstruate (fibroids, endometriosis, polycystic ovarian syndrome), nearly all workers who menstruate will experience some discomfort some of the time. Having a menstrual and menopause framework normalises this reality and allows workers to normalise dealing with their needs more easily.

Moreover, for workers who experience severe cramping it is unreasonable to expect that they would need to see a doctor to get a medical certificate as is the expectation for some organisations when workers access sick leave.

I'm concerned that introducing a framework might cause problems, is there an easy way to do this?

Organisations may validly be concerned about the response an introduction to this framework might have on their workforce, particularly if it is a workplace that has a strong menstrual and menopause taboo. There are steps that can be taken to ease your workforce into the introduction of the framework that will break down the taboo.

13. Victorian Women's Trust (2021d) "Ourselves at Work: Creating positive menstrual culture in your workplace". Available at <https://www.vwt.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Ourselves-At-Work-DIGITAL-V5.pdf> Accessed 5 June 2022

1. Employers could start by running a staff survey for all workers that will give workers a **private, anonymous** way to better understand the menstrual taboo and for those who don't menstruate an understanding of the type of symptoms commonly experienced. This survey works best when it is sent to all workers regardless of gender identity.

The questions can be educational, for example a question that asks what symptoms the respondent is aware might be experienced by workers who menstruate, followed by one asking them to tick symptoms they themselves have experienced, and one asking them to tick any symptoms they know their colleagues might have experienced. Similarly they can be asked to tick boxes that outline the impact that these symptoms might have on their/ their colleagues work.

These type of surveys serve to break down the taboo by normalising discussion of symptoms and impacts. To further break the taboo managers can be asked to remind their workers to complete the survey, thereby normalising discussion in team meetings.

2. Survey results should be shared by senior managers and spoken about in team meetings and in forums such as internal newsletters.
3. Internal intranets can have a section on menopause and menstruation added that have a FAQ section for workers who might want to better understand what they/their colleagues can expect from the employer as support.
4. Trial the policy in a section of the organisation and survey staff before, during and after the trial period. Talk to staff about the trial and invite comment.
5. Train people leaders and human resources teams so that they understand more about the symptoms workers are likely to experience and the options available to them to support the workforce when they are experiencing symptoms.

MENSTRUAL AND MENOPAUSE FRAMEWORK¹⁴

Rationale

This framework has been introduced to guide workers and their managers who are supporting workers who are experiencing the symptoms of menstruation and/or menopause. We have developed this framework to recognise that the experience of menstruation and/or menopause is different for each worker and want to ensure that we provide adequate support for workers when they are experiencing symptoms.

The framework supports workers to identify the best way to manage their symptoms without the need to hide their symptoms, or have any penalty associated with a request for support. Menstruation and menopause are regular biological functions, not illnesses, and this framework seeks to normalise this experience and remove the menstruation and menopause stigma and taboo.

Framework

The framework is designed to allow workers to identify which of the variety of options for self-care is best utilised while experiencing the symptoms of menopause and menstruation. The framework is designed to be worker led and flexible with the impacted worker identifying which of the options is best suited to their needs on each occasion they struggle with menopause and/or menstrual symptoms.

1. Working from home
2. Staying at work but making small changes to the workplace environment to allow workers to manage their symptoms. These changes might include:
 - a. Having somewhere quiet to rest for short periods if symptoms become severe
 - b. More regular breaks
 - c. Having the ability to be excused from meeting when symptoms would prevent participation to an acceptable level
 - d. Being assigned a work station (where hot desking is in place) closer to bathroom facilities.
 - e. The ability to access heat packs or desk fans as required without question.

14. Victorian Women's Trust

3. Taking a day of paid leave. In the case of paid leave, workers are entitled to a maximum of 12 paid days (non-cumulative) each calendar year in the event of they are unable to perform their role due to the symptoms of menopause or menstruation. This entitlement is in addition to sick leave and a medical certificate is not required.

