

Academic Paper

The experience of workplace coaching for menopausal women: A descriptive phenomenological study

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Abstract

The number of women in the UK workforce over the age of 50 has grown significantly in the last 30 years. As a consequence, many women are working during their menopausal years, and for some this can have a disruptive impact on their working lives. This study, the first of its kind, interviewed seven menopausal women who had received workplace coaching. Adopting a descriptive phenomenological methodology, it explored the commonalities of their experiences. Whilst the findings suggested that coaching provided an opportunity to address issues including confidence, identity and transitions, it also suggested that the menopause frequently is not explicitly discussed during coaching. This research investigates why this might be and what coaching could offer this important group of workers facing potential health changes.

Keywords

menopause, workplace coaching, descriptive phenomenology, identity, disclosure

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Introduction

The menopause is, for most women, a natural process of aging. Whilst the median age to experience the menopause is 51, the transition up until this time, known as the perimenopause, may last 10 years or more, and women may experience a wide range of symptoms, both physical and psychological including hot flushes, loss of confidence, anxiety, and depression. These symptoms vary in type and severity but the menopause is common to all women. For some, this experience can be extremely debilitating and impacts significantly on their experience at work (Brewis, Davies & Matheson, 2017).

The number of women working during their menopausal years has risen significantly in the last 30 years. The biggest increases in employment categories during this period have been for women aged 60-64 (from 18%-41%) and for women aged 55-59 (49%-69%) (Brewis et al., 2017). Social

and financial reasons account for these changes as “women are living longer, working more, retiring later” (Kopenhagen and Guidozi, 2015, p. 372).

The purpose of the study was to explore the experience of workplace coaching for menopausal women. As a menopausal woman myself, and one who has experienced the difficulties of this transition in the workplace, I was shocked at my own lack of knowledge of what was happening to me, the difficulties in getting a diagnosis, and how it impacted on my own career decisions. I was interested to find out how other women experienced menopause at work, and if coaching helped them. As a coaching advocate, I was interested to find out if workplace coaching was providing a productive intervention and to explore the themes arising from their experiences.

There are currently no UK studies exploring how menopausal women experience coaching at work. Consequently I explored related literature. The empirical evidence suggests women experiencing moderate to severe symptoms are negatively impacted at work (Geukes, Van Aalst, Robroek, Laven & Oosterhof, 2016; Griffiths, Maclennan & Hassard, 2013) and women want to reduce their hours or leave the workforce altogether (Hardy, Thorne, Griffiths & Hunter, 2018; Evandrou, Falkingham, Qin & Vlachantoni 2021). The menopause is considered a taboo (Atkinson, Carmichael and Duberley, 2020), leading to non-disclosure (Jack, Pitts, Riach, Bariola, Schapper & Sarrel, 2014).

The coaching literature relating to coaching women in the workplace suggests that it impacts retention (Moffett 2018b), and provides a setting for increases in confidence, focus and reflection (Gray, De Haan & Bonneywell 2019a). I will discuss this in more detail in the next section.

As the menopause is now attracting the attention of Government and organizations (Brewis et al., 2017; UK Parliament Women & Equalities Committee, 2021) it is important to find ways of supporting women in the workplace and I hope this research offers some insight into how coaching might have an important role to play.

Literature Review

Women are reluctant to share their menopausal symptoms in the workplace for fear of being marginalized and seen as less competent (Jack et al, 2014; Atkinson et al., 2020). There is concern that disclosure may be considered career limiting (Atkinson, Ford, Harding & Jones, 2015) and that employers may be reluctant to be supportive if symptoms are disclosed in the workplace (Butler, 2020). Feminist studies exploring the issues of power, gender and ageism in relation to the menopause, suggest that menopausal senior leaders feel marginalized because their feminine bodies do not conform with the organizational norm, “they hold power but feel marginalized because their feminine bodies are out of place in organizations” (Mavin and Grandey 2016, p.19). Research into the incongruence of bodily experiences and the work norm support this sense of marginalization which often intersects at critical times in women’s careers (Grandey, Gabriel & King, 2020).

For women experiencing moderate to severe menopausal symptoms there is a negative impact on their working lives (Hickey, Riach, Jack & Kachouie, 2017; Griffiths & Hunter, 2014) and this can impact on their ability to do their job properly (Geukes et al., 2016). Career trajectories can be influenced negatively as a consequence of symptoms of anxiety and depression (Molefi-Youri, 2019). Currently there is limited research on the numbers who have left the workforce as a consequence of the menopause but a Chartered Institute of Personnel Development (CIPD) paper suggests approximately 900,000 (Keeble-Ramsay & Ridealgh, 2018).

Whilst this research paints a negative picture, the research also points to a desire by women to seek support in the workplace. Implementation of supportive policies, increased awareness of the

topic and the need for work cultures to facilitate open discussions are wanted (Hardy, Griffiths & Hunter 2017; Hardy, Griffiths, Thorne & Hunter, 2019). Butler's (2020) research suggests a desire for a safe space to talk, and a more holistic approach to employee health and well-being (Jack et al 2014). A single study of the impact of workplace menopause cafes illustrates the importance of collective support and information gathering (Weiss, 2020).

Whilst workplace coaching as an intervention to support menopausal women has not been studied in the UK, an evaluative study of a Work Life Programme at the University of Amsterdam involving a combination of exercise, consultations with a menopause specialist and work life coaching, did find improvements in mental empowerment and the capability to make positive changes. (Verburgh, Verdonk, Appelman, Brood-van-Zanten, Nieuwenhuijzen, 2020).

I investigated the literature relating to workplace coaching focussing on women, mid-life and specific coaching approaches that may have congruence with the experiences of menopausal women. Maternity coaching provides evidence that working with women during important transitions of their lives can address retention issues by providing support and awareness of the transitional process (Bussell, 2008; Moffett, 2018; Filsinger, 2012). Developmental coaching seeks to create awareness in relation to lifespan and social and generational issues (Palmer & Panchal, 2011). A recognition of menopause as a significant life transition can help support this cohort, as Zeus and Skiffington (2000) suggest.

Midlife coaching can address work life balance that may impact menopausal women who are re-evaluating their careers and though limited, the research found coaching provided tools for developing resilience and positivity, offering both practical and psychological solutions (Brown & Yates, 2018; Wright, 2005). The limited research on coaching women in the workplace focusses primarily on leadership and executive coaching. Gray, De Haan & Bonneywell's (2019) study found female leadership coaching programmes promoted confidence, reflection and focus, whilst a facilitated peer coaching programme for women of colour, found improvements in mind set, confidence and interpersonal skills (Hopkins, Meyer, Afkinich, Bialobrzski, Perry & Brown, 2021). The importance of coaching women in both individual and group settings may also enhance social capital by providing a sense of shared experience and connectedness (Bonneywell & Gannon, 2021).

Non-disclosure of personal issues during coaching is relevant in the context of the menopause. Evidence suggests that if a client anticipates a positive level of support when disclosing, they are more likely to disclose (Ghama & Spence, 2020) and coaching has been found to provide a setting to share personal information (Gyllensten & Palmer, 2007). Maxwell (2009) describes these boundaries between private and personal space as being "co-created" and is a "product of both the coach and the client's willingness to explore the intersection of the personal and professional" (Maxwell, 2009, p.91). Grant (2017) suggests that workplace coaching needs to respond to the contemporary demands of employees and organizations by focussing not just on performance but on well-being, in order to create a culture of quality conversations. The blurring of personal and work boundaries may provide the setting for menopausal women to feel more comfortable disclosing their experiences (Grandey et al., 2020).

The review of the literature suggests that the impact of the menopause in the workplace, for some women can be significant. Workplace coaching potentially provides a valuable contribution to the support and development of women by providing a setting to allow them to disclose symptoms, build confidence, understand the transition they are experiencing and ultimately allow them to make informed decisions about their work and career.

Methodology

I chose a qualitative methodology for this study as I was looking for depth and specification of the experiences of the menopausal women rather than breadth and generalization (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012). The lack of previous research in this area prompted me to explore the individual experiences of seven participants allowing their “silenced voices” (Cresswell, 2013) to be heard. Adopting a critical realist paradigm allowed me to both understand the typical structure of the menopause and also to record the role that coaching played for each individual. Critical realism may be viewed as “the ontologically least restrictive perspective” (Bhaksar & Danermark, 2006, p. 294), positioning itself on a continuum between positivism and constructionism (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). This philosophy is congruent with my research question by recognizing menopause as one reality but also providing the opportunity to explore the subjectivity of the individual experiences in their own contexts.

The choice of a phenomenological methodology offers the opportunity to explore individual experiences with the intention of finding rich descriptions from my participants. I considered two phenomenological approaches, interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) and descriptive phenomenology. Both approaches use semi-structured interviews to collect individual narratives. The differences arise from data analysis. IPA uses hermeneutic intuitionist methods of data analysis and foreground the researcher’s subjectivity. I felt however for this project I wanted to firstly uncover commonalities of experience by extrapolating the essence of the phenomena. This uses reductionist analysis that transcends the context (Jackson & Cox, 2020) in order to reach a normative description of the experience. Secondly, as I was close to this topic personally, I wanted to distance myself from interpretation. In order to do this I needed to set aside my own subjectivity and biases by bracketing, in order to give a true voice to the participants. (Giorgi 2014). Whilst bracketing is fiercely debated between descriptive and IPA researchers (Zahavi , 2019; Giorgi 2014; Finlay ,2009) I conducted a bracketing exercise prior to undertaking the research and recorded my own thoughts and emotions during the research to ensure awareness of my own subjectivity on the topic.

Participant Selection and data collection

I recruited seven participants using purposive sampling of my own business and personal networks. A combination of opportunistic and snowballing sampling followed (Symon & Cassell, 2012; Bryman, 2016). Opportunistic sampling is a combination of luck and judgement, and I was fortunate early in the recruitment process to have the opportunity and ultimately recruit a key influencer in the menopause workplace field. Snowballing sampling followed as she suggested likely participants who were invited to join the study. The criteria for selection were:

- Experiencing the menopause
- Currently in work
- Received workplace coaching during this time, either in the workplace or externally.

Table 1: illustrates the workplace setting and the primary coaching objective.

Participant pseudonym	Sarah	Sue	Charlotte	Emma	Olivia	Penny	Helen
Type of Coaching	Internal pool	Internal pool	Internal	Executive external	Internal pool	External and internal	Internal
Primary objective for coaching	Career options post retirement	Career progression	Transition to new role and promotion	Various, confidence, career, personal development	Career choices and decisions	Transitioning to new role	Application for new roles

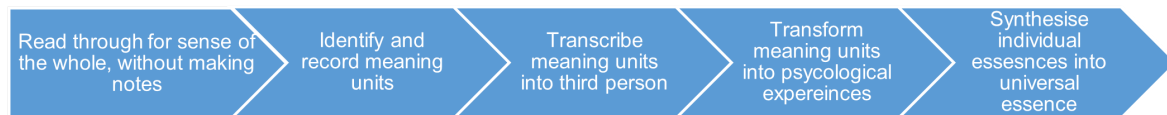
I conducted a pilot interview to ensure I was able to articulate the purpose and nature of the study in a confident and fluent manner, to test questions and timings and trial the process of recording and transcribing from Zoom. Given the personal nature of the topic it was important to ensure I

created a setting without distractions for the participants to share their stories with me. I did reduce the number of questions following the pilot to ensure they were able to talk with minimal questioning from me.

Data Analysis

I followed Giorgi's descriptive phenomenological methodology approach (Giorgi, 2009). This is a prescriptive five stage process with the aim of describing the "psychological structure of the experience" (Giorgi 2009, p. 128). This culminates in the creation of one narrative encapsulating the general essence of all of the participants. The prescriptive nature of this methodology is to provide a transparent and scientific mode of analysis which allows others to understand and potentially replicate in future research.

Figure 1: Illustrates these stages



I initially read through and listened to the transcripts without making any notes, just immersing myself in an attempt to gain a sense of the participant's experiences. Stage two involved identifying meaning units. This involved a second read through, this time highlighting units of meaning relevant to my research question. There is no interrogation of meaning and each unit is treated equally (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). Stage three involved transcribing the meaning units into the third person to ensure each unit is viewed in a dispassionate way to avoid interpretation. The fourth stage involved dissecting the meaning units to create psychological dimensions of the experiences described, to uncover commonalities of experience. Each stage of the process requires that the researcher "neither adds to nor subtracts from the invariant intentional object arrived at but describes it precisely as it presents itself" (Giorgi, 2009, p. 137).

The final stage was to create individual essences for each participant by condensing the psychological experiences for each participant into one narrative paragraph before these individual essences were further reduced to create a final collective essence. This is expressed as the essence of the experience of workplace coaching for menopausal women. Giorgi describes this reflective account as "robust and enduring" (Giorgi 2009, p.190).

Ethics and confidentiality

I was aware of the issue of the disclosure and the potentially sensitive nature of the interviews. I was prepared for the provision of external resources and referrals if required (Oliver, 2010) and adhered to the requirement of respect, purpose, integrity, justice and beneficence at all times during the study (Oades, Siokou & Slemp, 2019). All of the interviewees provided powerful, emotional and unique accounts of their experiences and I hope my research methodology provided a suitable framework to allow their voices and experiences to be heard.

Findings

I begin with an excerpt from the universal essence and will then discuss the findings from a number of the meaning units identified. None of the participants had gone to coaching to explicitly discuss the menopause. There was a reluctance for some to discuss the menopause during coaching and for others, they hadn't recognized their symptoms and therefore hadn't raised it during coaching. However, for some, coaching became a catalyst for making connections between the symptoms they were experiencing and a recognition that they were experiencing the menopause. For these participants, the impact on their lives and outlook was significant as they were able to explore personal and organizational strategies to help them.

All of the participants considered coaching as an extremely valuable and essential intervention in the workplace. They described how coaching provided them with a safe space to explore issues that appeared particularly prominent during the menopause, including lack of confidence, loss of workplace identity and the fear of disclosure in the workplace. Coaching offered them an opportunity to share experiences they had been reluctant to share with their colleagues for fear of being judged as less capable.

The value of coaching to support menopause was discussed by all of the participants as being a very valuable tool to promote well-being, even though they hadn't all personally been aware of their symptoms during their own coaching sessions. All of the participants described their desire to help other women in a similar position and to ensure that organizations were aware of the issues that menopausal women were experiencing. Coaching created awareness of their situation and a sense of purpose and action to move forward and find positive outcomes.

Identity and disclosure

Whilst all of the participants felt workplace coaching had been a positive experience, a safe space to discuss issues that impacted them specifically during mid-life such as career options and loss of confidence, a number had been reluctant to disclose that they were menopausal during their coaching. The topic of menopause as a taboo was considered a reason for non-disclosure, both during coaching and more widely in the workplace. Emma reflected the broadly felt narrative within the group, that:

'we are still internally conditioned to downplay, to put it to one side and say that's private, keep it in a little box over there.'

My findings suggested that the menopause made them question their own professional identity, and the negative image in the workplace caused a reluctance to disclose to anyone in the workplace, including for some, workplace coaches. Sue described how she was:

'seen as a lesser being, a weakened female. Many many women will refuse to talk opening about it, for fear of being judged, fear of losing their jobs.'

Staying in work and career transitions

For many of the participants, the menopause coincided with changes in their careers and jobs. Penny and Charlotte had recently taken on more senior roles, while Olivia she had decided to take on a more junior role in a different organization. Other participants were considering their long-term career paths. They described how coaching offered the opportunity to explore these transitions, including for some the menopause transition. Words such as "journey", "what you are now, what you have to offer", "feeling stuck" were expressions shared with me. Coaching provided a catalyst for staying in work and reflecting on career transitions and decisions particularly if the coaching relationship was such that the coachee felt able to discuss personal issues and the menopause.

Helen describes how the coach “walked along with me as I made this menopause journey” and without this support she would definitely have left her job. Penny describes how coaching offered the opportunity to raise her awareness of the symptoms of the menopause and to understand that she had not suddenly become less effective as a manager. For Olivia, sharing her story with her coach enabled her to reflect on her values and reframe how she felt about herself, “now I don’t frame myself as an anxious person anymore”. However, whether the participants had disclosed or not, they did find coaching offered an opportunity to change the narrative about their own identity.

Building confidence

The participants in this study were all senior women in their fields and losing confidence during the menopause came as a surprise to many of them. Most of the participants described how unexpected and out of character it was, and as a consequence led to feelings of inadequacy and anxiety about their ability to do their job, irrespective of their seniority. Charlotte and Penny were both concerned about whether they would be able to carry out their new roles effectively, whilst Sarah and Helen were considering leaving the workplace altogether. Charlotte reflected the views of a number of participants when she said that despite a wealth of experience and expertise, she was losing confidence and beginning to question her abilities. Coaching provided the opportunity to explore their loss of confidence and to develop coping strategies by being informed and prepared. Loss of confidence, whilst not unique to menopausal women, is an identified psychological symptom experienced by many women during their menopausal years. Sue’s comments reflect those of the participants,

‘coaching can be about building confidence and self-esteem, getting the most out of the employee. There is a connection between coaching and the menopause because coaching provides the opportunity to build confidence.’

Coaching for action

All of the participants in the study were coaching advocates. They had recognized through their own experiences, that coaching was an effective way to support this group of women. The impact that coaching had had was a desire to help others and to raise awareness within their workplaces. Some were actively involved in menopause support groups, others developing their own coaching skills. Their coaching experiences had allowed them to create awareness of their situation, recognize the issues that the menopause had for them as individuals, and also within the context of their organizations. For Olivia, coaching had provided her with an opportunity to recognize the link between her symptoms and the menopause and she felt that women needed effective communication and information:

‘about the potential impact of the menopause in the workplace, for coaching to be integrated, to create awareness.’

Emma makes an interesting point, that as someone who sees the benefit of coaching, she hadn’t discussed it herself during coaching, nor did she feel she was necessarily “leading a culture of openness about the menopause, not at the moment I’m not, and maybe I could change that.”

The women in this study found that the experience of coaching had provided a setting for support, a safe space to explore their careers, and to build confidence. Not all had discussed personal issues during coaching, but for those that had, coaching had the power to be transformative, helping them understand what was happening to them and consequently feeling able to make decisions about their careers and working lives. The recognition that coaching could have this influence on themselves and others led them to seek ways of helping other menopausal women, some as coaches, some considering cultural changes.

Discussion

The study found that the participants all found workplace coaching to be a setting where they were able to explore issues relating to confidence, careers and identity enabling them to move forward in their working lives. However, none of the participants had sought workplace coaching with the intention of discussing the menopause despite the fact that the menopause was impacting them significantly in their working lives. For those that did raise it during coaching, the impact was valuable, impacting their decisions about their careers and their identity.

Talking about personal issues in a workplace coaching setting isn't a prerequisite, however these findings suggest it can have value. However, is workplace coaching perceived as a safe space to share these personal experiences? Sue describes workplace coaching as a setting to discuss career development not well-being, "it was quite generic in the sense that it was about career development, quite one dimensional". Grant (2017) suggests that workplace coaching needs to widen its remit to encompass well-being. The multifaceted nature of coaching now, may require the development of different typologies to reflect these differences and this may be relevant to the workplace (Myers & Bachkirova, 2018). For coaches, understanding the borderlands between work and personal issues (Clark, 2000) and an ability to co-create these boundaries with their clients (Maxwell, 2009) offers the opportunity to open up these conversations as a "negotiated product of both the coach and the client's willingness to explore the intersection of the personal and professional" (Maxwell 2009, p 91). The findings indicated that when this happened, it had an impact on both the well-being and the career decisions made by the participants.

The literature suggests that coaching outcomes are more likely to be successful if there is a strong coaching relationship (De Haan 2019; Bozer and Jones, 2018) and if the coaching relationship allows the coachee to share their vulnerabilities, this supports lasting change (Rogers, 2012). The empirical evidence suggests that women would like to be supported in the workplace, for increased awareness of the topic of the menopause, supportive policies and creating a work culture that facilitates open discussion without fear of negative responses (Hardy, Griffiths & Hunter, 2017; Hardy, 2020; Butler, 2020). This research offers the opportunity for coaches to facilitate some of these changes.

The literature suggests that the menopause is a taboo topic in the workplace and can result in non-disclosure (Atkinson et al., 2020). This is reflected in my findings as the participants considered the menopause to be career limiting and not conforming to organizational norms (Grandey et al., 2020; Atkinson et al., 2015). The empirical evidence suggests gendered ageism, the intersectionality of age and gender to create disadvantage, as a reason for this non-disclosure. However, the experience of coaching for the participants exposed a dichotomy. Coaching offered them a safe space to explore issues relating to identity, disclosure, confidence and careers but non-disclosure was still present. The impact of this has led to women leaving their roles, downgrading their expectations or requesting part-time positions.

Maternity coaching research, although limited, suggests that coaching during a transitional phase of a woman's life can have a positive impact on retention levels. It also offers the opportunity to raise awareness of the topic of pregnancy and maternity in the workplace to help normalize it as a workplace topic (Moffett, 2018b; Bussell, 2008). This could suggest that coaching during the menopause transition has the opportunity to offer similar outcomes, and these outcomes will be beneficial both to the women experiencing the menopause, and to the organizations too.

Confidence was a common topic in this research. The participants were often surprised by their loss of confidence and levels of anxiety that appeared during their menopause. They found coaching helped them reflect and devise strategies. As this is a novel piece of research, I looked to the wider literature to see if I could extrapolate the potential benefit that coaching may have on a group of senior women that were reflected in my study. Studies of senior leaders (Gray et al.,

2019a) and facilitated peer coaching for female HR executives (Hopkins et al, 2021) found coaching to be a positive intervention for promoting focus, confidence and reflection. The evaluative study of Verbergh and colleagues (2020) of a work life programme provided evidence of self-efficacy and positivity for a group of low paid workers. The value that the coaching experience had on the group for promoting a sense of action was a very optimistic finding of this research. Their coaching created an awareness of their own situation enabling them to find their own strategies to move forward. It also engendered in them a desire to support other women and to raise awareness in the workplace. Ruderman and Ohlott (2005) support this finding, suggesting that women have a desire to help other women following a stressful event. They offer suggestions to coaches to have awareness of specific gender challenges that women might face and recognize the importance that the support of others can be engendered as a consequence of coaching. Studies of individual and group coaching for female leadership programmes (Bonneywell & Gannon, 2021) suggest that coaching can be a social process and an enabler of social change and provides a compelling argument for the impact that workplace coaching may have for menopausal women to ensure that they are able to stay and flourish in the workplace.

Conclusion

This study has investigated how women experience workplace coaching during their menopause. As there is little current research on the topic my intention has been to explore the intersection of coaching and the menopause, and to find out what value coaching has to this important cohort. My findings suggest that coaching provided them with a valuable setting to enable them to discuss issues such as career development, confidence and identity. Conversely however, there remained a reluctance, which is borne out by the research, to seek coaching specifically to explore the impact that the menopause was having on their working lives. However, the recognition of the power of coaching as an intervention for this group of women cannot be understated.

The importance of the menopause in the workplace is now one of national, international and organizational interest. (Parliament, U., 2022; Rees et.al. 2021). The coaching community has the opportunity to respond to these events, consider their own boundaries and expertise in response and explore ways they may wish to be part of this burgeoning conversation. Further research into how coaching can provide a supportive environment for this important group of women, has the opportunity to enhance diversity and inclusivity in the workplace.

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