PAUSE FOR THOUGHT

Kathleen Baird-Murray has embraced typically middle-aged activities such as yoga, meditation and getting a dog. But one thing remained to be conquered: the menopause. Until now...

Did I say that too loudly? I’m sitting in the very quiet first-floor drawing room of a private members’ club in central London and Meg Mathews has just mentioned KY jelly. Quite loudly. It’s part of a wider conversation that is peppered with the words vagina, orgasm and masturbation, but if she was overheard, no one seems fazed. Perhaps they’re all talking about these things, too.

The generation who gave birth to The Vagina Monologues are coming of menopausal age and they are bringing a new sense of openness to the subject. But the menopause is not a subject for the faint-hearted. We still struggle to understand our sex hormones and how they affect us. It’s testimony to how far I’ve come in the space of a couple of weeks (so deeply had I buried my head in the sand that the migraines I was experiencing were “just migraines”, the off-the-Richter scale anxiety was “just work stress” and the brain fog was “just being a little tired”) that I no longer feel coy when Mathews mentions these topics. Perhaps because it’s better than the horror stories joyfully told to me by a receptionist at a hormone and injectables clinic. Women whose bowels slip out of their vaginas post-menopause. Women who experience so much dryness between their legs that they find it painful to walk. Women who can’t so much as cough without wetting themselves. Or the regular conversations I have with friends about moments of madness, grief and insomnia. No wonder it’s a daunting prospect.

“I didn’t set out to tell the whole world about my menopause,” says Mathews, who is engaging, lovable and the perfect champion for a topic that demands frankness and a good sense of humour. “But now more than a million people have visited
WHAT IF IT DIDN'T HAVE TO BE THIS WAY? WHAT IF I DIDN'T PICK AN ARGUMENT BASED ON NOTHING WITH MY LOVED ONES?

taking hormones. “I know that what brings women to a doctor is the symptoms, but our hormones are silently supporting our physical health. Oestrogen is good for your bones, brains and heart; it’s a natural cardiovascular protector, dilating your blood vessels and keeping your blood pressure lower.” In other words, when we decide to take HRT we’re not just hopefully seeing our sanity return, we’re supporting our physical health.

My blood tests reveal so much oestrogen that I could be giving it away, but very little progesterone and barely any testosterone. “Testosterone is hard to get on the NHS but it’s not impossible,” says Dr Galy, who writes me a prescription. Will it turn my moustache into a beard, will I smash my fist through a brick wall, will I get a six-pack? He assures me he will monitor how much I’m absorbing with regular blood tests. And as Dr Galy, and Mathews, point out, the good news is that once this in-between phase is over, you can get all of this on the NHS. Mathews tells me how: download the NICE guide to menopausal symptoms from her website. Tick the ones that affect you. Ask your GP for a referral to one of the 27 menopause clinics in the UK and get a blood test. They’ll give you a bioidentical HRT prescription – it won’t be bespoke, or compounded, but most of us don’t actually need that.

It strikes me how much of finding out about the menopause – despite the wealth of information out there – is still about talking to other women. I take comfort in this and call my friend Christa D’Souza, whose book The Hot Topic is like the guide you wish your girlfriend had written (only in this case, mine has). Besides the sisterhood thing, I ask her, is there anything positive about this subject at all? She surprises me by saying so many beautiful things that some of my menopausal fears slip away. “Before I got my period,” she says, “I had delight in the world; it was very pure, something quite fabulous. But when you’re at that baby-producing age, everything becomes so much more tricky and complicated. I’m taking prescribed hormones now and I am in balance.” D’Souza talks about feeling like a grown-up for the first time, not having to look to others to form an opinion, and also being forced to look after herself physically. “In the peri-menopause stage I started drinking more – it’s as if your body knows this is the last-chance saloon. You put on a lot of glittery eyeshadow. And I realised I had to take myself in hand. I knew I’d earned the right to sit around in tracky bottoms and eat biscuits out of a packet, and I had enough friends – why did I need to go out? And I realised I had to take the path of most resistance.”

This, then, is a third stage, where you can really be you without wondering whether you’re still attractive; to not feel like that crazy person at certain times of the month. I’m not there yet in terms of fully embracing it, but I’m getting closer to seeing a path of sorts, well-trodden by fearless women like D’Souza, like Mathews, and like all those 13 million other women going through it, I understand that from now on, every second counts. And I don’t intend to waste any of it.

Read more from Kathleen at Vogue.co.uk/topic/te-50-diaries