

# A new documentary, *The M Factor*, breaks the silence on menopause with more hope and less shame

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Tamsen Fadal, co-producer of *The M Factor*.

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Menopause is finally finding the spotlight. Once considered taboo, women are speaking up and demanding better care than their mothers and

grandmothers. They're tired of being shrugged off by doctors when it comes to symptoms such as brain fog and low libido; search up "menopause" on any social-media platform and you'll find countless content devoted to the cause ("Not to brag, but I haven't had a mood swing in, like, seven minutes," reads one more light-hearted account).

More than 10 million women in Canada alone are affected by menopause (when menstrual periods stop for good) and perimenopause (the transition to menopause), with three out of four women experiencing symptoms that interfere with their daily lives, according to the Menopause Foundation of Canada. Yet little medical research is devoted to menopause, while even less education is offered to health care professionals.

However, change is under way, including the new centre of Mature Women's Health launched by the Sinai Health Foundation in Toronto, and the BC Women's Health Foundation has kickstarted a Mature Women's Health Campaign to raise funds for research-backed clinical care for midlife and mature women. Plus, the first-ever National Menopause Show dedicated to women's midlife health takes place Oct. 26 in Toronto.

And just in time for World Menopause Day, a new documentary, The M Factor: Shredding the Silence on Menopause, premieres on PBS Oct. 17. It features renowned doctors and board-certified experts breaking down the stigma around menopause, along with offering practical solutions. The intro alone is validating, with a sequence of women candidly describing their experiences: "It's unpredictable," "It's frightening," "I started to feel crazy". The Globe and Mail spoke with co-producer Tamsen Fadal – an award-winning journalist and women's health advocate – on dispelling the myths of menopause.



## **Why is this topic so close to your heart?**

Menopause took me by surprise and it has become a pivotal point for me. I realized I spent my whole life telling stories and here was this big, untold story affecting a billion women globally that none of us really talked about or, if we did, it was whispered about or considered taboo. Once I started doing my research, I couldn't stop.

## **Why did you begin your research?**

I had an incident in the [PIX11 New York] newsroom in November of 2019. About halfway through the live newscast, we were in a commercial break just chatting in the studio. And I'll never forget it. I got this intense hot flash where I broke out in sweat everywhere and my heart started racing. I thought, I'm going fall off this chair and so I said out loud, If I fall over, someone catch me. Our sports guy, Joe Mauceri, walked over and said, Are you being serious? He brought me out of the studio and confessed to me later that he thought I was having some kind of heart issue. That's really when the whole thing started to take root. I didn't know I was in menopause, and I certainly had never heard the word perimenopause.

**You experienced some odd symptoms in your 40s, which doctors shrugged off.**

I had read that there are 34 symptoms of menopause. Then I met a nutritionist out of Canada, Andrea Donsky, who had published new research. She says there are more than 100 symptoms including some weird ones, like burning tongue and itchy ears. Hot flashes and night sweats are two that we talk about a lot. There's lack of interest in sex, painful sex, an increase in UTIs, joint pain, belly fat... There's also mood swings – your hormones are all over the place. I went to my OB/GYN, who I'd been with for 20 years, and wound up with a message on the doctor's office portal that said, 'In menopause. Any questions?' I was 49 at the time and thought, How can I be in menopause? I'm too young. I thought that my symptoms were a result of stress from work and going through a divorce. I went down a rabbit hole of trying to discover how to get back to feeling like myself again. I hit about five different doctors before I found somebody I felt comfortable with.

**As executive producer on The M Factor, what was the most surprising thing you learned?**

I learned how necessary information [on menopause] is and how much women want it. We put the trailer out a few weeks ago, and I have never seen a reaction like this. We have women contacting us from Hong Kong, Australia, New Zealand and Singapore, asking to see the film. We are so thirsty for information about menopause. But in doing the film, I learned more about how much of a role estrogen plays in brain health. I also didn't realize how far behind we are when it comes to research – that was a big eye-opener for me.

**I vacillated between feeling validated and enraged while watching the documentary. On the one hand, I felt seen. On the other hand, I was astounded by how little resources are devoted to better**

## **understanding menopause.**

It's mind-boggling. I was so angry at the fact that I'm humming along in the world thinking everything's okay. And then this [stage] hits, and all these women who we've judged over the years, like, Why are you so cranky? Or why are you tired all the time? We didn't know what they were going through. For me, the hardest part is thinking back to my mother. I lost her to breast cancer when she was young, so [menopause] wasn't a topic we discussed. And I look back now realizing that she had gone through a medical menopause of sorts and had no one to talk to about it – she suffered in silence. I never had a chance to tell her, I understand what you're going through.

**In The M Factor, neuroscientist Dr. Lisa Mosconi says, 'Women have been taught to fear their hormones and doubt their brains.' How can we change things so that women no longer feel like they're losing their minds?**

Hormones do a number on us, there's no question about that. There are physical effects. But I think that if you're aware of this information, it makes all the difference. That's the most important part of this conversation: We want women to have that baseline. If they start feeling like they're not themselves, they're tossing and turning at night, gaining weight in weird places... I want somebody to be able to say, Oh, this might be that perimenopause thing I'm hearing about. We have to get to that place where people understand it and where women can advocate for themselves.

**Few people talk about the positives of menopause. What's the upside?**

I'm bolder. I'm wiser. I'm sassier. We can finally leave some of the silly fears behind us – some of the competitiveness, the comparisons, all the junk that

occupied our mind that we thought was so important. I've stepped away from my career to focus on [menopause education] full out, which was scary and exciting at the same time. I do not consider self-care a luxury anymore; it's a part of my life and I needed to really be woken up and take control of that.

**You did some research about how menopause affects women's relationships with their partners. More than half the women surveyed said that perimenopause or menopause has put a strain on their relationships. How can men better understand what their partners are going through?**

We weren't even saying the word menopause for so long, so how could we expect men to know what's going on? I'm seeing more and more men say the word now, which makes me hopeful. It's important that a man asks the right questions: What's going on? Is everything okay? Could it be perimenopause? And not, Is this just your hormones talking again? Those kind of dismissive statements are not healthy.

**Your book, How To Menopause, comes out in March. What can readers expect?**

It was important for me to give women a kind of menopause manual for cutting through the chaos and taking back control. I hear a lot of people say, I feel alone, I feel like I'm going crazy and I don't know who I am anymore. I really wanted to address some of those feelings and take the conversation out of the doctor's office and into the bedroom, the boardroom and other places where we've been too nervous to talk about it. Low libido, for instance, is something that happens during this time and it's very scary and uncomfortable to have to talk about it, no matter how close you are with your partner.

## What are some of the most common misperceptions about menopause?

One thing that's super important to remember is that everybody experiences this differently. There's not a one-size-fits-all [approach] to menopause.

*This interview has been edited and condensed.*

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