

Doctors gave me anti-depressants - until my daughter diagnosed the menopause



Bestselling novelist and screenwriter Helen FitzGerald's symptoms of menopause were mistakenly taken for anxiety and depression by her GP CREDIT: GEOFF PUGH

Menopause is like death: you know it's going to happen, but you don't really believe it. Some women seem to experience it peacefully in their sleep. For me, it was like a beheading. When it started two years ago, I was writing a book a year, and had a part time job as a criminal justice social worker. I remember waiting in line in the grotty kitchen at work, wondering how on earth I was going to complete all the work I had scheduled for the day. A friendly colleague was taking ages washing her mug in the sink, and a red mist rose in me. I wanted to grab her head and shove it into the sink. It terrified me. When I wasn't working, it was safer to stay in bed. I had always been a runner, but I couldn't run any more. I'd always been sociable and energetic, but I started saying no to things, then I stopped being asked. For days on end I wouldn't leave the house. Everyone annoyed me. Situations and problems played out on replay in my head. My arms were too heavy to lift. It hurt to breathe. Mental illness (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/mental-health/>) wasn't a dirty term to me, so I used it, telling everyone, including my boss and my GP, that I'd had a nervous breakdown. I did also mention to my GP that I was having night sweats and hot flushes and heavy constant periods, but did not think to use the word menopause, which was a shameful word to me, I realise now, and I wonder if it was for the GP too. Instead, I was diagnosed with anxiety and depression, and prescribed anti-depressants (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/life/like-megmatthews-prescribed-anti-depressants-acute-anxiety/>), which I hated. I couldn't write, I couldn't focus, and my moods were even more out of control.

This was a screaming fit at my husband over an unwashed pot, resulting in a late-night taxi-ride to a last-minute Airbnb and a vow never to come home. It was sobbing for hours and hours on end. I was caught in a permanent state of fight or flight - it was the feeling you get on a fairground ride, that tipping point when you're suspended in the air and about to go whooshing down again. As the anti-depressants hadn't worked (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/2018/02/21/drugs-do-work-antidepressants-should-given-million-britons/>), I believed I was going to be stuck up there for the rest of my life. When I forgot a court report for the second time, I knew I had to go off sick, though I was too scared to do it. I bit the bullet, took three days off, and was lying in bed when my agent

phoned to tell me that my novel had been greenlit. I resigned the following day. I was relieved to get out of there before screwing everything up, but I felt worse than ever - forced to leave a job which I loved. That's when my daughter, Anna, 20, intervened. She called, excited, because she'd figured out what was wrong with me. She and a few friends had been sitting round discussing their mothers, and a startling pattern had emerged. One of the mums hadn't got out of bed for a year. Another cried for twelve months solid. I had never considered anxiety and depression as symptoms of menopause (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/life/8-reasons-every-woman-should-see-menopause-doctor/>), but my daughter assured me they were, and that this was what I had. I was 51. It was so embarrassingly obvious.

The psychological symptoms of the menopause are often poorly recognised, says Dr Louise Newson, a GP and menopause specialist. "There is no coincidence that the peak in suicide rate in women in the UK is in the early 50s and the average age of the menopause is 51. I see and speak to so many women who have had symptoms of low mood, reduced motivation and have even been suicidal - symptoms which improve with the right dose and type of HRT. The menopause is far more than hot flushes. (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/health-fitness/body/could-answer-menopausal-hot-flushes-mind/>)" Thankfully, my daughter had an action plan. She'd booked a GP appointment, a consultation with a private psychiatrist, and six sessions of cognitive behavioural therapy. The psychiatrist prescribed more anti-depressants and charged me £350. I didn't take them.

I took my husband with me to the GP for moral support. We had spent a lot of time online, I said, and I wanted HRT. When the GP suggested another blood test, I felt that red mist rising again. I'm so glad my husband was there to say that a negative result could be unreliable, and that diagnosis is symptom based. She left the room to consult another doctor and returned to say she would prescribe HRT (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/healthfitness/body/cancer-risk-or-miracle-cure-the-truth-about-hrt/>) if I was aware of the risks. I went to the chemist, took a pill, and went to bed. Some time later I walked downstairs, freaked out that the world had changed. I was light. I could lift my arms. The awful feeling in my chest had gone away. I had come down off that awful ride, nice and gently, whoosh, and it felt wonderful. Since HRT, I've become a functioning human again. I'm running, writing, socialising and so thankful to my daughter and her friends.