

Emotional abuse may be linked with menopause misery

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Smoking, obesity and a sedentary lifestyle have long been linked to heightened symptoms of menopause. Now, a study headed by UC San Francisco has identified another factor that may add to menopause torment: an emotionally abusive partner or spouse.

In the study of more than 2,000 midlife and [older women](#), researchers found that one in five [women](#) had been emotionally abused by their current or former partners, and that these women had 50 percent higher odds of night sweats and 60 percent higher odds of painful sex.

Among women with symptoms of post-[traumatic stress disorder](#) (PTSD) or those who were victims of sexual assault or domestic violence, the prevalence of menopausal pain and discomfort was also significantly higher, the authors said in their study, which publishes in *JAMA Internal Medicine* on Nov. 19, 2018.

Women with PTSD symptoms had just over three times the odds of sleep difficulties and more than twice the odds of reporting vaginal irritation and painful intercourse. Women who were victims of sexual assault or violence by former or present partners had 40-to-44 percent higher odds of painful sex.

"Traditionally, menopause symptoms have been largely attributed to biological and hormonal changes, as well as negative mood symptoms, health-risk behaviors, cardio-metabolic risk factors and chronic health conditions that occur at a higher rate during and after menopause," said

first author Carolyn Gibson, Ph.D., a clinical research psychologist affiliated with the UCSF Department of Psychiatry.

"Stress related to [emotional abuse](#) and other traumatic exposures may influence the hormonal and physiological changes of menopause and aging, affecting biological susceptibility as well as the subjective experience of these symptoms," she said.

Gibson and her team looked at three types of menopause symptoms among the 2,016 participants: difficulties with sleep; vaginal discomfort such as dryness, irritation and painful sex; and vasomotor symptoms, which includes night sweats and hot flashes.

Abuse, Sexual Assault, PTSD Symptoms 'Surprisingly Common'

Participants were enrolled in Kaiser Permanente Northern California, an integrated health care system serving approximately 30 percent of the region's population. Their average age was 61; most were postmenopausal (77 percent), college-educated (81 percent), and overweight or obese (74 percent). Approximately 39 percent of participants were white, while 20 percent were Hispanic, 21 percent black and 19 percent Asian.

Traumatic exposures, especially emotional [abuse](#) and PTSD symptoms, were "surprisingly common" in this sample of women, according to Gibson, who described participants as "relatively healthy, well-educated and with better than average access to health care." Some 21 percent of women (423) said that they had been emotionally abused by their former or current partner. This was defined as "made fun of, severely criticized, told you were a stupid or worthless person, or threatened with harm to yourself, your possessions or your pets."

Some 23 percent (450) reported symptoms that matched a diagnosis of PTSD, 16 percent (316) said they were or had been victims of domestic violence and 19 percent (382) had experienced sexual assault.

"The data show that experience of [domestic violence](#) and emotional abuse, sexual assault and clinically significant PTSD symptoms are common, and may affect women's health across the lifespan," said Gibson, who is based at the San Francisco VA Health Care System. "Our findings suggest that routine assessment and recognition of PTSD symptoms and lifetime traumatic exposures when women are seen by [health](#) care providers may enhance the effective management of menopausal symptoms."

More information: *JAMA Internal Medicine* (2018).
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