

In-depth

The ‘pause and the profession

On World Menopause Day, experts say if employers and law firms want to hold on to the expertise of mid-career women, they’re going to have to get past the stigma surrounding this stage of life

BY [HOLLY LAKE](#) 18 OCT. 2026



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Marina Sedai was in her office when the chest pains struck. She was pretty sure it wasn’t anything cardiovascular, but standing was a struggle, so she crawled under her desk to lie down until the pain passed.

“I think my clinging on to the edge of my desk was really representative of me clinging on to my career in those moments,” she says.

An immigration lawyer in Surrey, B.C., Sedai had just left her job to open her own firm and was chairing the CBA’s immigration law section. A full plate, for sure, but the real struggle was perimenopause and the debilitating symptoms it kept sending her way.

It had started with fatigue. Two or three hours after she’d wake up in the morning, she was exhausted. She started getting regular headaches, putting on weight, and having pain in all the long bones in her body.

Sedai told her family doctor, a woman early in her career, about the symptoms and that she just didn’t feel good.

“She basically said, ‘Well, I don’t know what to tell you.’”

Around the same time, Sedai’s husband went to the same doctor, complaining of fatigue and weight gain. The doctor told him he was at the age where low testosterone might be an issue.

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“She tested him and got him on testosterone,” Sedai says. “She took an interest, she investigated, she led the way.”

As her symptoms got worse, Sedai pieced together the puzzle and realized she might be entering perimenopause. She did a lot of research and returned to her family doctor to ask for hormone replacement therapy (HRT).

“We don’t do that anymore. It causes cancer,” her doctor told her.

While that was the finding of the Women’s Health Initiative study in 2002, it has since come to light that the research misreported the risks of HRT due to major methodological flaws and the generalization of data. The demonization of HRT, however, has persisted, despite the benefits it can bring to women’s health and quality of life.

Sedai pressed on. Armed with evidence and information on standards of care, she saw another general practitioner, who told her HRT is only prescribed if a woman has difficulty having sex.

“My jaw hit the floor,” Sedai recalls. “I looked at her, straight into her eyes, and I want to see a gynecologist. As soon as I got to the gynecologist, immediately she said, ‘You need to be on HRT.’”



Marina Sedai

At that point, Sedai had been untreated and struggling for about two years. She’d gained about 55 lbs, and her blood pressure, heart rate and lipids had all shot up. Exhausted and sleep-deprived, she regularly woke in the middle of the night in the throes of a panic attack. The lack of sleep heavily compounded her brain fog and short-term memory loss, leaving her struggling to focus and process information.

“Often, as lawyers, we have to hold several variables in our minds at the same time as we do our analysis. But by the time I was getting to my analysis, I could only remember two of the variables, and I’d have to go back and recapture what it was I was after,” Sedai says.

“I was to the point where I would be in front of my laptop, feeling decent enough to get some work done, but I just couldn’t get my brain to latch on to complex ideas and stick with them. I started to think I was developing attention deficit disorder.”

Juggling the full-time jobs of getting her firm off the ground and taking care of her files, while leading the immigration section, while untreated, Sedai admits she wasn’t the lawyer or leader she thought she could be. Nothing disastrous happened, nor did she do anything wrong on any files. But it was very challenging, and at times she got behind and was slow on files. She pushed through, got her firm off the ground and had a good year as section chair. But the impact of what she’d been dealing with was evident in her bank account.

“My income crashed because I just didn’t have the time and the energy to do enough file work to be at the profit range that I wanted,” Sedai says.

“I had no intention or desire to retire. But I started wondering if I was going to be forced to retire. Would bagging groceries be so bad? It wasn’t until I got on HRT and

lost that weight that I was able to really have enough energy to do more work and get back to normal.”

Menopause at work

A 2023 study by the Menopause Foundation of Canada found that unmanaged symptoms are costing the Canadian economy \$3.5 billion every year, including \$3.3 billion in lost income for women who have had to reduce their hours or leave the workforce altogether and \$237 million in lost productivity for employers. Annually, an estimated 540,000 days of work are lost to trying to manage peri- and menopause symptoms.

Perimenopause lasts anywhere from two to 10 years before menopause. While it typically starts when a woman is in her 40s, symptoms can appear in her 30s. Driven by fluctuating and declining levels of estrogen and progesterone, there are more than 30 symptoms, including hot flashes and night sweats, heart palpitations, headaches, body aches, cognitive issues, depression and anxiety. Research has found that 95 per cent of women experience an average of seven symptoms.

For many, it's disruptive in ways they never expected. It's a confusing time that can turn your world upside down, and it can take a long time to realize what's actually happening. Half of women say they were completely unprepared for it.

“No one had given me the heads up about what was coming,” Sedai says.

Finding help navigating this stage of life is a common struggle. Only 25 per cent of women say their healthcare provider proactively discussed menopause with them. As Sedai experienced first-hand, when women brought up menopause with their doctor, 75 per cent said the conversation was not helpful. What's more, 40 per cent said their symptoms were undertreated by their healthcare provider.

Given the havoc perimenopause and menopause can wreak on a woman's well-being, and the fact that she's often left on her own to deal with it, it's not surprising that work can become too much to handle.

Kathryn Marshall, an employment and human rights lawyer in Toronto, says society isn't comfortable discussing the natural midlife hormonal shift that occurs in women's lives.

“There's a stigma around it,” she says.

“It's not something employers even want to talk about.”

Women are also reluctant to raise it with their employer for fear they're signalling they're getting older, knowing they won't be seen as valuable anymore. Marshall says that's a societal stereotype rooted in misogyny and the sexist belief that ties a woman's value to her youth and appearance.

“I think that a lot of women feel very insecure already in the workplace once they hit midlife. They experience age-related discrimination in the workplace in a way that men don't,” she says.

“Women coming into my office tell me that once they hit 50, all of a sudden, it's like there's a target on their back. And as soon as they started getting grey hair, they felt invisible. It's so different for men; they hit 50 and all of a sudden they are appointed as CEO.”

Marshall says she's worked with many middle-aged men who've gone through multi-year midlife crises, complete with fancy cars and hair transplants, that have been celebrated and openly discussed.

“What happens to women in midlife is all taboo, and not something people want to acknowledge openly.”

And if there's no acknowledgement, there's no accommodation for it.

‘A complete lack of understanding’

For Carmen Wilson (who asked that her real name not be used), the perimenopause symptoms initially came on gradually. But before she understood what was afoot,

everything was happening at once. It reached a point where some days she was so weak she couldn't stand up.

"I needed to be at home on those days. I could not have left the house if I wanted to. That didn't mean I couldn't work. But to call in and try to describe what was happening, I couldn't do that either. No one wanted to hear it."

Although she was working in human resources at a bar association, Wilson says her superiors and co-workers didn't know how to react or respond to what she was going through.

"There was a complete lack of understanding of what I was dealing with, which was unfortunate. I'm sure they know now, because they've probably all gone through it. But it was a difficult experience, to say the least, and it was somewhat shocking."

She started to question herself, her abilities, and what she was doing with her life. Could she still work, or would she have to retire? Eventually, she left her job.

"I was in a position where I was extremely competent and well-regarded. Had I had different support, I might have stayed. I can't say, 100 per cent, but any amount of empathy, awareness, or understanding certainly would have helped. I could have taken some time off or worked from home when I needed to."

Wilson knows other women who have left the legal profession, struggling with a lack of support in this phase of life.

Research has shown that unmanaged symptoms are pushing one in 10 women in Canada out of the workforce. One-third of working women said their symptoms negatively impacted their performance at work, while 24 per cent said they hid their symptoms at work. More than 65 per cent weren't comfortable speaking to their supervisor or HR about what they were experiencing, and half of women said they were too embarrassed to ask for help at work.

That tracks, considering 87 per cent of working women said their employer doesn't provide menopause-related support – or at least they weren't aware of any – such as medical coverage, flexible workplace policies or environmental adjustments.

The Berlin School of Economics and Law's landmark MenoSupport study surveyed over 2,000 working women. Researchers found that menopausal symptoms coupled with a lack of employer support were a major catalyst for women leaving or downscaling their careers. Driven by corporate taboo and structural silence, 25 per cent of women experiencing menopausal symptoms reduced their working hours. Ten per cent wanted to retire early or already had. Among women over 55, that rose to nearly 20 per cent. Almost a third had taken sick or unpaid leave, while one in six changed jobs because of it.

In Ottawa, the House of Commons Standing Committee on the Status of Women is currently studying menopause's effect on the labour force and accepting public submissions until Oct. 23.

Sedai says that in the last five to 10 years, she's seen women drop away from the immigration bar and law altogether. Sometimes they point to new technology as the reason, and not wanting to learn a new way of doing things. Others say they just don't have the energy for it anymore.

"They're not willing to communicate that this is perimenopause, and it's knocked the stuffing out of them."

Randi Bean sees that all the time. As the founder of Life After Law, she places lawyers in roles outside traditional law firm practice. Women looking for a new role will say they're finding life at the firm exhausting, that they're not feeling like themselves, or that the role isn't working for them the way it did before. They never point to perimenopause or menopause as the problem.

"But being a woman of a certain age myself, I read between the lines," she says.

"I think it's still almost the kind of thing that you talk about with your girlfriends and your doctor. It doesn't seem to be coming into the professional environment so much, at least not being named as such."

There will come a time when people will say they're burned out by peri- and menopause symptoms, and need to cut back, Bean says.

"It'll be identified, and it'll be okay to be identified. But I don't think we're there yet."

Erin Kuzz talks openly about what she's experiencing in midlife at every opportunity and seeks out speaking engagements and panels.

"I am so passionate about this topic. I sit in partnership meetings with the battery-operated rechargeable fans, and I do it openly in front of my men and women partners," says the seasoned employment lawyer and partner at Sherrard Kuzz LLP in Toronto.

"It's not something about which to be embarrassed. When we try to pretend we're not having a hot flash, it perpetuates the stigma around it. It's actually led to some really great conversations among some of my younger men colleagues, not just partners, asking questions about what their female partners will at some point be going through."



Erin Kuzz

Unfortunately, as the data illustrates, she says it's not a topic that's on most employers' radar.

"It's going to be sooner than later, but I think we're really just starting to have conversations about the impact of menopause and perimenopause from a workplace perspective," Kuzz says.

"There are a lot of very successful established firms that aren't taking the lead on this for whatever reason makes sense for them."

Bean compares it to a time, decades ago, before maternity leave was commonplace in Canada. People working in law often didn't take it, and if they did, they were concerned about how that would look and what their practice would be like if and when they returned.

"So a lot of women chose not to return because the attitude was you're either doing it this way – the 80-hour workweek – or no way. That's how it was until it wasn't," she says.

As time passed, firms adapted to women returning to work after maternity leave. They became more flexible, allowing for reduced work schedules and, more recently, hybrid and remote work arrangements to accommodate the needs of parenthood.

"So, I think law is capable of doing this," Bean says.

"It's just a matter of, how do you ask for it when you need it?"

Eventually, there will be an expectation of accommodation: benefits plans tailored to a workforce's needs and policies around reduced workloads, flexible work arrangements, and leaves. As most symptoms aren't permanent and can be treated, employers will have to create a culture and environment where people feel safe

coming forward when they're struggling and are not made to feel there's something wrong with them or punished with poor performance reviews.

Pushed out in their prime

The reality is that law already has a retention problem. The profession in Canada struggles to retain women at mid-career, particularly in private practice.

Recent data from the International Bar Association Gender Report Canada 2026 and related Canadian legal associations show that while women make up the majority of new entrants and overall legal professionals in Canada, those numbers drop off mid-career.

And unlike women in childbearing years, who are generally in the early stages of their career, women dealing with perimenopause and menopause are often at the peak.

"We're talking about women with extraordinary experience and an extraordinary ability to contribute and take on leadership roles," Kuzz says.

During the fight for maternity leave, she says it took firms a long time to figure out that if they kept losing women from the profession, it would have huge long-term impacts.

"I'm hopeful that we will take the lessons we learned from trying to keep women of childbearing years in the profession and transfer those more quickly to menopausal women."

And it's not just because it's the right thing to do. Ultimately, it comes down to numbers and maintaining a workforce. In Canada, one-quarter – about five million – of workers are women over 40, and two million are between 45 and 55, which is the age range when most reach menopause. According to Statistics Canada, that cohort is the fastest-growing segment of working women and is projected to grow by nearly one-third by 2040.

There's currently no legal obligation to accommodate women at this stage of life, but Kuzz doesn't think any industry should wait to act until there is, particularly law firms.

"Why not become an employer of choice? Why not be at the forefront and send the message both internally and externally that you value women in this stage of their lives, and want them to feel supported and set up for success?"

Within the next three to four years, she expects to see case law that interprets protections in human rights codes across the country to include the status of being in perimenopause and menopause. Marshall can't see how discrimination and a lack of accommodation doesn't eventually end up in front of a judge.

"It'll probably be one of my cases," she says.

Not a matter of new law

Across the Atlantic, that's exactly what's happening in the United Kingdom.

Although Conservative and Labour governments have considered legislation and policy changes, including statutory leave, there is no specific provision that protects women going through menopause from less favourable treatment, Jennifer Millins recently told a menopause panel at the International Bar Association conference in Copenhagen.

Instead, practitioners and individual claimants are navigating existing statutory protections to bring sex, age, and disability discrimination claims to tribunals. Between 2022 and 2025, menopause-related employment tribunal claims have more than tripled.



Jennifer Millins

“It’s still a small proportion of claims overall, but there’s been a rapid increase in them,” says Millins, a partner in the employment department at Mishcon de Reya LLP in London.

“That tracks with what’s happening culturally in the UK. There’s been a huge movement over the last five years or so that’s increased public awareness through media exposure about what women go through.”

In February 2024, the Equality and Human Rights Commission in the UK published guidance for employers on menopause in the workplace. Under the *Employment Rights Act 2025*, large employers in England, Scotland, and Wales with 250 or more employees are required to create and publish equality action plans that embed support for employees experiencing menopause alongside gender pay gap reporting. That was initially voluntary, but as of spring 2027, it will be a legal requirement.

“Larger employers in the UK are going to have to start thinking about this,” Millins says.

“We’re seeing a big change. Not necessarily in the statute books, but certainly in terms of public commentary and what that means for the government’s expectations of what employers do for women in the workplace.”

Beyond the ‘ick’ factor

The practice of law is so talent-dependent that the profession can’t afford to have women in their prime walking away from it, particularly at a time when there’s a push for more diversity within the judiciary.

“At the age that people are going onto the bench, for women, it’s typically in their perimenopausal or menopausal years,” Sedai says.

“So, I’m wondering at this point, how does that affect the availability of women for the bench?”

The profession and society in general need to get past the ‘ick factor’ when it comes to older women’s bodies. For her part, Sedai raised the topic at a panel at the Canadian Bar Association’s immigration law conference last year. And in addition to educating the young women around her about what’s to come, she’s also schooled some of her young male employees on the topic.

“I’ve told them, ‘You’re not young boys anymore. Your wives are getting older. You have mothers, you have sisters. You can’t be horrified by women’s health. The moment that you know somebody casually mentions menopause, you don’t have to look around for a place to hide,’” she says.

“We have understanding for women who are pregnant. Why is that same understanding in the workplace, for women in this stage of life, so difficult to reach?”

Holly Lake is a (non-practicing) lawyer and the editor-in-chief of CBA National Magazine.

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