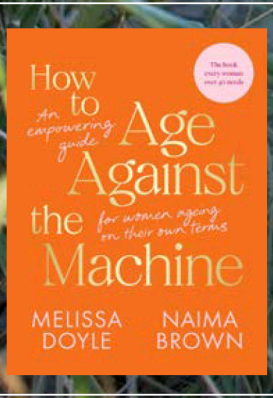
- Menopause

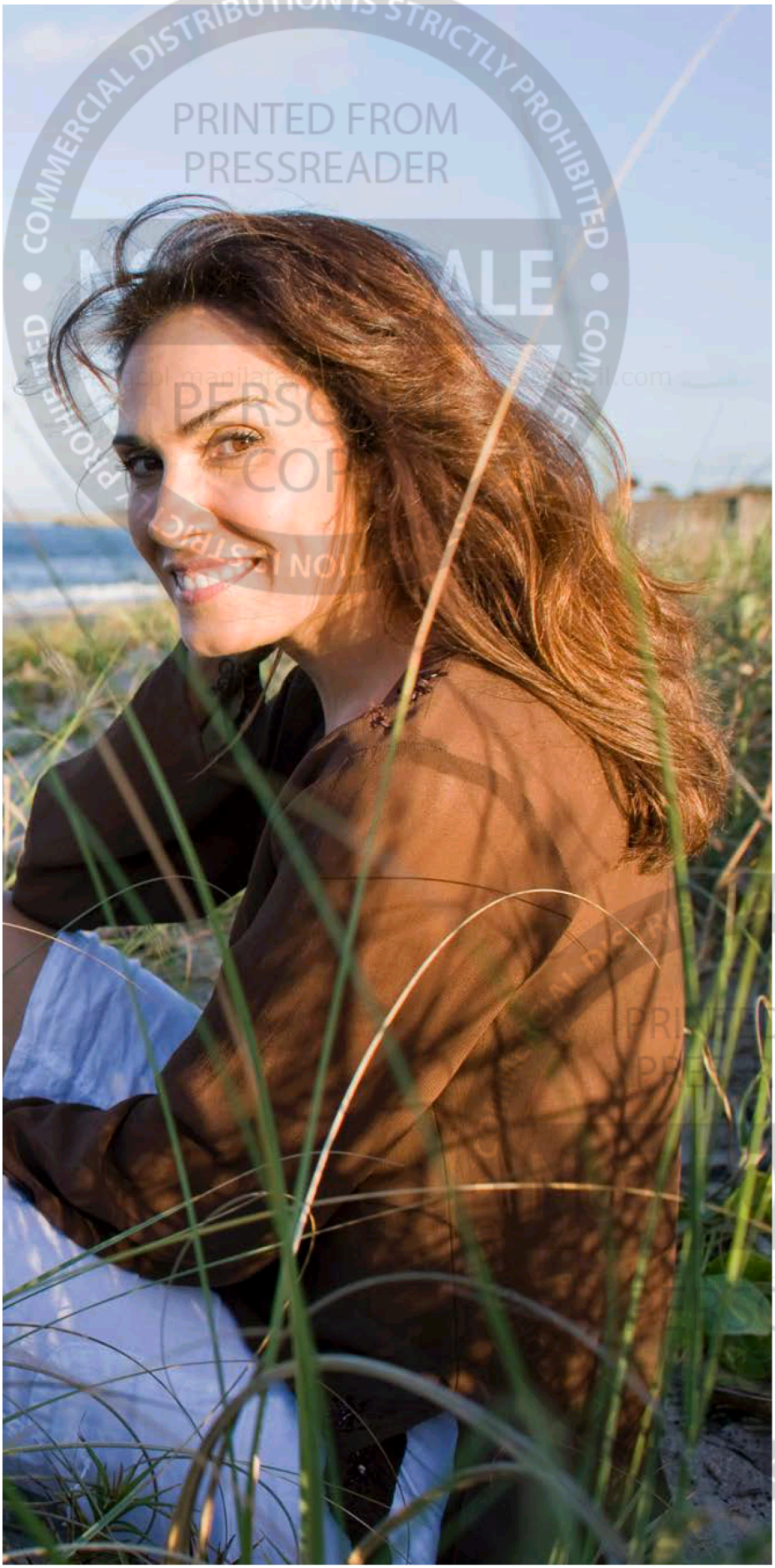
# How do we do menopause?

*An empowering guide for women ageing on their own terms*

**Journalist Melissa Doyle and TV producer Naima Brown's recently published book, *How to Age Against the Machine,* is a handbook full of accessible helpful advice for women (and those who love them) as they get older and experience a challenging and potentially exciting new phase of life.**




This is an edited extract from *How To Age Against The Machine* by Melissa Doyle and Naima Brown published by Hardie Grant Books, RRP $45 Available in stores nationally.



## book extract

As women, menopause is a feature of our ageing. It is, in many ways, the backdrop to everything else we talk about in this book. While we are navigating the changes in our families, our work and our relationships, menopause is there, impacting and influencing us. So it's no surprise that you'll read about menopause again in different contexts throughout this book – from sex and intimacy (how menopause changes our relationship to sex) to power (have you ever wondered what it's like to experience menopause while in prison?) and more.

In chapter 5, we will give you all of the information you need to care for your body as it grows older – the dos and don'ts (spoiler: do exercise, don't smoke). But there are a few arrows we want you to have in your quiver when it comes to specifically surviving menopause.

### MENTAL HEALTH AND RESILIENCE

If perimenopause and menopause and all their inherent symptoms, alongside all the other challenges that ageing can bring with it, don't make you feel like you need some help, that might be a minor miracle. This is a pivotal time in your life that brings with it seismic changes, many of which are unpleasant and uncomfortable. Add in the hormonal changes taking place in your brain and body, which can exacerbate feelings of anxiety and depression, and you might find this is the time to add a good therapist to your team.

Feeling like we're losing our minds, our selves, our cool-calm-and-collectedness – and our car keys – is, for many women, the hardest part of menopause. Chapter 3 will dive into the deep end of what our minds need at this time in our lives.



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## HORMONE SUPPORT

By this point you are well aware that the root of most of the perimenopausal and menopausal challenges we face are hormonal. Some of us may choose to get hormone replacement therapy (HRT), also known as menopausal hormone therapy (MHT). Hot flushes and night sweats can get so overwhelming and severe for some women that they seek medical treatment. Many women who've undergone a hysterectomy will also require HRT to help them with such an abrupt transition into menopause.

HRT contains oestrogen and sometimes progesterone. It has been known to reduce hot flushes and night sweats by around 80%. Some studies have shown additional benefits to HRT including reducing the risk of developing diabetes and preventing osteoporosis, and there may be some data that indicates your chances of developing bowel cancer or cardiovascular disease may be reduced through HRT.

However, as with any medical intervention, there can be side effects. These range from some vaginal bleeding to breast tenderness, bloating and nausea – all of which do generally subside. There may also be more serious risks.

What is clear is that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to menopause, and to how to treat your own personal menopause symptoms. For all of these reasons, it's so important you have a GP or personal doctor that you can really trust. On that note ...

## PICK A GREAT DOCTOR

Maybe you've had the same GP since you were a kid. Or maybe your GP was great throughout most of your life, but as you've entered perimenopause, you've noticed their knowledge and understanding of where you are in your life is waning. There is a lot of new territory that you're navigating. Whether you're deciding if HRT is right for you, wondering if you should seek mental health support or wanting to strengthen your bones, it's imperative you've got the right doctor. Given what we have learned about the medical establishment's many blind spots when it comes to women's health, it is even more critical you've got someone in your corner who's staying on top of all the most recent developments in this space.

One of the buoys we can all swim to as we navigate the choppy waters of menopause is the fact that it happens to all women. While our specific symptoms and challenges may at times make us feel isolated, chances are we are all experiencing many of the same things. We wanted to settle in more deeply with this idea, so Naima proposed experiencing a Women's Circle in Byron Bay. Naima grew up amid the counterculture of northern California, so she had been to more goddess circles and women's ceremonies than she could count. For Mel, on the other hand, it was new territory, and it came with its fair share of nerves. After all, she was only just beginning to wrap her head around how her life was shifting as she entered her fifties. Sharing her experiences – and her fears and worries – with a circle of strangers was daunting.

Despite our different experiences, the Women's Circle was revelatory



PICK A GREAT DOCTOR

Here are some tips on finding the right doctor for your menopausal years and beyond.

**1. Feeling a little guilty about changing doctors?** Don't. It's OK to seek out someone new now. If you'd like to, you can explain your motivations to your current doctor, maybe even send them a thank-you card, but either way move forward confidently.

**2. Consult with an organisation or society focused on menopause.** The Australasian Menopause Society has a database of doctors who have specialised skills when it comes to menopause and ageing.

for us both as we learnt about the important role that menopause and ageing play in the cycle of our lives as women. Murielle, our incredible facilitator, explained how all of nature's cycles mirror our lives as women – we can see ourselves in the seasons and in the phases of the moon. We begin in the spring of our lives – **the Maiden phase** – in which our youth and fertility are in full bloom. From there, we merge into summer, **the Mother phase**, where we give birth – literally, metaphorically or both. Then we enter **the Maga phase** – the autumn of our lives – before we flow into winter, our **Crone phase**, where we complete the wheel of life and death. Our Women's Circle was focused on the often-neglected Maga phase – this is the menopausal phase, where we slow down but our lives are still busy and vital. We learnt to see this time of our lives – after the outward-looking summer, but before the quiet, inward sleep of winter – as a time of integration, of changing colour, of preparation and relief. It is the time after our 'full moon' phase, but before we enter **the Crone phase** – where we will be aged women readying ourselves for our transition to the end of life.

*We discussed hot flushes and ageing parents, kids leaving home, changes at work, insomnia, emotions that seemed out of control ... and just really dug into the changes taking place at this time in our lives.*

What followed was a vulnerable, heartfelt, honest and sometimes tearful exchange of experiences and challenges. We discussed hot flushes and ageing parents, kids leaving home, changes at work, insomnia, emotions that seemed out of control ... and just really dug into the changes taking place at this time in our lives.

When it was Mel's time to speak, she thought she'd be ready. After all, her entire career has been about conversation and connection, and she's no stranger to audiences. But she found that when it was her turn to tell her story, the tears flowed.

'There's just a lot of things shifting,' Mel shared. 'I'm trying to get my head around it, and it's just a bit harder than I expected. I've always been very busy and always have a lot of purpose and focus. And then it is just changes in life. Changes in my career. Changes in my family. My parents are ageing. My son is about to leave home and move overseas. My little girl's going through her final years of school.

My dad is getting older and he'll need more care. My mother-in-law has just fallen and she's in hospital.

'So I'm sorry for the tears. Life's changes have always been exciting for me but suddenly right now it's a

**3. Become an expert on your body.** Start to chart your menstrual cycles, so you know how much they are shifting and changing. Keep a diary of your symptoms, or anything new or different you're experiencing – including emotional changes. Gather as much family history as you can. The more you know about you, the easier it will be to find a doctor who can be your best medical ally.

**4. Talk to other women.** Chances are you're not alone. In fact, statistically speaking, you are definitely not alone. Ask for recommendations – and ask for the specific reasons why a particular GP was useful during menopause. You may even want to consider bringing a trusted friend or even your partner along with you to meet a potential new doctor. They may have questions or insights that didn't occur to you.

**5. Don't wait.** Remember how we learned that perimenopause can start years before we officially hit menopause? We might be navigating changes in our bodies, our hormones and our mental health long before we are officially categorising ourselves as menopausal. If you've had any inkling that your current doctor isn't the right fit when it comes to 'women's issues', make the change early and establish a relationship now. One less thing to do when the hot flushes and mood swings come on heavy, right?



*Carving out time with other women who are going through what you're going through is vital.*

bit daunting. I think up until this point I was always looking forward to all the things that turning fifty would bring, but then every now and then some of the things that I can't actually control get a little overwhelming, and I'm just trying to navigate them.

'So I don't know why I'm crying. It must be some beautiful oil in the room that's making it spring forth.'

Yeah... it wasn't the oil. It was the safety of a circle of women who know exactly what you're talking about because they are living it, too.

This circle was one of the first things that we did as we set out on the journey that would culminate with this book – and the experience has stayed with us. Carving out time with other women who are going through what you're going through is vital. It could be in a Women's Circle, or it could just be catching up regularly with girlfriends you trust. No matter what works for you, the goal is to help you feel more visible and less crazy, and to deepen your connection to this time in your life and to the sisterhood.

## MENOPAUSE AGAINST THE MACHINE

Back in our introduction, we said (or, rather, shouted) that all women are not ageing equally. This applies to menopause as well. In this chapter we've talked about actions we can take to ease the menopause process – from therapy to a great doctor, to HRT – and every single one of these things costs money and resources that are simply out of reach for far too many of us. Even the notion of taking a little time off to care for ourselves is a privilege.

Perhaps you've heard the term 'period poverty', which has gained important traction in recent years? It refers to the many women who don't have access to basic sanitary items and facilities with which they can experience safe and stigma-free menstruation. This idea applies to menopause as well. Heavy bleeding requires access to sanitary pads and clean water. Hot flushes can be eased by ice packs or air conditioning. Many symptoms of menopause are alleviated by exercise and nutrition – utter luxuries.

We are mindful of that thing we do as women when we minimise our own pain or our own challenges by saying that it's not as bad as someone else's suffering. It's important we acknowledge how difficult menopause can be even for women who have access to all the tools. But we think we can hold both of these truths together – and, if you're anything like us, there's nothing that helps manage big, powerful emotions more than action. So if you're feeling some menopausal rage, and you have the means to do so, consider doing some research and finding organisations in your neck of the woods that assist menopausal women who may not have access to vital resources.

After all, we've got to stick together, ladies. As we'll discover in the next chapter, sticking together can literally save our lives.

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