

**Opening super:**

"We were not able to talk"

**Male voice over:**

*This is the story of Camilla who's 58 and Tom, 61, and their struggle as a couple navigating their way through Camilla's menopause. Camilla tells the story of a period where everything changed – family life, her health, her family relationships, her enjoyment of sex and her self esteem. Today, more than 10 years later, she is now passionate about helping other women to understand and cope with the menopause. But it has been a long and difficult road.*

*In the interests of sensitivity we are not using Tom and Camilla's real names, and the couple are represented by actors in this film. But Camilla is using her own voice to narrate her story.*

**Voice over:**

My husband Tom and I met back in 1972 and we got married a couple of years later. We have three daughters. I consider our family to be very close with lots of hugs and affection. At least we used to be, before my menopause when it all changed.

My mother became menopausal when she was around 47. I was 17 at the time, so I don't remember much about it - except she kept denying how bad she felt, even though she had frequent hot flushes and the whole family could feel the tension. I have probably inherited these patterns – putting the family's needs before my own, taking on a lot and not being open and honest about my own feelings.

I started to notice the first signs of my own menopause when I was around 45, often waking up in the morning feeling almost hung-over. Over the next few years, I was heavily affected by declining oestrogen levels – I just didn't know what had hit me. I felt as though I stopped existing - I couldn't find my self, I couldn't concentrate, couldn't remember anything and couldn't make decisions. My self esteem and self confidence disappeared but I didn't want to admit it or talk about it.

I started taking sequential HRT and things got better for a while, but then started going downhill again with serious back pain, heavy bleeding and migraines. Without giving me any real explanation, my gynaecologist recommended a hysterectomy and I was so confused, I didn't even know which questions to ask. Eventually I decided, together with Tom, not to go through with it. My migraines got worse and then, aged 54, I was declared post-menopausal and taken off the sequential HRT. I was put on a combined HRT treatment and referred to a psychiatrist for cognitive behavioural therapy to treat my depression.

I began peeling off the layers of the onion and things slowly improved. But I was angry, really angry as I found out that this condition is described only as a "disorder" and not as an illness... so why did I feel so bad?? And I was cross that women and their partners have to struggle their way through this– it's like the blind leading the blind, with such a lot of unnecessary stress and illness.

I started having a burning feeling in my vagina and I had pain during intercourse getting very itchy afterwards. I didn't understand why and nobody ever explained anything to me about vaginal health and what that means - that the mucous membrane gets thinner and drier for example. Lubricants helped for a while but my libido began to shrink – because of the vaginal dryness, certainly, but also because I didn't feel good about myself any longer. It was like being in a downward spiral and I started to put on weight, which made me dislike myself even more. Why did no-one tell me that the body's metabolism changes during menopause? And that so many other things happen to your body and can potentially have an impact on you.

In an attempt to understand what was going on, I attended a conference on menopause. Vaginal atrophy was a focus and that was a true wake-up call for me. It also triggered frustration about doctors – “hey guys, why don't you share all that information with us women?” In my research I found very little or no information on the menopause from a patient's perspective.

My Eureka moment was when I found an American website covering all the symptoms of menopause. I printed it and showed it to Tom to prove I was not making it up, but he didn't really understand it all. Ironically it helped a little when he later experienced erectile dysfunction.

My feelings for sex disappeared and I felt I was acting like a dummy. Tom would be cross if we didn't have sex and, even though I wasn't up to it, it was somehow easier to have sex than to have the argument. I found myself starting to dislike the man I had been happily married to for so many years. Tom on the other hand felt rejected. We completely lost intimacy and humour and we just couldn't talk about it. There was no common ground for discussion and it was extremely painful for us both. Imagine a pressure cooker ready to burst...

Tom and I became like strangers and we were always angry with each other. Tom started to drink and stayed at work longer - and I blamed myself. We were both so unhappy but didn't know how to make things better. We didn't know how to communicate.

Tom felt I had changed from being a gentle, loving and kind person – he felt I was seeing the world as an ugly place and he was probably right at the time. He wanted to leave me. Later on he said he even considered having an affair and we nearly ended up divorcing.

We discussed counselling as an alternative to divorcing but ended up not going. During that process we started communicating – and we somehow survived my menopause or my 'black period' as Tom calls it – as a family. We still have times together where we erupt but generally I would say that our lives together improve as we grow older and we are harvesting the fruits of our knowledge. And our sex lives? Well, it hasn't fully recovered. But communication and local oestrogen definitely help!

Because menopause has always been around and is accepted as a phase in all women's lives, it seems we are expected just to deal with it. But it is really important to understand that menopause would be a lot easier for women - and therefore also for their partners - to deal with if everyone starts talking about it, what it does to the body and what you can do

to reduce the symptoms. I believe most women would appreciate their physician asking about the impact of any menopausal symptoms and giving advice and information. On the other hand, women also need to make a commitment to act on the advice in order to help reduce the debilitating side effects of the menopause.

I wish somebody had told me.  
Thank you for listening to my story!

**Super:**

*NN logo*

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