



The great gift

There is life after menopause – and it just gets more interesting!

Last year, aged 57, Ruby Wax began a master's degree in mindfulness-based cognitive therapy at Oxford University. The comedienne is not alone in deciding to pursue a challenging intellectual goal of a different bent after entering her 50s. Jaki Scarello, author of *Fifty & Fabulous! The Best Years of a Woman's Life* (Watkins, £12.99) interviewed women across five countries when researching her book, many of whom she says experienced a surge of creativity and energy shortly after menopause. 'Menopause, for all the bad press it gets, is a great gift to women because with its reminder of ageing it offers a woman time to pause and reflect on who they became as they were busy doing and achieving in their 30s and 40s. This reflection leads to renewed self-knowledge, new goals, new desires and even new values.'

While many women dread reaching such a milestone, there is

evidence that they are empowered after the menopause: they are free to follow their personal dreams, feeling arguably sharper and more inspired than during the previous two decades of their lives.

Better brains

Research has even shown that we get smarter with age. The Seattle Longitudinal Study began in 1956 and tracked the mental powers of 6000 people for more than 40 years, concluding that people function better on cognitive (brain) tests in middle age than they do at any other time. The findings saw people between the ages of 40 and 65 achieve higher results in vocabulary, verbal memory, orientation and reasoning tests, than in earlier years. And while men's scores peaked in their late 50s, women's continued to improve into their 60s.

This cognitive ability, coupled with the hormonal change that women experience following the

menopause, contributes to greater self-confidence and focus.

Psychological shift

Jill Shaw Ruddock, author of *The Second Half of Your Life* (Vermilion, £12.99), published in January this year, writes about the fact that, as women stop producing oestrogen and progesterone, their focus on fertility and motherhood reduces dramatically. Maggie Chapman, co-founder of The College of Cognitive Behavioural Hypnotherapy, where half of her clientele are women over the age of 50, agrees. 'The menopausal woman becomes less concerned about pleasing others and now wants to please herself – it is a moment of psychological development,' says Chapman. 'The fluctuations in brain activity created by surges of progesterone and oestrogen are now stopping and there is a steady flow of activity between the amygdala [thought to play a

role in processing emotions] and the prefrontal cortex [involved with emotional control and intelligence]. The drive to tend and care has reduced and [women are] less interested in the emotions of others.'

Change at the right time

Sue Salik is one woman who felt a strong urge to reassess her life and, as she puts it, 'fight for her identity' in her 50s. 'Women over 50 can feel rather invisible and it was important at this time to find something of my own I could throw myself into.' Salik has three daughters in their 30s and three young grandchildren, and was looking for this challenge when one of her daughters escaped unharmed from the 7/7 terrorist attacks at King's Cross in 2005.

'It made me realise that although my daughter had credit card information on her person, there was nothing to tell the emergency services who to contact on her behalf if she had been unable to speak for herself.' Salik, now aged 60, took voluntary redundancy from her part-time role in the careers service at Middlesex University, and began her own company, Contact4me (www.contact4me.com), a service that enables next of kin contact and provides medical information in the event of an accident. 'It has been the best thing I have ever done, even though at times it felt like pushing water up a hill to get the business up and running. There is no way I could only be a mother and grandmother now – I love the variety in my life.'

Ten years ago, Shelagh Jones, now 64, began Spiritus (www.spiritus-thespiritualmarketingdirectory.com), a website that allows people to find out about companies' values. Jones had run her own business before, but after experiencing depression and seeking counselling, she realised how important it is that what we do professionally reflects who we are inside. 'I am quite sure that earlier in my life I would not have taken that little glimmer of an idea and nurtured it in the way I have done.' The business

won the Innovative Business of the Year Award in the Goole and Howdenshire Business Excellence Awards in March this year. 'Ideas come to me for its growth which are not the norm for a business directory – and again, I am sure I am more receptive to those ideas and more driven to execute them than I would have been pre-menopause.'

Dream job after 50

In 2008, research from the Learndirect Careers Advice study revealed that many people find their dream job only after the age of 50, partly driven by the need to do something more worthwhile. It also showed that 61 per cent of over 50s craved the chance to acquire new skills, a hunger that U3A – the University of the Third Age – has tapped into. It has nearly 800 U3As around the UK and recently acquired its 250,000th member, over half of whom are women.

Third agers are self-managed lifelong learning co-operatives for older people no longer in full-time work. The eclectic mix of courses includes jazz appreciation, science and astronomy, opera, creative writing and Greek literature. 'Today's older women are not content with the passive later years their mothers might have expected,' says Barbara Lewis, vice chairman. 'Instead they want to be up and about, learning things.'

Estelle Bullough, 74, is secretary of her U3A in Bradford, Yorkshire, and says it helped her to rediscover her love of languages. 'I wanted to be a linguist but my mother died when I was young and I had to look after my father as he was ill, so I joined the bank at 17 and worked there until I had my children.'

Now she attends U3A conversation classes in Spanish, Italian, German and French, has been an interpreter, and passed her German and Spanish A-levels in her 60s. Bullough can now pass her expertise on to fellow

members of her group, enforcing the underlying premise of U3A – that those who learn also teach, and that those who teach, also learn.

Rich knowledge bank

It is a philosophy supported by Scarello. 'Faith in others to perform and make choices increases [in women over 50], and so does their faith in their own natural abilities and skills. Tension and worry diminish and their ability to delegate and to educate is at an all-time high. In fact, women of 50 and up use the words "advisers" and "counsellors" to describe themselves, when before they called themselves "managers" and "directors".' Salik agrees, and urges ladies of a certain age to harness this rich knowledge bank and follow their dreams. 'Give it a try, as the life experience one has at 50 is so valuable and you can meet people of all ages and hold your own, unlike when you are young and inexperienced.'

Far from being a time that marks a gradually diminishing quality of life, or requires greater compromise, it seems 50 heralds a new dawn – all you need to do is embrace it. 'Once you have thought through how you want to explore life in the ensuing years it's time to make some commitment to those changes,' says Chapman.

'Whether it's a return to studying, creating your own business or exploring how to retrain using all the wisdom and knowledge collected over your earlier years, it's time for action! And you have the self-belief and confidence to follow through.'

Or, as Ruby Wax told Shaw Ruddock during her book research: 'My advice would be to get over yourself. Whatever you've achieved, everyone's forgotten about it already, so the only person you have to answer to is yourself. And if you can look in the mirror and say, "Boy, am I getting more interesting!" then you've accomplished something.' **1**



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