

COMMUNICATION GUARDRAILS TO MENOPAUSAL CHALLENGES: A STUDY OF SELECTED MARRIAGES IN PORT HARCOURT CITY RIVERS STATE

Okeh Azubuike <sup>1</sup>, Obi Adaku Promise <sup>2</sup> & Ogori Pererich Faith<sup>3</sup>

[baiky\\_zed@yahoo.com](mailto:baiky_zed@yahoo.com), 08055057994<sup>1</sup>

[adiiwealth@gmail.com](mailto:adiiwealth@gmail.com), 0806 819 9761<sup>2</sup>

[faithyjesusbaby@gmail.com](mailto:faithyjesusbaby@gmail.com), 08035473606<sup>3</sup>

Department Of Mass Communication, Ignatius Ajuru University Of Education, Rumuolumeni, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria

**ABSTRACT**

Menopause is a necessary stage in human marriage, majorly a woman's affair, it means a natural decline in reproductive hormones when a woman reaches her 40s or 50s. It is characterised by 12 months of non-menstrual flow, poor interest in conjugal relationship, emotional imbalance, stoppage of procreation in women among others. These developments are capable of creating gaps and threatening the foundations of marriages. To properly navigate the difficult terrains associated with the menopausal stage, effective communication is required between couples to reduce the misunderstandings that emerge during menopause, and to promote empathy, peaceful and healthy cohabitation. This study sought to crystalize the communication guardrails that can be adopted by families to keep marriages afloat and healthy when menopause sets in. The study adopted the survey method, and used the Cochran's Sample Size Calculator to arrive at the sample size. Questionnaire and interviews were used to gather data while the simple percentage and Miles and Huberman's templates were used for analysis. The study concluded that many couples in Port Harcourt City did not understand the importance of communication in navigating the challenges of menopause, it therefore recommended that couples should adopt open, transparent and solution-driven communication tools, maintain trust and collaboration during menopause in order to ensure closeness and healthy marriage.

**Keywords:** *Menopause, Guardrails, Communication*

**Background to the Study**

Human life runs in stages, and menopause is one of the significant transitions that herald ageing and maturity in women, it brings about both physical and emotional changes and challenges such as hot flashes, sleep disturbances, mood swings, vaginal dryness, loss of interest in conjugal relationship and increased risk of certain health conditions.

The menopausal stage in women comes with obvious direct impacts on them, their relationship with others and most importantly their marriages. The changes that occur in women during menopause may strain their marital relationship if not addressed openly, and with understanding. This stage of the woman's life requires effective management especially within the context of marriage and family. Studies have shown that communication is the cornerstone of every successful relationship.

According to Nelson (2008), during menopause, spouses are encouraged to adopt a safe and judgment-free space to express their thoughts and feelings, and to share ideas and experiences transparently in order to lay the foundation for mutual understanding.

Menopause is the inevitable stage of female reproduction and ageing, it is a stage in which physiological changes characterised by fluctuations in sex hormone levels occur; this stage can last for up to a decade. According to studies, most women experience varying degrees of physical and psychological symptoms during the menopausal transition, which may threaten women's quality of life and long-term health (Safarinejad, 2016).

From the above, it becomes critical to evolve ways of helping women through the menopausal transition in order to support their personal health and their marital relationship (Obi, 2015).

Over the years, many measures have been taken to improve women's quality of life during menopause, they include hormone replacement therapy, lifestyle intervention, and psychological counseling, which are all forms of personal health care for women. Studies have shown that external factors, such as work and life pressures as well as social support levels also have important impacts on menopausal symptoms, and that the severity of menopausal symptoms can be associated with the levels of women's perceived social support. Many women that have reached their menopausal stage require the supports of their spouses and other family members. According to Miller (2021), healthy spousal communication is the principal source of family and emotional support for women that have entered the menopausal stage. This is because how women navigate the experiences and challenges of menopause depend on the level of empathy and understanding from their husbands. Lack of spousal support can lead to negative consequences, such as depression and even suicide. Effective interaction between partners in perimenopause stage can help women to understand how to adequately handle menopausal symptoms. Looking at the conversation above, it is evident that communication plays important roles in handling the challenges that women's entrance into menopause can cause in marriages. This study therefore specifically sought to:

1. Find out how couples in Port Harcourt City, Rivers state have used communication to handle the challenges that accompany menopause
2. Determine the communication tools that couples can adopt to effectively handle the emotional challenges that accompany menopause.

Accordingly, the following research questions were asked:

1. In what ways have couples in Port Harcourt City, Rivers State used communication to handle the challenges that accompany menopause?
2. What communication tools should couples adopt to effectively manage the emotional challenges that occur during menopause?

### **Statement of Problem**

Menopause comes with diverse challenges that require spousal understanding to navigate. The physical and emotional changes and challenges that accompany menopause such as hot flashes, sleep disturbances, mood swings, vaginal dryness, loss of interest in conjugal relationship among others are conditions that were never envisaged or bargained by couples when marriage was contracted.

In their study, Nappi and Nijland (2018), reported that many marriages have collapsed because the needed understanding to navigate the challenges of menopause in women were absent between spouses. The study which surveyed 250 families showed that about 90 per cent of the men that participated in the study lacked empathy and clear understanding of the menopausal challenges being faced by their wives. They opined that that couples required greater empathy, closer interface and sincere conversation during menopause to keep the marriage alive and healthy. From the findings reported by Nappi and Nijland, it is obvious that communication is highly critical in dealing with the challenges that plague marriages during menopause in women, and that not to adopt effective communication principles to tackle challenges of menopause can destroy the foundations upon which marriages are built. This is a consideration that made this research work very critical.

### **Clarification of Concepts**

**Communication:** The totality of interface between couples and other family members

**Communication Guardrails:** All conscious communication tools adopted towards navigating the challenges of menopause in marriage.

**Menopause:** A natural biological process that marks the permanent end of a woman's menstrual cycles and fertility. Menopause is confirmed after a woman has gone 12 consecutive months without menstruation.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopted the Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) and Social Support Theory.

Relational Dialectics Theory (RDT) was developed by Leslie Baxter and Barbara Montgomery. It describes how meanings in close relationships are constructed through ongoing struggles and interplay of competing ideas or dialectical tensions. The theory explains the tension between connectedness and autonomy in relationships.

While discussing the theory in relation in the context of menopause, Njomi (2009) states that couples experience tensions that can be managed through open, honest, and empathetic communication, and that understanding is not a fixed outcome but a fluid and dynamic process created through communication.

Also the Social Support Theory emphasizes the role of emotional, informational, and instrumental support within relationships. The theory further posits that the comfort, assistance and information received from close partners and allies can be a therapy towards improving wellbeing and reducing risks. It can foster pro-social behaviours and effective stress coping. The theory highlights the crucial roles of supportive relationships in promoting positive outcomes and providing essential social and material resources for partners in need.

While discussing the Social Support Theory, Kort-Butler (2018) asserts that emotional support driven by effective communication can enable partners to provide the necessary support to one another during the menopausal transition.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Communication as Therapy for Menopausal Challenges in Marriage**

It has been variously established that menopause in women come with series of challenges, for women in marriage, such challenges are capable of straining the relationship they have with their spouses. Both professional marriage counsellors and scholars believe that open communication can be used to navigate the challenges that arise in marriages during menopause, a period marked by significant physical and emotional changes that can lead to mood swings, strained intimacy, reduced libido among others. It is believed that if couples openly discuss symptoms, needs, and concerns, they can foster understanding, empathy, and a stronger connection that can hugely transform menopause from a potential conflict source into a shared journey for growth and a deeper relationship (Hall,2020).

According to Banik (2015) some of the challenges faced by women during menopause are emotional changes, decreased intimacy and communication breakdown. He stated that hormonal changes can lead to increased anxiety, depression, irritability and sadness, which can make partners to find difficulties in understanding and coping with each other.

Eden (2019) asserts that the physical symptoms that characterise menopause such as hot flashes, insomnia, and even physical discomfort can not only affect a woman's energy and mood but create a need for spousal understanding and support.

The best way to handle the challenges that arise when intimacy is decreased in marriage is to get closer through regular discussion to seek remedy. The realities of menopause which include changes in libido and physical discomfort can lead to frustration and negatively impact a relationship.

Miller (2021) holds that communication breakdown can arise when menopausal challenges such as mood swings and emotional instability set in. According to him, this development can cause tension and misunderstanding because partners will begin to find it difficult to express themselves sincerely, freely and accurately.

Rees and Macklin (2006) gave a list of strategies for improving communication within a marriage where menopausal challenges have set in to include regular check-ins and meetings, active listening by both parties, offering soothing counseling, fostering safe space, showing patience and empathy among others. These scholars opine that regular check-ins enable couples to create

dedicated time to openly discuss their feelings, challenges and experiences.

This will help the couples to feel together, connected and intact. It will also make the most affected to feel loved and supported. Menopausal challenges in marriage require regular sharing of ideas, feelings and showing of empathy (p.241).

According to Kort-Butker (2018), active listening is another communicative strategy that couples can adopt to survive the challenges of menopause. He believes that when partners share ideas, listen attentively, show empathy and focus on understanding their perspective without interrupting or offering unsolicited advice, they can understand themselves better and bond more effectively. While navigating the challenges of menopause, couples are supposed to express their needs clearly and with great compassion, this entails communicating their specific support needs, exuding patience with each other and recognising that they have entered a complex stage in their marital journey.

Njomi (2009) urges couples who are facing the challenges that arise during menopause to create a non-judgmental environment where they will feel comfortable to express their thoughts and fears as well as promote mutual understanding. They are expected approach the emotional and physical shifts that accompany menopause with huge compassion and understanding because such challenges are often beyond the control of the affected partner. He is of the view that such attitude will promote effective communication, enhanced understanding and stronger connection. By facing the challenges that accompany menopause as a team, couples can strengthen their bond, develop deeper connections and renewed intimacy (p.194).

### **Menopause, Emotional Imbalance and Conjugal Relationship**

A major challenge of menopause in marriage is the effect of emotional imbalance on effective conjugal relationship. Research works have shown that menopause has a way of affecting the emotional well-being of women through hormonal fluctuations that show up in the form of declining estrogen levels, and affecting brain chemicals such as serotonin which regulate mood.

Kuehner (2017) holds the opinion that during menopause, women may experience increased irritability, sadness, anger, anxiety, among others. Cognitive changes such as brain fog, concentration difficulty and memory lapses can hugely contribute to feelings of frustration in both partners. Kuehner further holds that emotional imbalance can impact negatively on conjugal relationships because it can lead to communication breakdown in marriage.

Jones and Smith (2019) are of the view that mood swings and emotional sensitivity can lead to misunderstandings and strained conversations within the marriage. They further believe that a couple's sexual relationship can be remarkably strained due to the resultant effects of emotional imbalance such as decreased Intimacy, changes in libido, physical discomfort among others. Emotional distance, increased conflicts and heightened irritability can cause partners to become more sensitive to resentment, tension and increased altercations (p.89).

Safarinejad (2016) asserts that although the challenges that plague marriages during menopause are many and tasking, there are strategies that can be adopted to support such marriages. Partners are encouraged to engage in honest and patient conversations about menopausal symptoms and their emotional impacts. Adding their voice to the above, Jassim and Al-Shboul (2018) suggest that a better understanding of menopause through patient and result-focused conversation can foster empathy and help partners to effectively support each other. They also encourage couples to adopt lifestyle adjustment strategies that focus on nutrition, regular exercise to stabilise mood and their overall well-being. This strategy can help them to reconnect emotionally and physically. The implication of the conversation above is that when the urge for conjugal relationship is lost in marriage due to the natural characteristics of menopause in women, couples can explore new ways to enliven intimacy by focusing on what feels pleasurable and supportive to become more connected, supported and loved.

Menopause have been found to lead to unprovoked and even unintended anger toward husbands.

Tang (2022) writes that the anger that arise from menopausal symptoms is not the little passing moments where a woman perhaps had a bad day or was wronged by the husband, but a type of anger that makes a woman to unintentionally feel deep inner rage to the point of exploding at her partner on a regular basis (p.63).

Tang prescribed support through talk therapy, hormone replacement therapy, and a host of other options that have the efficacy to dial down anger and lessen the mood swings of women that have entered the menopausal age.

According to Lo and Kok (2019), husband who are at the receiving end of an angry menopausal wife should learn more about how a little empathy and patience can go a long way to support and regrow intimacy.

Menopause is a new chapter in marriage, while the sexual urge of the man is still intact or even growing, that of the wife is dwindling. It is actually time for empathy, it is a natural path in life which must be positively navigated (p.191).

Aside the fact that the woman begins to lose urge for sexual relationship, another twist to the issue of intimacy by couples is that menopause comes with realities that could make the woman to change in physical appearance, to look radically different from that appealing structure that attracted the man.

Graziottin (2017) writes that at menopause, the woman sometimes gains un-bargained weight, often with the extra pounds settling around the midsection, a place where no woman will need it. Vaginal dryness is a turn-off to many men, this can also affect sexual intimacy (p.257). Menopause is a physical and mental journey that can have a significant impact on mood and intimacy in marriage. The symptoms that accompany menopause have the capability to disrupt a woman's life and how she approaches her marriage in a myriad of ways.

### **Empirical Review**

Nappi and Nijland conducted a study in 2018 on how communication and empathy can be adopted to handle menopausal challenges. In their study, Nappi and Nijland (2018) reported that many marriages have collapsed because the needed understanding to navigate the challenges of menopause in women were absent between spouses. The study which surveyed 250 families showed that about 90 per cent of the men that participated in the study lacked a show of empathy for their wives that were already facing the challenges of menopause.

The researchers further reported that spouses should show more empathy, stay closer and discuss more frankly to keep their marriage afloat.

Richa Sood, a U.S-based General Internist and Women's Health Specialist, in a study on menopausal challenges in women, reported that no fewer than 6,000 women in the United States reach menopause in a daily basis, and that midlife women with higher mindfulness scores experienced fewer menopausal symptoms.

In the study which focused on more than 1,700 women aged between 40 and 65 who received care at the Women's Health Clinic in Rochester from 2015 – 2016. Sood suggested that mindfulness may be a promising tool to help women to reduce menopausal symptoms and overall stress.

The study further revealed that women with higher mindfulness scores were less affected by the challenges of menopause, and that the link between higher mindfulness and reduced menopausal symptoms was found to be stronger among women with the most perceived stress.

Also, Christina Sexton in a study reviewed by

Dr Anthony Tang, reported that from age 40s to 50s, when women feel unprovoked anger at their husbands, chances are that menopausal symptoms have something to do with it.

The study which surveyed 128 women in menopause, reported that menopause-induced anger can be sudden and unprovoked, and that the reasons are basically borne out of mood swings, poor sexual urge, increased irritability among others.

In another study, the Australasian Menopause Society came up with a research result showing that mood disturbances in menopause tend towards increased anger and irritability, and less towards

sadness.

The study conducted in 2022 which used a sample size of 394 women under menopause revealed that menopause-driven anger is an 'on-off' phenomenon, with the rage lasting for a few minutes or even hours before it spontaneously resolves, somewhat similar to pre-menstrual syndrome.

From the works cited above, the current study is unique because it took advantage of the gaps in completed studies, established distinct variables and undertook the study in a different environment from those in the works cited.

**Method**

The study adopted the survey design and used both questionnaire and interviews to generate data. The official population size of Port Harcourt City is put at 541,115, according to 2006 population census, a sample size of 384 respondents made up of married men and women was determined using the Cochran's Sample Size Calculator with the following formula and parameters:

**Formula**

$$no = \frac{Z^2 \cdot p \cdot (1-p)}{e^2}$$

Confidence Level: 95%

Margin of Error: 5

Estimated Proportion: 0.5

Four experts in menopause counseling and symptom management from the University of Port Harcourt were interviewed. Data retrieved from the interviews were reduced to meaning codes and situated within extant conversation in using communication to manage menopausal challenges in marriage.

Data analysts adopted both the simple percentage count template for quantitative data, and the Mile's and Huberman's method to take care of qualitative data

**DATA PRESENTATION**

**Responses on ways couples handle menopausal challenges**

S/N	Methods	No. of Responses	Percentage
1.	Counselling	104	27.1
2.	Self Help	220	57.3
3.	Communication Tools	60	15.6
	<b>Total</b>	<b>384</b>	<b>100</b>

**Responses about Inherent Menopausal Challenges in Manage**

S/N	Methods	No. of Responses	Percentage
1.	Mood swing	110	28.5
2.	Loss of Sexual Urge	160	41.7
3.	Anger at Spouse	62	16.2
4.	General Irritability	52	13.6
	<b>Total</b>	<b>384</b>	<b>100</b>

**Participants view on interest menopausal challenges in marriage**

S/N	Participants	Responses	Analysis
1.	Interviewee 1	General irritability, mood swing and insomnia	The participants say that menopausal symptoms vary and appear in the form of general
2.	Interviewee 2	Loss of sexual urge and unprovoked anger	

3.	Interviewee 3	Hot flashes and general irritability	irritability, loss of sexual urge, hot flashes, mood swing among others.
4.	Interviewee 4	Mood swing and general irritability	

**Responses on use Communication to Handle Menopausal Challenges**

S/N	Methods	No. of Responses	Percentage
1.	Open Communication	50	13
2.	Showing Empathy	124	32.3
3.	Active Listening	50	13
4.	Exuding patience	160	41.7
	<b>Total</b>	<b>384</b>	<b>100</b>

**Participants Opinions on use of Communication to Handle**

S/N	Participants	Responses	Analysis
1.	Interviewee 1	Couples should stay close and communicate with empathy	The participants urged couples to adopt communication strategies such as open conversation, empathy, exude patience and seek professional counselling
2.	Interviewee 2	View challenges as a natural path and sincerely discuss solutions	
3.	Interviewee 3	Communicate openly without grudges or ill-feelings	
4.	Interviewee 4	Follow challenges with patience and seek professional counselling.	

**Discussion of Findings**

The results generated from the respondents showed that most couples did not have an idea that spousal communication can be used to navigate the challenges that accompany menopause. The data showed that most couples preferred seeking self-help by allowing themselves to naturally pass through the challenges or seek professional counselling. The couples surveyed in the study agreed that mood swing, hot flashes, loss of sexual urge, anger at spouse and general irritability are symptoms of menopause. From the data, it is obvious that deploying open communication, showing empathy and listening to each other's concerns are rarely considered by couples in Port Harcourt City as tools to navigating the challenges that arise during menopause in marriage. This lack of communication is perhaps the reason couples still experience emotional separation and absence of conjugal relation when menopause sets in.

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

From the data presented above, is obvious that although communication is a critical tool to navigating the challenges of menopause in marriage, couples in Port Harcourt have not effectively utilised such tools and principles while trying to face the challenges that menopause have thrown at them.

Menopausal challenges such as mood swing, anger at husband, loss of sexual urge, hot flashes and general irritability are not actually medical conditions that require diagnosis and treatment, they are however emotional challenges that trigger social problems, and can be best managed through frank communication driven by trust, collaboration, and without any fear of negative consequences.

The study holds that although it is important to seek professional counselling when menopausal challenges rear their heads, open, sincere and empathetic communication that is driven by mutual respect and sharing of ideas can be a veritable way for couples to stay close, enjoy conjugal

relations and keep their union intact.

Going by the conversation above, the study recommends that couples who are facing the challenges of menopause should:

1. Adopt a communication style that is open, transparent and solution-driven
2. Communicate in a manner that shows mutual respect, honesty and sharing of ideas.
3. Hold conversation about the challenge with the intention of fostering closeness, and without fear of negative consequences.
4. Exude trust and collaboration while discussing challenges about menopause

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