

Experts are cheering Michelle Obama's openness about hot flashes. And they have some advice.

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Michelle Obama was about to climb out of Marine One when the uncomfortable feeling suddenly swept over her entire body. Heat.

"I'm dressed, I need to get out, walk into an event, and literally it was like somebody put a furnace in my core, and turned it on high, and then everything started melting," Obama, 56, recounted during a recent episode of her new eponymous Spotify podcast. "I thought, 'Well, this is crazy. I can't, I can't, I can't do this.'"

What the former first lady was going through in that moment is an event that many others who have endured menopausal symptoms are all too familiar with: a hot flash.

But unlike Obama, who dedicated last week's podcast episode to discussing women's health with D.C.-based OB/GYN Sharon Malone, many people who experience menopause are reticent about openly sharing their personal stories. That's a problem, Obama said.

"What a woman's body is taking her through is important information," she said. "It's an important thing to take up space in a society, because half of us are going through this, but we're living like it's not happening."

Obama's comments echo experts who say normalizing conversations about women's health is critical to ensure people are able to get the proper care and guidance they need during what may be a challenging and overwhelming part of their lives. Experts say that's especially true when it comes to menopause, as there are a number of safe and healthy ways for people to manage the disruptive symptoms that can accompany the process.

"There are things that you can do about it," says Marie Bernard, deputy director of the National Institute on Aging (NIA). "But if you don't talk to others, specifically other women who have experienced it and who have found out ways of handling it, or [talk] to your health-care provider, you're not going to know these things."

Menopause, which usually lasts seven years but can persist for up to 14, is accompanied by a wide range of mental and physical symptoms that vary based on person, according to the NIA. Although some people have little to no trouble with their symptoms, a majority aren't as lucky and can instead find themselves experiencing any combination of hot flashes, difficulty sleeping, moodiness and irritability, pain during sex and depression.

"For some women who are having trouble talking about it, it's scary thinking about making that transition," Bernard says. "It's really a marker that you are no longer a young person."

The symptoms themselves, such as a visible hot flash, may also spark feelings of self-consciousness, says Julia Frank, a

professor emeritus of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at George Washington University.

“Any out-of-control thing that happens is potentially a source of shame and embarrassment,” says Frank, who has worked with women experiencing depression and anxiety connected to menopause. “That might be hardwired. If you fart or you burp, some people are fine with it and some people are just deeply embarrassed every time they do something that they can’t control, and a hot flash is basically uncontrolled.”

Though hot flashes and other symptoms of menopause can appear without warning, there are ways to manage them and prevent them from having too great of an impact on your daily life, experts say.

Find the right doctor and ask questions: Wen Shen, an assistant professor of gynecology and obstetrics at Johns Hopkins Medicine, says to prioritize finding a health-care provider who is comfortable guiding you through the process.

“She needs to find a provider who is knowledgeable, who is willing to sit down and discuss with her, who doesn’t just brush her off,” Shen says.

If conversations about menopause don’t become more commonplace, Shen warns that “a lot of women will pay for it later on.”

“Menopause should be looked at as an opportunity,” she says. “A time when women should be looking much closer at their overall medical health.”

Symptoms of menopause may lead to serious health issues such as osteoporosis and heart disease if they are not properly addressed, says Mache Seibel, a women’s health and menopause treatment expert affiliated with Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston.

Think about nutrition: People should do their best to eat healthfully and avoid processed foods as they go through menopause, says Seibel, who is also the author of “The Estrogen Fix.” Research has indicated that obesity may cause more frequent and severe hot flashes.

Seibel also suggests taking calcium supplements and vitamin D, and encourages limiting or cutting out spicy food, alcohol and caffeine, which can be triggers for hot flashes.

Get regular exercise: Although working out isn’t a proven way to reduce menopause symptoms, it is useful for maintaining a healthy weight, relieving stress and improving quality of life, according to the Mayo Clinic. Seibel recommends three to five times a week for 30 minutes a day.

Vigorous aerobic exercise would be best, Frank says: “That stabilizes the autonomic nervous system and also helps people deal with the weight issues that come with menopause.”

Practice self-care: Find ways to de-stress through calming activities such as mindfulness meditation, yoga or tai chi, Bernard says. For those who have less time, Seibel says even just lying on your bed and taking deep breaths can be helpful.

Prioritize rest: Hot flashes and other menopausal symptoms may make sleep challenging, but Seibel says it’s important to prioritize getting enough rest. It starts with practicing “good sleep hygiene,” he says. Instead of watching TV or using phones and computers right before bed, take a relaxing bath. He also recommends hanging room-darkening shades and keeping the temperature around 65 to 68 degrees, if possible.

Plan ahead before going out: Dress in layers, Bernard says, so you can easily take off clothing when a hot flash hits. It can also be useful to carry a small, portable fan.

In more extreme cases of menopause, in which the symptoms may not be responding to lifestyle changes, experts say people should not be afraid of discussing the possibility of hormone replacement therapy or other prescription medications with their health-care provider.

The key to figuring out how to best manage your menopausal transition is being open to discussing the process, Bernard says. She recalled one instance when a colleague noticed she was having a particularly bad hot flash during a meeting.

“Take your shoes off and put your feet on the cold floor. That can help,” Bernard says her colleague told her. And it did.

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