

Plain English/Lay Summary Template

Introduce the paper

Research suggests that some Autistic people experience menopause more intensely, but they may find this difficult to explain due to autism-related communication differences. Because traditional research methods are inaccessible to some people, we invited Autistic individuals to describe their menopause experiences through creative works such as art or poetry. Participants, who lived in Canada and the UK, could be at any stage of the menopause transition and were free to describe both positive and negative experiences. Autistic Community Research Associates (CRAs) Rose Matthews and Christine Jenkins led the project and played a key role in all stages of the research.

Summary of empirical research; framework; methodology; theories used; analytical approach

We aimed to make the research process as meaningful as possible for Autistic researchers, participants, and those who would see and read our work. Our approach was autism-affirmative and emancipatory, challenging medical and deficit-based models.

We invited creative submissions describing Autistic people's lived experiences of menopause and received six submissions (paintings, poetry, graphic design), one from Canada and five from the UK. Initially the two Autistic CRAs, who had both experienced menopause, responded creatively to these works, through prose, poetry, drawings and references to song lyrics. The research team as a whole then responded to the entire body of work.

Summarise the main findings and/or arguments raised in the paper

In this study we used creative research methods to deepen our understanding of Autistic menopause by inviting diverse forms of artistic expression. Creative submissions allowed participants to express themselves more freely than traditional data collection methods would have allowed. In their works, and accompanying explanatory notes, participants recognised the potential therapeutic value of creativity as a "remedy" for Autistic menopause-related difficulties, including the stress of unexpected changes in their bodies, hormones, and mental health; midlife transitions; struggles with medication; disempowerment and stigma.

Creative expression enabled both Autistic participants and researchers to reflect on the complex transition that takes place during menopause. The creative method used in this study was original, building on approaches other researchers had used previously. Connecting with Autistic participants through creative works that described experiences of menopause produced powerful feelings of solidarity and empathy in the CRAs, who were Autistic and post-menopausal, with similar lived experiences. The CRAs responded to these creative submissions on a deeply emotional level, embracing their subjectivity, rather than attempting to distance themselves.

We developed an original approach to data analysis where the two CRAs initially responded to the arts-based submissions creatively and reflectively. They used drawings, poetry, prose, and excerpts from song lyrics to capture their reactions in their respective research journals before meeting online to discuss these. The whole research team then met to reflect on the creative submissions and the CRAs' responses to them.

Despite the pain and suffering sometimes evident in the creative submissions, the overall sense was one of hope and potential transformation. These pieces of work confirmed that menopause shouldn't be seen purely through a medical lens; it has cultural dimensions and prompts deep philosophical questions about the meaning of life. While this study provides intriguing insights into how a small number of Autistic individuals experienced menopause, more research is needed to understand specific dimensions relating to factors such as gender, sexuality, and ethnicity.

Creative expression and reflection can be catalysts for personal transformation through a process of (to paraphrase one of our participants) 'stepping into' who we fully are. Mystical and magical aspects of the research process are not usually acknowledged in traditional scientific research, but in this study we ventured far beyond the physical symptoms of menopause, into the mysteries of mind, spirit, and soul. There were such frequent examples of serendipity, synchronicity, and synergy that we were no longer surprised when they occurred.

We concluded that Autistic menopause sometimes results in crisis, but it can also lead to transformation and flourishing, and for some individuals, different forms of creative expression can play a significant role in facilitating a positive transition. Using arts-based approaches helped participants and researchers to process emotions, better understand themselves and their experiences, and advocate for change. Autistic Community Researchers found connecting

with participants' lived experiences powerful and transformational. Traditional research methods have limitations in capturing people's lived experiences. Creative arts-based research methods can play a significant role in enhancing self-expression and deepening other people's understanding of Autistic menopause.

Summary of main implications for Disabled People, Disabled People's Organisations; Social Justice; Policy & Practice; Theory; Research; and Method

Menopause can be an extremely challenging transition for some Autistic people as existing difficulties are sometimes magnified by unpredictability and change. In our work, we found that creative methods helped participants express and process experiences. In addition to submitting creative work describing Autistic menopause, each participant was invited to explain what their submission meant to them. It was helpful for researchers to know what participants intended to communicate. The Community Research Associates' (CRAs) creative responses yielded further insights relating to Autistic menopause.

Rather than imposing meanings onto creative submissions, the CRAs used these as the departure point for a reflective and subjective exploration of issues and themes associated with Autistic menopause. They drew on their own lived experiences, data from a previous phase of this research study, literature on Autistic menopause, and connections with the wider Autistic community.

Although we only received six submissions, these provided important insights which would probably not have been captured using traditional research methods. Our reflective, creative approach proved immersive and compelling and generated a diverse range of expressive material on Autistic menopause describing both struggles and flourishing. This research study highlights the emancipatory potential of creative research methods for Autistic participants and Autistic researchers.

Finding out more e.g. links to other resources, organisations, publications, author bio, source of funding, disclaimer, acknowledgments etc

This research was funded by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). More information about the Bridging the Silos: Autistic

Menopause Study is available at: www.AutisticMenopause.com together with the creative submissions.

Additional resources on autism and menopause are available on Dr Rachel Moseley's website: [Resources and support | Science On The Spectrum](#)

We acknowledge the significant contribution made by our participants who shared insights into lived experiences of Autistic menopause through their creative submissions and explanatory notes. We are grateful to the reviewers who provided helpful comments on an earlier version of this article.