SESSION TRANSCRIPT · THE MISSING PIECES OF PERIMENOPAUSE

Refueling in the Cracks: Reclaiming Your Energy While Carrying the Invisible Load

with Judy Wnuk · Day 1, Monday, October 26 · The Invisible Load

Hi, I'm Judy Wnuk. I'm the founder of VitalHer Wellness, and I'm also a certified menopause coaching specialist (that's a mouthful) and a certified nutrition coach. But before any of that came to be, I was a daughter, and then a caregiver. And that's where my story actually starts.

In the summer of 1990, my mom had a complete hysterectomy. We're talking real major surgery, long before laparoscopic or robot-assisted procedures could make recovery faster. I remember that time very clearly, because my oldest daughter had been born just a few months earlier. So I packed up my newborn and spent a week at my mom's house while she recovered.

And here's the part that matters. My mom and I were really close. We talked about everything. But menopause was rarely, if ever, a topic of conversation between us. Not before her surgery, not during her recovery, and not after, when I was in the thick of my own hormone chaos. At the time, I was nursing a newborn and living on very little sleep, so I was blissfully unaware of what she must have been living through in the wake of a surgical menopause, which she never named out loud. Not even to me.

Fast-forward 25 years, and my parents were living in an in-law apartment attached to our house. It was one of the happiest chapters of our lives, having those two generations do life together. But one December, that all changed. My dad passed away, and almost immediately my mom began showing signs of cognitive decline, which would later be diagnosed as dementia.

That was the start of nine-plus years as her sole caregiver. Years that got harder and very complicated when COVID hit. And also a season where I had to learn, in real time, how to care for myself, while my mother's needs never stopped increasing, and mine kept getting pushed to the bottom of the list.

I tell you this because this is the reason I do what I do now. Somewhere in those caregiving years, a question took hold that I could not put down. What if someone had talked to my mom about menopause back in 1990, or before? Would any of it have gone differently? I'll never know. But that question is what sent me into studying the effects of hormone changes on a

woman's cognition, among other things, and eventually becoming certified to coach women through perimenopause, menopause, and beyond.

So if you're living your own invisible load season right now, as I like to put it, caring for a parent or a spouse or a child while your body goes through its own upheaval, and all the while keeping it to yourself, because that's what we do, I want you to know three things before we go any further. Number one, you are not a failure. Number two, you are definitely not lazy. And number three, you are not bad at self-care. You're carrying a load that nobody planned for, and your body is changing underneath you at the very same time.

And there's a missing piece here that almost nobody names out loud. We're going to change that today.

Here's what nobody tells you about carrying that invisible load. It isn't just tiring. It's a real physiological drain. And it's landing on a body that, if you're 40 or older, is very likely already navigating perimenopause or menopause at the exact same time. That's not a coincidence. That's biology and life stages colliding. The years that women are most likely to be caregiving for aging parents, or guiding teenage kids through the transition to adulthood, are the same years that their hormones are already shuffling sleep and mood and energy.

So when you feel that brain fog, or that short fuse, or that bone-deep exhaustion that doesn't lift with a good night's sleep (mostly because you're not getting a good night's sleep), that's not you being weak. That's two demanding seasons stacked on top of one another, at the same time, in the same body. Yours.

Now, there's real research behind this. The 2024 Lancet Commission on dementia, one of the largest ongoing bodies of research in this area, identified 14 modifiable risk factors across a person's life course, and estimated that addressing all of them could prevent or delay up to 45% of dementia cases worldwide. And several of those risk factors, like physical inactivity, obesity, and diabetes, sit squarely inside the same pillars that I coach: nutrition, movement, and recovery.

Let me offer a small caveat here. I want to be careful, because I'm not a medical provider. I'm a coach. Nothing that I'm sharing today is medical advice, a diagnosis, or a promise about outcomes. That study is population-level research, not a guarantee for any one person. So if you have real concerns about your own cognitive health, please take those to your doctor. But I will tell you this: I wish someone had told my mom back in 1990 that any of this mattered.

So no, you're not imagining how hard this is. Your body is doing two full-time jobs at once, and it's probably been running that way for longer than anyone around you, or maybe even you,

realizes.

And here's where most advice gets it wrong, well-meaning as it may be. The advice says you just need to sleep more, get to bed earlier. You need to eat a healthier diet. You need to move more; get up out of that chair and move. As if any of that fits into a life that has zero margin. As if you have even one extra hour lying around to add a wellness routine to a day that's probably already full before your feet hit the floor in the morning.

So let's be honest about what your day really looks like as a caregiver. It's not one long, unbroken stretch of caregiving. It's full of what I like to call cracks: small, unplanned pockets of time that are already there, whether you use them or not. For example, the five minutes in the pharmacy pickup line, or standing in the grocery store checkout line for ten minutes, or sitting in your own driveway for a minute before you go back inside, or that gap between when she finally falls asleep and when you collapse yourself. Those stretches of waiting for the prescription, or the doctor, or a phone call to end. That's what I mean by the cracks.

Those cracks already exist in your day. You're not being asked to create them out of a schedule that has nothing left to give. They're going to happen today, whether you notice them or not. The only real question is what, if anything, goes into those cracks. And that's the missing piece. Not a routine. Not one more line on a to-do list that never ends. Just permission to recognize them, and to intentionally put something small and real into time that was already going to pass either way.

Let me tell you about a woman I coached who lived this for a season. She moved in to care for a family member, and her days were not her own. But the family member she was caring for insisted on going out to the front porch every day to smoke. As much as my client hated that habit, she also knew it meant 10 or 15 minutes before she would be called back inside. And that was her crack. She didn't create it. It was already there. She just made the decision to use it.

So let's talk about what it looks like to really use those cracks. Here's what something small and real can look like in practice: one two-minute refuel from each pillar that I coach, nutrition, movement, and recovery. This is not a program. It's not a routine you have to memorize or remember. It's just proof that, in your daily life, a crack in time can hold more than you think.

In the area of nutrition, in two minutes, you don't need a new meal plan. You need one prepped thing within reach. Maybe it's a hard-boiled egg in your fridge, or a handful of almonds in your bag, or a scoop of protein powder stirred into the coffee you're already drinking. Whatever's already in front of you, add that one thing to it. And while you're at it, drink something. A full glass of water, not three sips left in a water bottle from an hour ago. A full glass of water.

Because dehydration alone can mimic half of what you're blaming on hormones. That brain fog, that fatigue, that headache that just won't quit often finds its roots in dehydration. That's two real deposits in you, protein and water, made in the time it takes to unwrap a snack and fill a glass.

And what about movement, in two minutes? You've probably heard the sayings "motion is lotion," or "if you don't move it, you lose it." You don't need a workout to do that. You need to stand up and roll your shoulders back. Take ten steps down the hallway and back. That is a real deposit into your body. It's not just a consolation prize for skipping the gym or missing a workout. On some days, this client told me, her only movement was going outside and walking up and down the wheelchair ramp to the house. And that, she said, worked wonders for her.

Now, I want to be honest with you about which part of this is settled science and which part is my judgment call as a coach. You may have heard of Dr. Mary Claire Haver. She's a leading menopause physician, and she recommends that women in midlife aim for about 250 minutes of movement per week. And before you balk at 250, for perspective, a full week is 10,080 minutes. So 250 minutes out of 10,000-plus is not a huge amount of time. She would divide that into roughly 150 minutes of cardio and 100 minutes of strength training. And she's clear that those minimums are not a ceiling. Ten steps down a hallway is not going to get you there, and I'm not going to pretend it does.

But here's my judgment call as a coach. The cracks I've described in your day are the starting point, not the whole prescription. They're how you begin, and how you rebuild the habit of choosing you, one small step at a time. Then, once you've got a little momentum, you're ready to add a real walk or a real strength session. And the good news, as Dr. Haver likes to put it, is that most of the benefit isn't in the fine print. It's in showing up.

Finally, recovery, in two minutes. Not every day is going to be what I like to call a green-light day, where you have the bandwidth to get it all done and check everything off that to-do list. Some days are yellow-light days. That's when you get the bare minimum done, and that's the win for the day. And some days, let's be honest, are red. Red-light days mean survival, basically. And that's allowed too. But naming which kind of day you're in, out loud to yourself, is the first two-minute act of recovery, because it lets you stop mentally fighting the day you're actually having.

Then take two minutes and step outside. Stand still. Close your eyes. Breathe in slowly through your nose and out through your mouth. Let the sun or the wind actually touch your face, and listen to whatever's really out there. That's not wasted time. That's your nervous system finally getting two minutes of the quiet it's been craving all day long.

My client still names her days, pretty much every single day, even now. Whether it's a green-light day, a yellow-light day, or a red-light day, she decides: number one, what really must happen; number two, what would be nice if she could get to it; and number three, what isn't important today or can wait for another day. In her words, it relieves the overwhelm, and it's her key to not giving up.

None of that asks for time that you don't already have. It asks you to notice the cracks that are already there and put something real into them.

So here's your assignment for today. Don't try to find all the cracks, although it's kind of fun to recognize where they are. Find just three today: one for food, one for movement, and one for a breath. As I like to share with my clients: small steps, practiced consistently, create lasting change.

Here's the last thing I want to leave you with, and it might be the hardest one to believe. There's a term for the season a lot of you are living in right now. It's called the sandwich generation: caregiving for your kids and caregiving for your parents at the same time, in the same breath, or one following right on the heels of the other. I remember the first time I heard that phrase. It was like someone had finally handed me a name for the thing I'd been living with, without ever being able to describe it. I remember telling my husband that I felt like I was drowning most of the time. And that's exactly where I was: sandwiched.

My mom raised three kids. She sewed our clothes. She grew and put up the produce that fed our family all year long. She was one of the most capable, loving women I have ever known. And she did all of that without ever hearing menopause discussed, or even perimenopause, let alone understanding what her own body was going through while she did it.

I can't turn back time and hand her what I know now, though I would dearly love to. But I can do the next best thing. I can put that knowledge into practice for me, and I can pass it forward to my daughters, to my granddaughters, and to every woman in this season of life that I meet, starting with you today.

Here's the truth I want you to leave with. Perimenopause and menopause are not diseases. They are not a season of decline. They are a biological and physiological reality, a season that your body moves through, not a diagnosis that you've been labeled with. You are not a victim of this season. Let me say that again. You are not a victim. Even in a caregiving season that you did not choose and cannot control, you still get to make choices that will benefit the woman you will be five years from now, ten years from now, 20 years from now. You have permission to matter in your own story. Not instead of the people you're caring for, but alongside them.

If today's talk was helpful, I put together something to help you keep this thought process rolling after this video ends. It's called the Refuel in the Cracks Checklist. It's a simple handful of practical ways, two minutes or less, to restore energy, built for the actual cracks in a caregiver's day, not for a life that has extra hours to spare. You can find it for free at vitalher.coach/checklist.

And if you ever want to talk through your own specific season, because everyone's is unique, and what refuelling actually looks like for you and what you're carrying, I also offer a free 20-minute clarity conversation. No pressure or pitch, just a conversation. You can schedule that conversation at vitalher.coach.

One final reminder: everything I've shared today is general coaching guidance, not medical advice or a treatment plan. Please hear me when I say you are doing one of the hardest, most invisible jobs that exists. I see it, and I applaud you for it. And I am so glad that you were here today.
