SESSION TRANSCRIPT · THE MISSING PIECES OF PERIMENOPAUSE

Clutter and Perimenopause: Why Your Home May Be Making Your Symptoms Worse

with Nicole Naugle · Day 1, Monday, October 26 · The Invisible Load

It's 5:15 on a Tuesday and you are sitting at a red light when a guy in a jacked-up truck decides that he's going to cut you off. Meanwhile, your car is reading your messages out loud. Your kids, they need a ride. Your husband, he wants to know what's for dinner, and your boss is casually adding one more project to a list that was already unrealistic, because surely you can handle it. By the time you pull into your driveway, you're tired and you're annoyed. And not only about today. You know that when you go to open your front door, you are walking into a cluttered room.

And if you're in perimenopause, there's a good chance that your tolerance for clutter and noise has hit an all-time low. The shoes tossed by the door, the mail avalanche that nobody opens, the countertops that you have to clear off for ten minutes before you can even contemplate making dinner.

And maybe someone has hinted or flat out told you that you're overreacting. Maybe you've wondered it yourself. When you're standing in the kitchen at 6pm thinking about sweeping everything on the counter into a trash bag and just ordering takeout. But you're not overreacting. You haven't suddenly turned into an unreasonable, less patient person. It's just that your brain has lost a little bit of its ability, sometimes a lot of its ability, to remain calm. And the stuff on the counters is more overwhelming than they used to be.

So today, I'm going to show you why that's happening. Then I'll give you a few small things to do in your home this week to start making things feel better.

Hey there, I'm Nicole and I'm here in full solidarity with you on all of the fun that perimenopause brings. The other day I legit forgot the word spoon, so there is no judgment over here. And while I can't take away your hot flashes or your 3am wake-up calls (I wish I could), but I can help you with your home. I've decluttered, organized and decorated my way through more than 15 moves, and I've been a professional home organizer for over a decade now. I own Simplified Home Design, and I host the Simplify Your Home podcast, where I help women create homes they love that also decrease their stress.

At home, outside of Nashville, Tennessee, I'm part of a blended family. My son is 17, my stepson is 22, and our daughter is five. So yes, I am parenting a kindergartener and a high school senior at the same time, all while in perimenopause. We also have a goofy rescue pitbull and some fish, plus a lobster who, given his recent tank activity, believes it is mating season. There's never a dull moment around here, and I know how much it matters to have a home that you can relax in after a long day.

One quick note before we get started. I have a background in psychology and I'm a total neuroaesthetics nerd, which is basically the study of how our surroundings affect our brains. But I'm not a doctor and I'm not a psychiatrist, so our chat today is based off research that I've studied as well as my clients' lives and

those of other women close to me. But this isn't psychiatric or medical advice. Wow. I feel like one of those disclaimers on the prescription medicine commercials that we used to have to watch. Moving on.

Every woman goes through perimenopause and until recently almost no one talked about it. Our moms and our grandmas, they probably didn't. Our doctors, they maybe read a paragraph about it in med school. My recent annual visit to the doctor would seem to support that, as her advice to me was simply to eat more soy. I have no poker face, so I can only imagine the look that I gave her when she told me that. But we don't all get the same symptoms. It's like some weird Hunger Games thing over here that none of us would have ever volunteered for. You just find out what symptoms you drew whenever they show up, and sometimes it is all too much.

A few weeks ago, I was out to dinner with some friends and we were laughing over fajitas and margaritas when one of our friends just burst into tears and we were all a little shocked until she started telling us about all the things that she just could not deal with anymore. She gave me permission to share this story, but I'm still going to change her name because it feels weird to not do so. So let's call her Lucy.

You know that woman who seems to have it all together? The one where you wonder how on earth does she get everything done? Lucy is that girl. She's been happily married for years. She has a beautiful home and impressive job title. Her kids look like they stepped out of a J.Crew catalog. She volunteers. She travels. But perimenopause has been trying to take Lucy out. You name a symptom, she has it. And the balls that she's been juggling for years. They're all starting to drop one at a time. Meetings that she used to handle easily. They now leave her feeling overwhelmed. Her patience with her family has gone well before 5 p.m., and the beautiful home that she spent decades making look perfect now just feels like a never-ending maintenance project.

And if it can happen to Lucy, it can happen to any of us. Maybe it already has. And look, I can't fix all of Lucy's symptoms. I wish I could, but I can help with the last one. And I can help you with it, too.

Okay, let's get a little nerdy. Stay with me. I'll keep it short. Perimenopause can start anywhere from your late 30s to your early 50s, and it can last a few years or a full decade, maybe more. I live and die by my planner, so I personally find this whole situation infuriating. I would like an exact start date and an exact end date. Thank you very much. But nobody can tell us when symptoms will show up or how long they're going to stick around.

What we do know is that estrogen and progesterone, they start fluctuating all over the place, and progesterone often drops first, sometimes many years before your periods actually stop.

And this next part, it might make you feel a lot less crazy. Your body turns progesterone into a compound called allopregnanolone. That's the word up there on the slide. Look, I have tried to say this 12 times and I cannot get it to come out right, so I'll just let you read it. But you don't have to remember the word. What matters is what it does. It supports your brain's main calming system, the same system that a lot of anti-anxiety medications work on. So progesterone is part of how your brain basically keeps you chill. And when progesterone drops, you lose some of that built-in calm. Things that never used to bother you

suddenly do: the video game chat blaring from the other room, someone chewing their dinner, a countertop buried under mail and cluttered with half empty glasses. Any one of them can make you want to scream or cry, or run away and take a very long nap. Some days, maybe all of the above. It's disorienting. Some mornings you look in the mirror and you're not totally sure you even recognize the woman that's looking back at you.

And then there's estrogen. Estrogen plays a role in regulating your cortisol, your main stress hormone. So when estrogen hops on a roller coaster out of nowhere, you have a harder time switching off your stress at the end of a hard day. Then put those things together: less ability to stay calm, plus stress that hangs around longer. And you can see why visual clutter just gets a lot harder to ignore. The pile that you used to walk right past, it becomes the thing that can send you over the edge.

But your home isn't only annoying you right now, it may be adding to your stress and making your perimenopause symptoms worse. Researchers have recently been taking more time to see how clutter and disorganization affects us, but I want to highlight a study that followed working couples as they gave video tours of their homes. They just had to walk around with a camera talking about their homes. Then the researchers looked closely at the words people used: words like cluttered or messy or unfinished, or words like restful and relaxing. And over the next few days, they also measured cortisol from saliva samples.

Normally, cortisol is highest in the morning and then it drops throughout the day, and that drop is what helps you wind down at night. But the women who describe their homes as cluttered and unfinished, they had a flatter pattern. Their stress hormone didn't come down the way it should, and their mood got worse as the day went on. But the husbands? Same home, same clutter, no significant stress link. I know. I'll give you a second for that one.

Researchers think it's because women usually carry more of the responsibility for the home. We notice more things. We think we have to remember everything. We do most of the planning. We know when we're out of dish soap before anyone else does. We know that the permission slip is due on Friday, and the birthday card needs to get into the mail before Tuesday. It's the invisible load. Now, to be fair, it's one small study and it shows a link, not a cause, but it matches what so many of us feel like when we're walking into a messy kitchen at the end of a long day.

Now add perimenopause: a brain that's already starting with less ability to remain calm is walking into a room that keeps your stress level turned way up, and the timing is terrible. Perimenopause tends to show up right when your career comes with more responsibilities. When your kids are getting older and they need different things from you. When your parents are getting older and they need more help, and when you're trying to keep your marriage and your friendships going despite a calendar that's already too full. And just to add to the fun, fitting into your favorite jeans now requires a gold-medal-worthy gymnastics routine. It's not fair, but your home is one piece of this that we can change.

Okay. Perimenopause can be a pain, we know that. But the same study that we were just talking about does offer some hope. Women who describe their homes with words like restful and relaxing had a healthier cortisol pattern. Their stress came down the way it's supposed to, and their mood actually improved over the day. And researchers have a name for the kind of space that your nervous system is really craving right now. It's called a restorative environment, which is really just a fancy way of saying a room with less stuff for your brain to have to take in. So that way you can move out of stress and into rest.

Often that looks like having fewer things sitting out on your tables and countertops, having softer, warmer lamplight in the evening, opening your blinds during the day, adding a plant or two, or adding natural materials like rattan and linen to your home. Just trying one or two of those things can help. You can't control your hormones, but you can control what's sitting on your kitchen counter. And you don't need a perfectly decluttered house to start feeling calmer. You just need at least one space that doesn't stress you out.

So here's what I want you to do this week. No 100-step to-do list, and no giving up all your foreseeable weekends required. First, choose a room in your house. Start with a room that you'd feel the most relieved if Cinderella's fairy godmother waved her magic wand over it. If your mind races at nighttime or you're wide awake at 3am making tomorrow's to-do list, start in your bedroom. If you hate getting ready in a cluttered bathroom, start there. If cooking is what makes you happy, or what used to make you happy, start in the kitchen. Don't overthink it. The room that popped into your head while I was talking. That's probably the room that you should start with.

Next, clear one surface or drawer in that room. Just one. It could be a nightstand drawer or a countertop, or the overflowing shelf in your laundry room. Put on your favorite playlist or podcast. (Shameless plug: you can always tune in to the Simplify Your Home podcast.) Then grab a trash bag, a basket, and a box. Trash obviously goes in the trash bag. Anything that lives in another room goes in the basket, and you'll relocate things when you're done. And anything you no longer want to take care of or see that goes in the donation box. Because if you keep all five spatulas, you're always going to be washing and putting away five spatulas every single week, forever.

Same goes for your nightstand. If you love one hand cream and one lip balm, keep those. You don't need every hand cream you own jammed into the drawer. Only put back what you need or what makes you happy. Grandma's vase holding flowers from your garden. That's lovely. A stack of twelve books that could topple over at any moment on you while you're sleeping. Not so much.

And last, live with it for a week. Before you tackle anything else, just notice how you feel when you walk past that cleared surface. At the end of a hard day, maybe you'll realize that you're feeling less annoyed or frustrated or overwhelmed, and that feeling is what's going to convince you to keep doing it. And on a low energy day, just toss the trash off of a surface. Don't worry about any of the other things.

Thank you so much for spending time with me today. I know we are all so busy and I really, truly appreciate you being here. If you feel like clutter is adding stress to your life, I made a new resource just for this summit. It's called Clutter and Perimenopause: Simple Steps to Create an Easier to Maintain Home. It will walk you through everything that we've talked about today and more, so you don't have to remember anything I've said today. The guide also has some stuff that I didn't have time for today, like easy strategies that can work on your worst symptom days because perimenopause is not the time for some complicated organizing system where maintaining it is just going to feel like an unpaid part time job that you never wanted or asked for. You'll also learn what small changes you can do to make your room feel more calm. Plus, there's a brain dump page for the to-do list that runs through your head at 3am. And since you joined the summit, it's free and you can grab it at the link on this page. You can have it open on your phone tonight while you're clearing your first surface.

But let's get back to you sitting in that driveway after a long day. Your home can either support your nervous system or it can make you cranky. It's okay to make a calm home a priority right now, not someday when the kids are grown, or when you plan to sell your home, or when you retire. Now, while your body and your brain could really use the assist, there's research to back you up and I will back you up. So this week, choose your room and clear one surface. Then come tell me which one you picked in the group, or just reply to the email where you receive the guide. I can't wait to hear all about it.