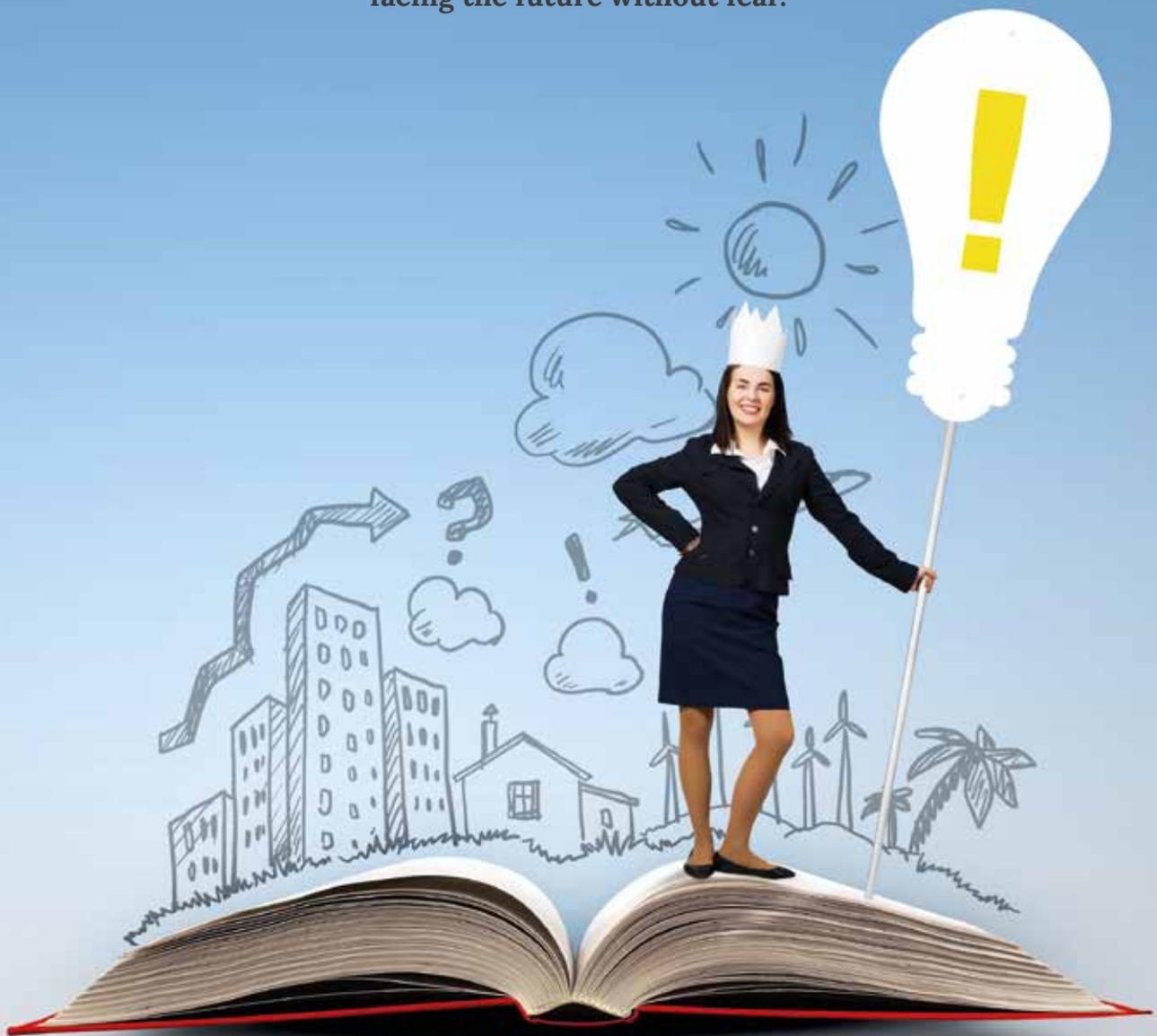


Scrapping the rule book on ageing

Kerry Dolan shares some thoughts on
facing the future without fear.





The post-reproductive female of the orca world is a huge asset to her pod.

Awalk through the beauty aisle of your local chemist will tell you everything you need to know about our culture’s attitude to aging: with ‘anti-ageing’, ‘age defying’, ‘anti-gravity’, ‘anti-wrinkle’ and ‘100% grey coverage’ emblazoned in bold fonts across products marketed towards women of middle age and beyond – though you will rarely see these their faces on the packaging.

These directives are echoed throughout our daily life, looming down on us from billboards, blaring from the TV and jumping out from the glossy pages of our magazines. The message is clear: women are not supposed to age. What’s more, the ageing process is somehow shameful and should be hidden at all costs.

On top of that there are the horror stories of hot flushes, wild tempers and diminishing mental faculties - it’s not surprising that many women approach the second half of their life with trepidation.

No matter where you are in your life in the lead up to menopause, there is a sense that you are heading towards a big drop, like that first and highest climb of a rollercoaster. The climb is steep and the stories we’ve heard of what is beyond are terrifying, but, what if we decided that we were heading for the thrill ride of our life. That we could just let go and enjoy the ride from here on out?

Nature holds very few role models of post-reproductive females. Most animals’ fertility diminishes with age, but their reproductive capacity continues. Only humans, killer whales, short finned pilot whales, beluga whales, narwhals and a few types of insect are known to have a long post-reproductive life. But why?

The grandmother hypothesis is the most popular theory behind menopause. It suggests that, where

older females could contribute more to their genetic legacy by imparting their wisdom and supporting their families than churning out children, they have evolved to do so. I like this theory. It implies that nature sees a value in women beyond their fertility. It reminds me that the second half of my life should be just as meaningful, if not more so, than the first.

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In her beautiful memoir of menopause, *Flash Count Diary*, Darcey Steinke writes touchingly of Granny, a much-studied orca matriarch, whose post-menopausal years were spent, advising her daughters, steering her pod to the best fishing sites, tutoring them in their techniques and likely even performing midwifery duties on a breech calf. The mother/son relationship, in orcas, is so important that when his mother dies, a male orca is eight times more likely to die in the following year. What’s perhaps more surprising is that this figure increases to 14 times, if his mother was post-menopausal. The post-reproductive female of the orca world is a huge asset to her pod.

I don’t think it is coincidence that in cultures where the role of older women is revered, menopausal symptoms are less widely and less severely experienced. “In societies where age is



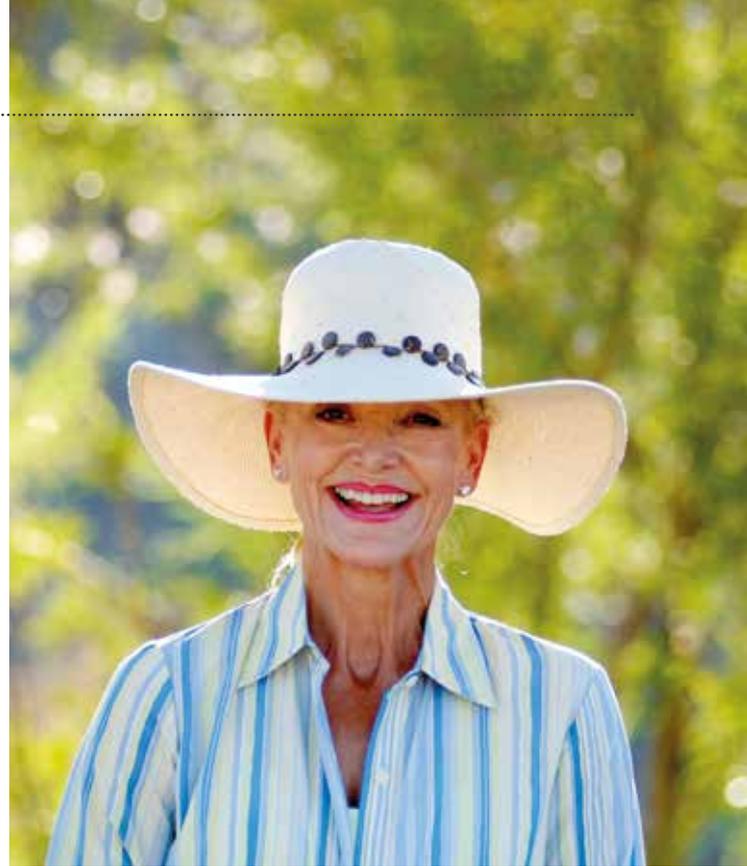


more revered and the older woman is the wiser and better woman, menopausal symptoms are significantly less bothersome," says author Dr. Mary Jane Minkin, a professor in obstetrics, gynaecology and reproductive health at Yale Medical School. "Where older is not better, many women equate menopause with old age, and symptoms can be much more devastating."

As we approach menopause, the domesticating hormones that have rewarded us for altruistic behaviours begin to subside, lifting the veil on our lives. This revealing is not an easy process. Too often, we are showing up at this transition physically, spiritually and emotionally exhausted. It is crucial that we take time to pause – menopause-, take stock and decide how we want to spend the wiser half of our years. Now is the time to reconnect with your passions and drives, to edit your life, get rid of fears and limiting beliefs that may have held you back in the past and discover what you are truly capable of as well as educating ourselves on the best ways to take care of our bodies and maximise our health. If you haven't already learned to appreciate your unique beauty and character, then now is the time to do it. Your experiences, gifts and skills have created the alchemy of a unique wisdom to impart and to rely on.

Who do you want to be now the veil has lifted?

A useful exercise to do is to write down everything you currently believe about yourself and your future as you age. Don't think too hard about it, just write.



How do you view your body as you age? How do you imagine others view you? What are your fears and worries around ageing? How do you expect to spend your time? What will you do with these precious years?

Look at your list

Now, close your eyes and use your imagination to bring this future version of you to life. Imagine this post-menopausal you, allow her to appear in your mind's eye. Notice how years of continuing as you have been, with the same beliefs, the same obligations, the same habits, the same thoughts have shaped this future you. Pay attention to the way she holds herself, the expression on her face.

- **What do you think/feel when you see this future version of yourself?**
 - **How does she live her life?**
 - **What does she spend her time on?**
 - **How would your loved ones react to this version of you?**
- **What would strangers make of her?**
- **What baggage is she carrying?**

Now, write a new list. This time detail everything you'd like to believe about yourself and your future as you age. How do you want to view your body and take care of it? How would you like others to view you? What are your hopes and dreams? How

would you like to spend your time? What would you like to spend these precious years?

Look at your new list

Now, close your eyes and use your imagination to bring this future version of you to life. Imagine this post-menopausal you, allow her to appear in your mind's eye. Notice how years taking care of yourself, respecting and appreciating your body, doing things you enjoy, living your hopes and dreams and choosing compassionate thoughts and beliefs have shaped this future you. Pay attention to the way she holds herself, the expression on her face.

- **What do you think/feel when you see this future version of yourself?**
- **How does she live her life? What does she spend her time on?**
- **How would your loved ones react to this version of you?**
- **What would strangers make of her?**
- **What unique qualities radiate from her?**
- **What has she let go of?**

Ladies, it's time to scrap the rule book on ageing and decide how you want to live those precious years, who you want to be and what you want to do. Perimenopause is a great opportunity to check in with

your life. Alexander Pope describes it as a kind of 'report card!' Whereas the average age of menopause has remained fairly constant around 51, the average life expectancy has increased and is now 81, so, ladies, menopause is now a pause for breath, a time to check in and step into your power before embracing the wiser half of your years, not a final bow.

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