



## CURRENT CHALLENGES

For over a year now Berthe has been feeling the effects of the menopause. It took a while for her to realise that this was happening. She felt fatigued, had aches and pains and the worst effect was the 'brain fog', causing an inability to make decisions and creating paralysing self-doubts. Berthe, usually confident, has found making decisions difficult, not necessarily big decisions but, for example, she'd have to make a phone call to a colleague and would agonise over it for a long time. She also found herself feeling emotionally labile at work, sometimes getting upset and tearful, sometimes angry or frustrated, sometimes feeling very aggressive when slighted or undermined by male colleagues, often the case in meetings when they start 'mansplaining' some basic concept to her!

# BERTHE

## University Lecturer

**AGE** 52

**GENDER** Female

**NATIONALITY** Dutch Citizen of Congolese heritage

**FAMILY SITUATION** Lives alone but has a partner and active social life

**JOB/CAREER** Works at Aarhus University lecturing in Women's Studies, gender diversity and critical race theory which she is passionate about. She also supervises PhD Students.

**PERSONAL THOUGHTS ON GENDER EQUALITY** Very aware of gender equality, is an active campaigner. She is considered an expert on some issues.

## ATTITUDES AND EMOTIONS

- Berthe feels an internal conflict; whilst being up to date on women's issues and gender equality, arguing for your own rights is another matter. She feels embarrassed and suddenly much more aware of ageing and her age in the workplace. She feels as if drawing attention to herself in any way will flag up her age and potentially attract discrimination. She had one conversation with her female manager who suggested she was probably 'a bit depressed' and should book an appointment with her doctor. This shocked Berthe and in the moment she could not react. Afterwards, she felt enraged that her life stage was being medicalised and pathologised as abnormal.

## MOTIVATIONS

- Berthe is not quite sure how to deal with the challenges she is facing. She feels she should speak up for women of her age facing the same issue, yet it feels career-limiting. Ethically, it's a personal challenge to her. The emotional exhaustion of managing the situation and trying to have enough energy for work and keeping herself well is exerting a toll and lately she has been wondering about other career options. This troubles her too. It feels like a cop out. She thinks she should have one last substantial job as part of her career trajectory, but she asks herself if she could make professor in her current mental state. She'd like a more highly paid job to contribute to her pension for another ten years ideally.

## WORK SITUATION

- Berthe is rated highly by colleagues. She can be a bit intimidating. Colleagues have noticed that recently she's 'gone off the boil' a bit. Her direct reports find her snappy, contrary and occasionally unreasonable, yet on some days she can be so understanding and empathetic. To be honest they are a bit puzzled.
- Her manager has noticed her dip in concentration and wonders if she might be a bit down. She had a bereavement in the last year which she perhaps never dealt with fully. If she wants to make professor she'll have to bring in more research money and add to her publication list; she started writing a book and the progress has stalled.

## Manager's questions

- As a younger female manager it would be useful to have more understanding about the issues Berthe is facing; what action should I take?.
- I checked with HR and they said to refer her to her doctor. I think I should do more, but I don't know what to do. What should I do? If I refer her to her Doctor, will she take offence?
- Should we have a proper policy? It needs to be well researched too otherwise Berthe will pick up on that.
- How do I tease out what's causing Berthe's issues? I don't want to offend her - I am actually a bit scared of her. Should I own up to my own insecurities and request someone more senior attend the meeting with me to support my development? Would this anger Berthe? What should I say?

## Peers/colleagues' questions

- Does anyone come to work 'to work' anymore, rather than banging on about pet issues?
- Staff try to be understanding of managers, but it's often not two-way. When they want understanding from managers, they are told to just get on with it.
- Why is there such unfairness?
- Some males are saying they have the same issues with women in their lives; could they have more knowledge about the menopause and how to support family members?
- It feels like there's a climate where you have to declare everything, what about privacy?



## Individual's questions

- I'm a so-called expert on intersectionality and yet I'm quiet when I've felt multiple aspects of discrimination and marginalisation...why do I find it so difficult to recognise the personal and political coming together in my own life?
- Why didn't I challenge my manager and what am I going to do about it?
- I'm not depressed. I feel assumptions were made when I lost my father, but actually it was a relief. I was much freer to live my life. Why is bereavement so taboo?
- If I stay in this role or seek promotion in this organisation, I need to be able to think more clearly, so what support do I want?
- This organisation is poorly equipped to deal with menopausal women; how can colleagues be educated?
- How could this be an opportunity to make some real changes?

## Policymakers' questions

- As with many gender issues, it's a challenge to ensure that there is ownership throughout an organisation and that this is not just 'owned by women'. Why are women's issues so marginalised?
- Policy makers have expressed an interest in engaging menopausal women to inform policy yet are a in a bind; it's been suggested that it labels people and is potentially discriminating against them. How do we best make progress?
- The organisation is signposting people to external resources until what action to take can be decided; a strategy is needed. Where should policy makers start?