

## Too hot to handle?

*“It’s like a volcano slowly erupting in the centre of my being. It comes with little warning. No consistent trigger. A rumble of heat starts deep within my abdomen and quickly spreads upwards and outwards throughout my body. Soon my face is red, there’s sweat pouring down forehead, my back can get sopping wet in seconds and in the process, I’m left gasping for relief. It’s only a vague sense of appropriateness that stops me from flinging off my clothes, pushing open the windows or giving in to the temptation to go and dance in the rain. It doesn’t last. The flush can pass as quickly as it begins but the discomfort lingers: the heat soon turns to cold, the sweat begins to seep through the clothing leaving damp patches in places that are impossible to hide and the persistent question “how much did everyone else notice?” keeps turning over in my mind.”*

Hot flushes are one of the best-known symptoms of the perimenopausal phase of life. They are not a universal but certainly a frequently occurring phenomenon as oestrogen levels deplete. Some women get them sporadically – others endure them multiple times a day – combined with their close relative, the night sweat, they can make life deeply distressing.

Many women report that medical treatments like Hormone Replacement Therapy are effective in keeping this symptom at bay. Such symptom-relief is a kindness of the Lord. But some women have reasons for not wanting to go on HRT. Some women find the symptoms don’t subside as much as they would like. When the flushes are coming thick and fast, it can be tempting for women to withdraw from social events, from serving, from church and hide away.

### **Personal strategies**

There are some simple accommodations that many women find helpful. Tweaks to diet to avoid too much caffeine, too much sugar, or too much spice can bring some relief. Clothing and bedding that is more accommodating of sweat can minimise the visible effects of the flushes. Keeping rooms on the slightly cooler side can bring some relief – though no-one wants to be cold. Sitting at the end of a row at church, rather than in middle, can make it easier to slip to the restroom to splash some water on the face or neck. Even gentle exercise (just a walk not a marathon) seems to help the body cope better with the changes it has to face. None of these are foolproof strategies for making the symptoms go away, but they can help keep some of the worst of the flushes at bay.

### **Relational encouragement**

Close friends can play an important part in helping each other persevere. Talking about the experience of flushes can be useful. Women are helped by realising they are not alone in experiencing these strange sensations – not alone in finding the process hard. It is unlikely that women will want to talk about hot flushes with people they don't know well but close friends can offer a safe place to express and share tips. Humour can play a part too. Stories of making a detour in the supermarket to walk down the frozen food aisle one more time or quickly popping into the kitchen to make a cuppa (but cuddling a packet of frozen peas once there) can become fuel for making each other smile. Laughing as well as lamenting really can help.

### **Communal accommodation**

At church, developing a sensitivity to how hot flushes may impact people when meeting together is wise. Allowing people to sit at the end of a row – rather than asking them to move in - can be a big kindness. Providing a couple of fans that sit at the back of the church – alongside a jug of water and box of tissues – means people can quickly and quietly grab what they need without it being massively obvious that they are having a hot flush. Such items may be a blessing to many others in the church as well. Periodically asking everyone who serves if there is anything the church can do to help them in their service is a blessing – not everyone will want to talk about their experience of the menopause, but some will. Some may ask to step back or serve in different ways. Holding evenings on the menopause where everyone: men, women, young and old can come to better understand and encourage each other can be something that helps the whole church to grow.

### **Spiritual growth**

Hot flushes bring big questions about the Bible's view of aging, how we are called to view our bodies when they are not functioning, how we handle the struggles with fear of man that occur when we feel embarrassed by our beetroot face, and how to persevere when life is hard. Being willing to open Scripture together and pray together in this season is a wonderful thing. Acknowledging that since Genesis 3 our bodies have been decaying, brings a reminder that the symptoms of increasing age are to be expected. Exploring Psalm 139 reminds us that our struggles are known and seen by the Lord. The words of the Psalmists and prophets like Habakkuk give us permission to pour out our hearts to the Lord saying, "how long?". Hebrews 10 shows us a little of how to persevere through hardship with eyes on Christ. Ephesians 4 reminds us of the place of the church in speaking words of hope to one another. Psalm 23 reassures that our Shepherd is leading us through this season and will not fail to provide or protect. Glimpses of

the resurrection body ahead can help us know that whilst there is struggle now, there is something better to come.

A hot flush is never going to be a pleasant experience. But together – with the Lord and with our church family – there is the potential to navigate this season together and do so with hope because our eyes are on Christ.