

# S2: #21: Stella Duffy: What is it like to be postmenopausal?

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## **SPEAKERS**

Joyce Harper, Stella Duffy

### **Joyce Harper 00:00**

I welcome to my podcast. Why didn't anyone tell me this? With my guests, we are discussing reproductive health issues and issues that affect your health in general, and debunking some of the many myths around our health. And in this series about embracing age today, is a great pleasure to talk to the wonderful and amazing Stella. Duffy about what is it like to be post menopausal. So a little bit about Stella. Stella has written 17 novels. Her last novel, lullaby Beach, was published by Virago in February 2021 she has also written and devised 14 plays and written over 70 short stories, including several for BBC Radio four. Her collected stories are published by salt in everything is moving. Everything is joined. She has won many awards, too many to mention, and she wrote and presented the BBC documentary How to Write a Mills and Boone, which I need to listen to. In addition to her writing work, she's worked in a theater for over 35 years now. Stella is a regular speaker and campaigner around LGBTQ plus women's and arts equality and inclusion issues, and she was awarded the OBE for services to the arts. In 2016 she is multi talented. She is a qualified aerobics teacher, running workshops in yoga for writing, and this year, was awarded a doctorate in existential I'd have to be careful. I said that psychotherapy, which we're going to hear about today. And her research was in the embodied experience of post menopause. How fantastic is that? Welcome Stella.

### **Stella Duffy 01:50**

Thank you, Joyce. It's brilliant to be here with you now.

### **Joyce Harper 01:54**

Stella and I, we've had quite a few conversations, and we talk a lot, so we're going to try. I had so many questions for her, because she's done this wonderful piece of work with post menopausal women. But we're going to start at the beginning. So Stella, I always love to start by asking my guests what led them to the career they're doing now. And you've had such an interesting career journey. So I mean, I'd love to hear about your novels that you wrote leading up to your PhD. So over to you.

### **Stella Duffy 02:26**

Wow. Okay, so that's only the gap between 17 and 61 I'll see how quickly I can do that. Joyce, okay, so I'm the youngest of seven kids. I think that made a strong impact on what I have done with my life. I

was born in a council estate in South East London. My dad had come over to fight fascism in 1939 from Aotearoa, New Zealand, his native country. And my mum was a South London working class girl, and they got together, and between them, they had seven children just after the war. And I'm the youngest of those kids, and there was some difficulties about being the youngest. It was that we didn't have money. It was definitely a struggle, certainly in the 60s. But there was also some huge benefits. Anyone who was the youngest of a large family will know that you're not brought up just by two parents. If you're like me. You have several older siblings who think that you belong to them as well. And so the difficulties were getting a word in edgeways. So I became very good at shouting, being very loud, and getting attention. But the benefits were, there were a lot of people to care for me when I was five years old, we moved back to Aotearoa, New Zealand, where my dad had grown up, and the five older ones all stayed in Britain. It was Swinging London. It was 1968 they were in their late teens, early 20s. Why would they be economic migrants, you know? So we moved from here to New Zealand, and I had the great privilege of growing up in a town, a timber town that most people would drive through. It's definitely not a tourist destination, but this population was 70% Maori and Polynesian. So I grew up with Maori families, Samoan, Tongan, Nue and Fijian kids, lots of white families like my own, who are economic migrants from Scotland and Wales and Britain, Holland, but also this indigenous, native Aotearoa culture that does a lot of interesting things. One is Maori culture in particular, but all the Pacifica cultures have a space for older women. So I grew up perceiving older women, not as a problem. And when I say Pacifica culture, these were my mates, these were the kids who lived next door. It wasn't like we were the white people here and they were the brown people over there, because it was a small town. And because the population was was more brown than white, certainly the part of the town that I lived, the posh kids lived on the edges. We lived in the middle, because Mum and dad both worked at the mill. I grew up in a culture that really understood extended family, that had massive respect for the land and the water, and understood an oral storytelling culture. And it wasn't until much later that I realized that my love of theater and performance probably was influenced by that. You know, Maori people shared stories with moko tattoos, with weaving, with carving, and it was only writing that was imposed in the English language when the Colonials arrived, taking over someone else's land. So I was really fortunate to have that in my upbringing. I was also really fortunate unlike all of my siblings, I'm not just the first in my family to go to university. I'm the first in my family to say to stay at secondary school long enough. There just wasn't enough money. You know, my parents were struggling post war, as were many working class people and the other kids, all had to leave school and get jobs. And even the other sister, who moved to New Zealand, she left school at 16 and got married, had babies, had four kids by the age of 20. We breed a lot in my family, until we got to me. So I had always understood performance and storytelling to be really important, and I had the great good fortune. And I think education is such a privilege, and I think we often forget that of going to university, not really knowing what I wanted to do, because no one I knew had gone to university to get a job. There were no doctors or lawyers or, you know, business professionals in my family. So I went and I did English literature and drama and fun things that I loved. And then when I was 23 I came back to Britain. I wanted to see where I was born. I wanted to get better, to know my older siblings. One of them had died in the interim, and that felt like a big loss, and I never got to know her as an adult. And I thought I was going to stay for three to five years. And I got into doing stand up, this is in the 1980s and improvisation and improv comedy. And I learned how to write through doing that work, and I started becoming a writer. Met my wife, who is also a writer, and thought, I thought I was going to stay three years, five years, but I met her, and she's Kolkata, born like both of her parents, and they moved here when she was two, and the

rest of her life, she'd only ever lived in London, and we're still here after 34 years. So all of these things sort of combined for me to I started performing, out of performance, improvisation in particular, I started writing. I was very fortunate. I sold my first novel just before my 30th birthday. And it's really important to say this, I sold my first novel for 1500 pounds. Now, at the time, that felt like loads of money for me. I was earning almost nothing being a pretty rubbish stand up and a very adequate improviser. At the time, I was rehearsing in a church hall in Kennington and Shelly, my wife drove across London long before mobile phones. This is in 19 this must be 1992 because it was just before my 30th birthday. And the first thing she said she watched the rehearsal room, and I was like, oh my god, Something terrible's happened. And she said, how do you want your name spelled on the on the spine of your book? And I knew that she was saying that they bought it, and that was really thrilling. And I think a lot of people think that writing pays you truckloads of money. Well, I'm a literary novelist, you know, and it's not truckloads of money, just discovering, actually, that academic writers don't get truckloads of money either. But all of this feels like it's come together now in my creative work in psychotherapy, and I've had cancer twice. I had cancer in my mid 30s. The first time, chemotherapy made me menopausal, and that made me infertile, just to the point that Shelley and I were trying to have children with a baby father. She did get pregnant, but she miscarried when I was having radiotherapy, and I had five embryos made before I started chemo, and every single one of them died in me. And when you're a gay couple, you don't get a happy accident. And like a lot of people who have tried to have children, and it just gets too brutal to keep trying. We made the decision to stop trying. My body wouldn't have been able to anyway, and she just kept not getting pregnant after the miscarriage. And it was a really hard choice, but it was the right choice. And in fact, we met you through fertility fest. And so out of that, I found a therapist for my first cancer, a cancer specialist, and then when I had breast cancer again at 50, it really slapped me. I was doing work that I love. I was being a novelist. I was I'd founded an organization, fund palaces, that supports communities all across Britain to co create their own cultural creative events, trusting that people in the community, people like my family, working class, people who don't necessarily have the privilege of education and access to expensive arts, can run brilliant things for themselves, if we just give them a try and support them to do so that we don't have to fly in experts all the time. I mean, I'm very keen on experts, and particularly in the menopause world, keen on the experts. But in terms of the arts, I believe that everyone is creative, and I perceive creativity not just to be arts bound. So now, having come to psychotherapy in my mid 50s, I did a foundation course at 55 then I started this doctorate program that is four years, and it led me to where I am now, which is I love my psychotherapy practice. I see clients in a private practice. I work with couples and with individuals, and I've done some group work. Next year, I'm going to start teaching on the course that I trained on, which I'm really excited by but largely the thing that really impressed upon me was that here I was white working class girl thinking that academia is for other people, people like you, Joyce, with the name professor you know, in front of it, despite that, of course, everyone's had a journey to get here, right? All of us, none of us were born professors or doctors or whatever. And I was really uncertain that I could do the doctorate, but I had a huge amount of support from the existential therapist I was working with from my supervisors. And the reason I wanted to write about post menopause is I've been post menopausal for decades. You know? I've been postmenopausal since my late 30s. And what I understand is that my life isn't over because I'm postmenopausal. My life isn't terrible because I'm post menopausal. A lot of things about the menopause transition were terribly difficult for me. Having 40 hot flushes an hour at the same time as chemotherapy or radiotherapy is not recommended. You know, it was really brutal. Losing my fertility at that age was really brutal. So when menopause got all muddled

up with these other really hard things, and what I found difficult about the minosphere at the moment is this heavy negativity that it's the worst thing that can happen to us, that it's the most brutal thing. And that is not, as I said, mine was shit too, not denying the hard stuff, but, and it's a transition and out the other side, and even towards the end of coming out the other side, we might have to make a bit of an effort. And existential therapy really cares about this effort. What choices are you making? What changes do you want to make? But like puberty, like motherhood, like the transition from perceiving oneself to be fertile, to be to understanding oneself to be infertile, like marriage, like monogamy, like non monogamy, like divorce, like any major life transition. Menopause is a serious and major life transition, and if we approach it as a transition rather than as an end, then there's a whole, at least a third of our lives yet to live. And I'm excited about how we might creatively choose to live that, not as a novelist or a painter or maybe, but what choices do we want to make? What are the creative choices for me? And by the time we're 51 and a half British average age for menopause, or 48 global average age for menopause, we are beginning to understand the shit we've put up with, the fewer fucks that we now want to give and this rest of our life gives us the opportunity in that transition to make some choices, some choices that support me, that support each one of us as who we are now Beth long winded way of how I got here, but that's it.

**Joyce Harper** 14:21

This is why I love you. Oh, my Goodness me. Everything you said, just honestly, it's so fantastic. We are so on the same page. It's, it's really amazing. Lots of things I want to go back and dig into now about your amazing, amazing life. So I'm, I don't know if I've told this, I am the youngest of five, so I, I'm I'm with you. I shout very loudly. I even had a hearing test. Well, I think we recognize this in each other, right? And we talk a lot because otherwise no one was going to listen to us. It was the only way. In my. House we did with my grandparents, so there was actually nine of us in that in a three bedroom semi in Harrow. And my I did have an uncle who was who's a doctor, but none of my siblings went beyond O levels. In those days, I was the only one of my siblings. So I think being that younger kid. I don't know whether we thought we had to show everyone that we were it's fine, it's fine. We didn't, yeah, so so much.

**Stella Duffy** 15:33

There's also a desperation not to miss out. I don't know about you, but I would have to go to bed, and they were still up and talking to each other and watching telly and having conversations for hours, and it was like, I'm missing out. I want to be where the people are.

**Joyce Harper** 15:49

I think, I think for me, actually, I think I grew up too quickly. So my I went through puberty, quite young. I went through puberty nine so I had, I looked old. I had big boobs and everything so and with the oldest siblings, I felt that, you know, I went to a nightclub when I was 14. Still go to nightclubs now, or day to day clubs now, but went to pubs and we were 13. And so with my kids, I was really trying to be sure that when they were 12 and 13, they were still kids and they weren't trying to be adults. So I think I grew up very quickly from being the youngest. Did you feel that?

**Stella Duffy** 16:27

Yes, but my reasoning was because when I was five, we moved to Aotearoa, New Zealand, I became my mother's confidant. She was desperately homesick, desperately missing the older children, and my next up, sister was just getting into her puberty, the boys that she fancied, all of that she wasn't interested and I was way too young to be my mother's confidant. She didn't have anyone else you know her. My parents relationship wasn't great, so she told me everything far too young. There's a psychotherapeutic term that I've literally only just discovered. It's a parentified child that we end up becoming parents to our parents and I also see people often talk about what it's like to be the eldest girl. I think there's a not dissimilar echo for the youngest girl, particularly of people, there's an assumption that we will be able to look after them in their old age. No thanks to the nurse who, when my mother gave birth to me, handed me to her and said, this one will be a blessing to you in your old age. And my mother told me that time after time after time, and we did get on very well in her old age. So that was lucky. But I think that that there is a place as a youngest child where you end up feeling like you have to, I don't know, take it all on, or live up to a lot of expectations and a lot of hopes, because you know, you're the last one. My mum see your program is called. Why did no one tell me this, but my mother did, my mother, who was born in 1921 and so when people now say to me, Oh, my grandmother's too old. I can't possibly come out to her, or I can't ask her about menopause, I'm like, What are you talking about? That would have been 104 103 this year when I started coming out to myself and then to my mother. When I was about 1718, my mum just looked at me and she went, Yeah, saw a lot of it in the army. I love her because she did, because she was in the army in the Second World War, and so were a lot of dykes. My mum always told me when she became menopausal, and it was after me, when she was pregnant with me, she thought, I'm this is my menopause. She was 41 she thought, well, I've had these other she'd had six other pregnancies, although she's had all these other children, but she'd also had a stillbirth and miscarried twins at seven months. So she'd had a lot of pregnancies. She thought, Okay, this is my menopause. Then at five months she discovered, she realized she was pregnant with me. She went to the doctor, said, I'm feeling this, this and this. And he looks there and went, Hey, you're a mother of six. Can't you recognize that you're pregnant? And we were all born tiny and premature. So she was only officially pregnant with me for two and a half months. Wow. I always knew that my when my mother's menopause came, I knew when her first period was. She was incredibly open. And I think sometimes when we say, oh, people didn't talk about it. I think what we're doing is we're being a bit classist. Maybe middle class women didn't talk about it. I had some women in my research tell me that their mothers did. One black woman tell tell me no, all the Afro Caribbean women in my work were in my family were absolutely stoic, and they got on with it and they didn't talk about it, which of course, goes to all the pressure on black women always to be stoic and resilient. Yeah. So I think, I think that we can say people don't, didn't talk about it. I think we can say some people did, and I think it's important to notice that some people did.

### **Joyce Harper 20:11**

Yeah, for sure. Now you talked, you've talked quite a bit about aging, and about the negativity that we have around aging, which is also a big bug, but I just put on social media today. I got trolled a few weeks ago for writing a negative comment on a documentary that's coming out in the US, and I started watching the trailer, and it was just, oh, these terrible things are gonna happen. Terrible, terrible, terrible, which is, to be honest, a bit like the documentaries we've had in the UK, all about the negativity, and I wrote a comment, and I wrote a bit about the interviews I'm doing. You're one of the

people I've interviewed for my book, and I'm still getting trolled. I'm still getting call yourself a professor. We're having a terrible time. This is happening, and that is happening. How dare you? You're undermining us women. So we have got this battle, but we'll we'll dig into this a bit more in the podcast today, but before we do that, the first question I asked all of the 50 women I've interviewed for my book is, what was their view about aging. So I want to start with that for you today. What? And I know you told me a great response, but I'll let you say whatever you want today. What's your view on aging?

**Stella Duffy 21:24**

I remember what I said then. What my view is today is that I had my first breast cancer at 36 my second breast cancer at 50. Last summer, I had a ruptured brain aneurysm and brain hemorrhage, and this year as well as last. So this year, in the past year, I've had a hip replacement, two lots of brain surgery and a knee replacement. I am so grateful to be aging. I seriously, what's the alternative? And I don't want to be dead. Yet. I don't mind being dead. I'm not keen on the dying part, and I particularly don't want to die in pain. My mother in law, who my wife cared for for nine years, died, upset, in pain, really locked in she couldn't speak by the end, let alone hear or see. It was horrendous, and I absolutely support dignity and dying, but and my preference is to live as long as I possibly can, as well as I possibly can, and that means embracing my aging. Last year, on my 60th birthday, I put a photo of me swimming in a loch. My birthday is at the beginning of March, so swimming in a loch in Scotland, and I said, I'm so excited to be at the beginning of old. Yay for 60. And the amount of people who respond to go, what do you mean? You're not old. I'm 75 and I'm not old. I'm like, Oh my God, what do you think you are? If you're 75 you still calling yourself middle age, because you're not going to be 150 you know all this thing menopause happens at midlife? No, it doesn't. If the global average is 48 only the people who are going to be 96 are in their midlife. You know, the sooner we go, this is how old I am. It's fine with me. Yes, I live in an ageist culture, just in the same way that I live in a heteronormative, sexist, racist, culture, all of those things. But actually, I can root out my internalized ageism. And I think part of the problem when we go, oh, please call me older, not old, or we say, Oh, I don't mind being being an elder, but I'm never going to be elderly, any of those things. What we're saying is there's something wrong with being old and because I've been out for over 40 years, I've really had to work on my internalized homophobia more than once. Because I'm an infertile child woman who is child is not by choice, I have had to work on my internalized pronatalism more than once. These things come round and round and round. We think we've cleared all the shoes out, and then we go, Oh, there I am, slapping myself off again for this or that, or judging myself as not as worthy as other people. It is hard to age in an ageist culture, but we're the people who need to change that, and we change that by embracing the age that we are and the ages we're being becoming

**Joyce Harper 24:21**

We're the same age, and I find I'm always telling everyone how old I am, but I'm Yeah, I love it. I love it, and I want people to know, especially if I'm doing something wacky, like being at a day rave or swimming somewhere, just to say, look, I feel great. I'm 61 I feel absolutely bloody great.

**Stella Duffy 24:46**

And so I don't feel bloody great. I've got these new bits of metal all through my body, but, but I'm still really grateful to be alive, yeah, and I'm really grateful to be getting older. And I live with chronic pain, and that really gets in the way, except that it only gets in the way to the extent that I have to let it and

around letting it, I just want to live as much and as well as I can, and partly that is having the the evidence of my older sisters. So my brother's lovely. I've got one brother and five sisters, one who died when she was 33 um, but my surviving older sisters are just phenomenal women in their late 60s and 70s. They're, they're, they're amazing. One of my sisters when she was on her 60th birthday, one on our sailing halfway around the world trip. One of my sisters has on early on, well, not that early, but relatively early onset dementia, and she's living as best she can with with the knowledge that it's going to keep changing. One of my sisters and her husband moved to Spain, and she's, she's a fantastic Spanish but B goes to art classes in her 70s and is becoming a great painter. Another one of my sisters is never going to stop working, because she's a site nurse for big construction sites. And God, she loves working with building site men, these women. She really does, these women, and my mum, and actually my brother and his wife as well would just have been phenomenal role models of what aging can be, and I'm really grateful to them for that. I'm I love that there are these people ahead of me. And you know, one of the sisters has had a big, several big surgeries. I'm not the only one of us to have had cancer. Another one's walking brilliantly on her new knee. You know, they're all showing me that I can be old and older and as old as them, and I too can have a thriving and valuable and contributing life.

**Joyce Harper 26:54**

Yeah, I absolutely love it. I feel like I'm thriving too, and it's really frustrating. I've also got one brother. I didn't know whether we knew. I've got, there's four girls and one, one brother, I wanted to delve, delve a little bit into your, well, Delve quite a lot, actually, into your PhD and and I, I've done a PhD as well. I found in my 20 I could start my picture when I was 21 and I found it the hardest time of my life. I I was doing a lab project. Lots of things went wrong, but, but I wonder for you, did you actually enjoy doing the PhD?

**Stella Duffy 27:39**

I'm sorry, but yes, yeah, I am. I had never considered myself academic. I mean, when I did go to university, when I was 18, I got a, it's called a 2b in New Zealand, a two, two. And it was I scraped through, because all I was doing was doing plays, putting on plays, writing plays, directing plays. It's all, all I wanted to do. And so I didn't really pay attention to any of that, and I wasn't any good at it, and I didn't care. I have learnt so much in the past five years from my training. Because it's a deep it's a deep prof, so it's a doctorate by professional studies. So half of it was hands on training, working with therapy clients. Worked in the NHS. I worked in a hospice while learning therapy skills. And then the other half of it was theory. And then from the second year, we were doing our own research. And, you know the I you know. Okay, this is gonna because you're a professor, this is gonna sound funny to you. I didn't know, five years ago that when you do a doctorate, or actually even a master's, I hadn't done a master's, you have to do a literature review. I didn't know. I didn't know what a literature review was. I'd never heard the term. I didn't know that I had to go and read all these other people in the field. I honestly thought, because I'd written all these novels, I thought, Oh, I know. I'll just sort of write an academic version of something I care about. That was what I thought it was. And then I discovered I had to do a literature review, find a methodology that suited me, do it, send in an application to an ethics board, although decades of working in theater had taught me how to fill out a risk assessment form. I mean, I'm the woman who knows everything about that there is to know about running with scissors. So there was at least that, but there was so much that was brand new to me, and actually it was thrilling that it was brand new to me. I discovered I was quite good at it. I discovered I liked it. I

discovered that I liked sharing things with other people. And I really discovered that the more I got into this research around post menopause, that there's very little until very recently, written about. Post menopause, that there's very little written about who we are after the transition. And to go back to you saying you've been trolled for saying, you know, could we be less negative? While there is some material written about the problems of negativity bias, and there is some material written about some of the other cultures where they don't seem to have the same experiences in menopause as the largely white western, North European and North American studies we've got to date, and there are some amazing studies by black women researchers looking at Black women in America and their experience, but they're few and far between. So what we've got is we've got a very skewed study so far. We've got a very skewed understanding from a research perspective, because the only people who tend to put their hands up to be part of a research study are ones who are having a shit time. Yeah, those who aren't having a shit time are going ahead, getting on with it, because it hasn't been brutal for them. And to go back to this idea that we might be gaslighting people by saying, well, it's not brutal for everybody, I have a theory that we, quite sensibly, don't interview women in the middle of childbirth to ask them what it's like being a mother. If you asked any woman in the middle of childbirth, or actually, from my perspective as a not mother in the middle of an egg retrieval, which are brutal. If you ask any woman about childbirth, or mum about mothering in the midst of that, they're not going to tell you, it's lovely. They're not going to tell you it's joyous, and they're not going to say and I feel like my life is changing and opening up to something possible and wonderful. Currently, the only people we are talking to about menopause for about the past 20 years have largely, not always, but very largely, been white women, because so much medical research in particular is on the bodies of white people, middle class women, because they've got the time to do a research study. They're not too busy. They're not doing three fucking jobs in a shitty economy that treats them like shit. But also people in the middle of it. When we interview people in the middle of a transition, it is always going to be difficult. I do a lot of work with cat, with clients with cancer. I've done quite a lot of bereavement work. What we know from bereavement therapy is that people want to come to bereavement therapy when their person is six weeks dead, when it's really recent, but a lot of bereavement services say don't come for at least six months, because you need to begin to get some perspective on what you've been through. And actually six months is really early. And the same with cancer treatment. You know, people do want support during cancer treatment, and I really understand that, and I'm happily happy to provide it. But actually when people need a lot more support is often afterwards where they're like, What the hell have I just been through? And so because we're only concentrating on those in perimenopause and the actual year of the menopause transition, what we're hearing is all the stuff, largely about the vasomotor symptoms, but also about the emotional symptoms. What we're not hearing is, now I'm out the other side. Here's my perspective, here's what I learned, here's what was awful, here's what was brilliant. Here's the choices I'm making for me now. So yeah, so for me, making a choice to study post menopause, to look into that, it affirmed where I am and where I've been since I was 37 it affirmed the women around me. My wife's four years older than me, and has been on HRT for quite some time and and very happily. So it's not an anti medicine perspective that I have. I mean, I wouldn't be alive if it wasn't for medicine. But I do think that we need to let in these other perspectives, and we have to be honest. As a white woman, we've got to be honest. So many of the research studies have largely involved white women, and that is not the same perspective as black women, as Asian women, as women from the many global cultures for whom menopause is a release from unwanted pregnancy. Yeah. You know, there's a fantastic study, aminium McCormick, 2021 and I always remember that one, because it's just I was so excited to

read it, where they talk about these Iranian women who found menopause a massive release from unwanted pregnancy, some of whom said they had conversations with their husbands about the kind of sex they wanted for the first time in their married life. So these were women who'd been married very young. So when we in the wealthy white West talk about menopause as globally terrible, I think we need to really pay attention to our privilege, because it isn't terrible for everyone.

**Joyce Harper 35:01**

Yeah, I so, so agree. And I've done a lot of focus groups with women at various stages, and we've done, I've done lots of surveys, and as you say, the people that come forward are the ones that are having the shit time, the ones that are dealing okay are ticking away in the background. And I felt we we had this very warped narrative of the transition itself as well, because 20% of women don't get symptoms, and some of the others, some of the 80% it's quite manageable. So this is exactly why for my book, I very intentionally went to postmenopausal women who felt they were happy and were very inspirational. And so I know, Stella, you and I are going to get in trouble. We're going to get trolled more by the women who can't see that we're talking about post menopause. I made it very clear in a comment that I was that comment I was told about that it was post menopause. But all the messages that are coming through are all about women in the middle, as you said, and I loved your analogy with having a, you know, being in delivery, and also with cancer, you know, when you're in those situations, you know, having your treatment or whatever, you're not the same places as post. And we haven't done a work.

**Stella Duffy 36:21**

Okay, you can't be and I don't, I don't think any of us are suggesting that someone who's really struggling needs to, I don't know, pull their socks up and get over it. Of course, we're not. But I do think there is a place to have, somewhere to look forward to, because our current the conflation of sexism and misogyny and ageism, means that what we're currently largely saying, what our culture is largely saying, is that once you become infertile, you have no value so as a woman, you are valueless because you can't have more children. And I think that people who've had children don't, don't until they get there quite understand how much pressure is put on our fertility as a value. Those of us who weren't able to have children have really experienced it, and that conflates with a culture that thinks that once we're old, we're bad and wrong, that that the only valuable body is a healthy body, and that an aging body is is by didn't of its aging, not healthy. And that's so brutal to us, and when we put those two things together, let alone when you add in being a black woman, being a disabled woman, being a neurodivergent woman, being a trans man who is also menopausing, being a non binary person who is also menopausing, being queer and menopausing when you add those extra intersections in, unless we are offering some positivity, I think we are doing people a disservice. Not to say you have to be positive in the transition. No one has to no but to say, from the other side, Hi, I'm on the other side of the bridge, and I'm here to say that's tricky over here. We've got some lovely drinks. We've got a nice, warm campfire. Joyce has got a rave going. I've got some massage oils out, and we can all have a lovely time over here. You just need to get through and we'll send you care parcels on your journey. Because if we, who are on the other side don't make some space for those who are coming through, then what we're doing is we're going, Oh, I'm fine. It's all fine over here, but you go through it, I would have given anything you know, the amazing work that Danny biddington is doing with menopause and cancer at 36 when there was nothing like this available, I would have given anything to know that there

were other women like me. I mean, it's all pre Internet, and the internet has made such a difference. I would have given anything to have heard from someone on the other side saying, yeah, it was really shit, and now I'm okay now. I'm finding value again in my life. Now that I've come through this, I'm in a place where I can see who I want to be now, how I want to be now, and what I'm going to take from the past and what I'm going to leave behind, because I don't have to take it all with me. I would have loved that. That's what I think we can be for the people who are coming through now, yeah, yeah. I think it's so important for the people that are coming through. And as you know, we're working on developing a menopause education and support program for everybody, being very inclusive. And as you say, listening to everybody. Because it's not just white middle class women that have a menopause, but it's, it was really interesting. Having done one of the events where we were teaching the basics, I felt the energy in the room starting to go down as we went through, you know, the symptoms and the treatments and etc. And I really felt it go down. And then the evening finishes with four.

**Joyce Harper 40:00**

Short videos by some of the many, many women I could have got to do it. We've got short literally one minute, four women talk for one minute about why they thought post menopause life was fabulous, and I felt the energy lift up and that take home from the women in the room was that was that, that those videos at the end were the cherry on the cake. It was light at the end of their tunnel, and they really were leaving. I always want women to leave any event I do feeling motivated and feeling happier than when they came in. If they'd have not had them and left after after. We talked about cognitive behavioral therapy, for example, they'd have been so low. But they left very motivated that, okay, we hear it's going to be shit, maybe, maybe shit, but we, we, there's like four women there told us it was great. And with mine, 50 women I could have, there's another 50 women out there that I know I could have easily interviewed. So there are 1000s of us that are having, as you say, it's not necessarily easy, either. We all have ups and downs. But let's dig into your research. So existential psychotherapy, I did have to Google it. What's it? Me?

**Stella Duffy 41:17**

I only discovered existential psychotherapy, when about 18 months after I was diagnosed with my second cancer, after five different surgeries, I was like, I can't do this. I can't cope. I was running this organization I founded. I was on the steering committee of the that set up the Women's Equality Party. Like a lot of people, I was running as fast as I could away from my cancer, and I just wasn't okay, and I got in touch with the hospital, I said, You got any support. And they tried to find me a therapist, and she wasn't, she wasn't available, and then she wasn't available. And then one day they I was like, I just need somebody. And they're out. They went, Well, we've got a man, and he's a bit younger than yours. I'm I don't care. I just need someone who knows what this is. Anyway, as it turned out, he was an existential therapist, and existential therapy is actually really valuable in life transitions like cancer, like infertility, like menopause, because existential therapy says, Yeah, that's right. Every life has limits. Every life has its boundaries. All of us are going to die. All of us can only really feel what we feel up to maybe the edge of our skin a bit further. No other human being is ever going to get exactly your experience. But because we live in the same world and because we live in a culture, we can try and get as close to each other as possible in therapy and our understanding using the ideas of existential philosophy. And one of the big takeaways for me from that was that I have choices within the boundary of being a 50 year old, twice, breast cancer, childless, not by choice woman, I still had choices within

the boundary of being a 61 year old woman with a whole bunch of thing, chunks of metal in my body. I have choices, and I don't have all the choices in the world, but nobody does. And one of the really important things I think about existential therapy existential philosophy is that it acknowledges the culture that we're in. So we're saying there's all these boundaries that are put on us by by our life, by our existence, but there are also ones put on us by culture. Franz Fanon, the French, French existential writer, black man, writes about going to segregated America in the 1960s and he says, I was over determined from the outside. He wasn't going around thinking I'm a black man, until white people started pointing out how black he was to them. And we get that as women, we get it as older women, we get it as aging women. It comes at us from outside. So existential work says, Well, how do you you've got a choice. How do you want to take that? Do you want to buy into that? Do you want to believe that? Do you want to fight it? Do you want to not fight it because it's too damn exhausting? How do you want to work with your limitations and coming to not even accept, because accept as a hard word for lots of people, but the thing I've landed on these days is agree with coming to agree with the life that you have, and then working with that, I've found to be immensely useful. So that's how I got into existential psychotherapy. That's That's why I find it so creative because it it doesn't predetermine where we're going to go. It's really about working with the person or the couple to find out where they want to go, and then trying to do that alongside them.

**Joyce Harper 44:54**

Brilliant, absolutely great. Now, your research, you interviewed, you interviewed quite a few, but you're. Research. You've analyzed the eight very diverse women that you interviewed, and you had three research themes, and I just wondered whether you can tell us. I mean, it's really hard to do this briefly, but we're not very good at that.

**Stella Duffy 45:16**

That's your four years of work, 20 minutes. Okay, so I did all these pre interviews, and they were 15 minutes long. And out of that, I made a real effort, and you'll understand from ethics boards and things where they really like everyone in your research to be the same. And I was like, Well, no, because everyone in my life isn't the same. So there are black women, mixed ethnicities, women, queer women, straight women, mothers, not mothers, stepmother. There are disabled and non disabled, neurodiverse and neurotypical. There's a range. The only thing I don't have is any trans or non binary people, and that's because the ones who came forward were the wrong age. And I stuck to an age limit, because at least then I could tick one ethics box and go, Well, they're all They're all in that, that group. And there are eight very in depth interviews, and people shared with me what it was like to be being postmenopausal, because it's not one thing you know keeps changing, and it's going to keep changing as we age, as we become even older. And the three main things that showed up for me were the first one that was everyone, and I think this is what is where the perimenopause conversation really happens, the shock of change. Everyone found it shock, even those who were expecting it to come up, even those who had been having the conversations with their sisters or their friends or their mothers or whoever. It was still a shock, because it's an embodied shock. And this I really understand from my experiences of cancer and from my experience of an aneurysm, when the body changes on us without us choosing it so involuntary embodied change. It's always a shock. You know? It's always Oh, my God, what is this? And who am I as it to change it. So the first thing that all of them explored was the shock of change. But after the shock, they began to talk more about living with change, the

accommodations they were making, what it was like, what they did about their vasomotor symptoms. Lesbian couple, for example, one of whom was having terrible night sweats. They ended up sleeping in different beds. It couldn't part of it contributed to the breakup of their relationship. So there's a lot of stories that, oh, lesbians will be brilliant at menopause, understanding each other, not necessarily it depends on the relationship, but it was also about how it impacted them. So one of the black women talks about she had other shit to put up with. Is the truth. She, at one point in her interview, she says, you know, bad as racism is now in the 60s and 70s, it was and she did this. She went in your face, and she goes on to speak about being stoical through her menopause. And I find this really moving. Karanatha talks a lot about the imposition on black women to be resilient, to be stoical, to be strong. And this participant talks about it wasn't terrible that she got on with it, but she didn't give herself any chance to rest, to recover, and it was only later that she realized maybe that could have been a value, too. One mixed ethnicities, women. Woman says that in her becoming herself and her learning to live with change, and I think this is a brilliant bit where she actually says, I realized that becoming postmenopausal got my own shit out of the way, and that she talks about having two black sons and living in a very inner city area, and she said, it got my own shit out of out of the way so I could be there for them, and because for her, two young black men growing up in present day Britain are having a bigger struggle than she is as a mixed ethnicities woman in coming through into post menopause, and then afterwards, they talked about what that means, what it then means to be being post menopausal, and understanding that we are aging and that our menopause is a wake up call to our mortality, and knowing that we're going to die isn't oh god death terrifying. It's Oh death. How do I live towards my death? How do I live towards my death? How do I live towards my death? How can I make it have impetus, and how can I make every day matter knowing that I will die? And so they talked about what they want from their futures. And among them, they talked about sex, you know, and how one of them, one of the lesbian women, she says. Therapies that might be more holistic, that might be about addressing who you are and where you are now, as well as what's going on for you physically, and maybe those things can help. And it's a kind of weird thing, particularly when people are quite good at being holistic about all sorts of other things to go well, we're only going to be medicinal about menopause because it's purely because that's a disease. It's a deficiency disease, rather than it's a life transition. You know, we're not calling you had your first period at nine, so we're not calling eight year old girls deficient in estrogen. No, it would be weird if we did, but we're using this deficiency word for women who are post menopausal. And fuck that. Joyce. I am not deficient, just not neither am I. I'm not having it.

**Joyce Harper 55:49**

We could talk about the perimenopause and the symptoms for a long, long time, but I'm, I'm going to be positively, positive. And you talk so you talked about the sex part. You and I have talked about sex a lot. You've got so much data on that. And it was interesting that when I finished the interviews for my book, I thought, which chapter should I write first? And the one that really sprang out at me was sex. And I've written, I've finished that chapter. It's 17,000 words. So anyone that writes a book knows that is way too long for a Chapter, but it's just, it's the women said. The women said such amazing things. And I've got a little bit about aging and the aging body. And as you said, you might not have penal vaginal sex anymore. You might have sex with someone from the same sex, you know, whatever,

**Stella Duffy 56:40**

if we queer sex in post menopause, what we end up doing is we had different conversations with our partners. I don't care if they're heterosexual. Relationships have a diff. You know the problem for people who have penis and vagina sex when they don't care how brilliant it is at some point in your lives, the penis isn't going to do the thing you want. Maybe the vagina isn't either, and therefore have the other conversations. What other parts of your body get off on things? What other things could you use? The assumption that there's only one way to do sex is so limiting and so just I don't care how brilliant it is, there are always other things to explore. I've written a lot about that. That's exactly what I've written.

**Joyce Harper 57:26**

My editor wants to cut it down anyway, right? Creative post menopause is a term you've used, and I am obsessed with being creative. And I'm not a I'm not a paint. I can't paint. But I asked the women that I interviewed about being creative, so tell us about creative post menopause.

**Stella Duffy 57:47**

So for a lot of us, we get into a career or a role, and we think, Oh, this is me. This is the this is what I am. This is what I'm like. And then maybe a big transition comes along, like a serious illness, like motherhood, like infertility, like menopause, and they were like, Oh God, who am I? I think the Who am I, where am I, how do I want to be? Are the most creative questions we can ask ourselves. And how would I like to be is so valuable. How do I want to be in the rest of my life? So for me, because I've been freelance since I was 17, and I'm 61 now, so that's a lot of years. 44 I think it's 40, um, no idea. Never had sick pay, never had compassionate leave, never had holiday pay, always done the next job that would pay me and that I would enjoy. So in my 20s, I was an actor. In my 30s, I was a writer and an actor. In my 40s, I started directing, writing and acting. In my 50s, I started running this organization, and in my 60s, I'm a therapist that all feels really creative to me in that I followed my love, I followed my passion, I followed my desire, and what I'm suggesting is that post menopause can be if we let it a time when perhaps not all of not all responsibilities are gone, particularly for those who are stuck in that looking after older parents, as my wife did for nine years, and also maybe looking after children who haven't quite left home, as yours are beginning to do, but we can still go, Well, how much responsibility do I want to have, and am I choosing this? And there's a way an existential work that we look at things that we don't feel like we have any choice about, and we see if we can choose it anyway, because the minute we choose it anyway, there's some power in there. So if I look ahead to my next 20 years, so I'm lucky enough to have them, I don't expect this body that has fallen down in lots of ways in terms of having a perfectly healthy body. I don't expect this body to stay fully healthy for the next 20 years. It will surprise me enormously if it did. But. If I did, because I am my body, after all, but I do expect me to take whatever comes and because I've had the opportunities I've had in the past to learn from the heart things, to apply that learning to how I want to be next. And I really believe that each of us can use this idea of, how do I want to be with the life I've got, rather than who, because who I am changes all the time. Anyway, who I was at 25 is certainly not who I'm going to be at 65 I bloody well hope not. Anyway, one of the difficulties about the shock of change is that it makes us go, Well, who am I? It's a brilliant question. You're changing. That's who you are. How do you want to be with that? That's a completely different question.

**Joyce Harper 1:00:48**

And I you mentioned the word change that I think women, I know some are going to get annoyed, and I say this, but we call it the change, and it is a time of changing. And the women I've interviewed have said that they now feel their authentic self. They've actually found themselves by doing what you've what you've just said. And I'm not going to let you get away with our podcast without talking about our common love of wild swimming.

**Stella Duffy 1:01:16**

Yeah. Now when you call it wild swimming, I just call it swimming. I grew up in Aotearoa, New Zealand. In my little town, there were six lakes within 20 minutes drive. The sea was an hour that way, or an hour and a half that way, because my because that part of the island is narrow, we just went, I mean, there was a town pool, but it was unheated, and we had minus 10 degree frosts. Where I grew up, we just called it swimming. And so the sea, for me, is my place of safety, the Pacific in the middle of the night, when it's dark and all you can see is stars, is my safest and most joyous place. But if I can't have that, I'll have Brockwell Lido or Brixton rec I just want to be in the water. And I'm not so keen on what English people often call lakes, but they really mean ponds. I like a big lake, but I just want, I want to be in the water. And I don't stay in long. In winter, I go in, I scream, I get out. I put my head under. I thank the sea for existing and for holding me. And I because I because they're all joined up. When I did my first solo show, I called it. It was about my first breast cancer. I called it breast strokes because about my two favorite things, swimming and cancer. And at the end of that, that show i i talk about how all the seas and the world are joined up, and I can't remember it now, but they are all joined up because you go across the Bering Strait and through the Panama Canal and around the Cape of Good horn, all the seas and all the oceans join up, and the world is more water than it is Earth, And where more water than we are anything else. So for some of us, and I know it's not true for everyone I you know some people, my wife, likes a mountain and a desert. Good honor. She likes swimming too. I've forced her to become a swimmer, and she does love it now, but, but her, her impetus is towards mountains and deserts. But for some of us, water is a home, and water has been in all of my transitions, such a generous home.

**Joyce Harper 1:03:29**

Yeah, I'm so lucky. Today I've been on a meeting where we're going to be doing more research into menopausal symptoms and wild or cold swim, whatever, swimming, swimming, but not in a pool. And I'm very, very excited, because, as you said, it's not everyone's thing, but those women that do it, we are. We rave about it because it does. It does hold us and it makes us feel amazing. I think we're going to have to do the North Sea at sunrise, Stella, so in winter, in winter, the latest sunrise at frinten, where I go quite a bit, is 8.10, you have to get there about half an hour before the sea. The sea is black and the sky is red and orange and blue and every other color. And then being in the water when the sun rises. So any of those sort of friends of mine on Facebook, you'll see a picture of me in the water as the sun was rising in the North Sea, freezing, freezing, but freezing totally. Well, we love it. I find that my chronicle body doesn't hurt when I'm freezing, so that's always helpful. Honestly, I absolutely, I hear so many people say that it's just such, such a relief getting in the water. Certainly my brain, my very busy brain, does clear. It's so good for my mental health. Now, we've, we've talked about so many things Stella now, and we, I'm. Good. We're coming to the end now, and I ask all my guests, have they heard people say, Why didn't anyone tell me this? And if so, what did they ask?

**Stella Duffy** 1:05:13

I've heard lots of people say it, and what I respond is, did you ask? So I asked my mum about all her stuff when I was about 12-13 it's not always on the older generation to take it, particularly if you think that the women 25 years older than us were really trained to shut the fuck up and just get on and the women 50 years older than us were maybe we as the recipients of second wave feminism and ideally third and fourth wave feminism. That's down slightly more inclusive. Maybe it's on us to ask the questions. Maybe it's on us with our great privilege of being able to buy a house, have a credit card without our father or our husband signing off for it, having the pill accessible to us if we want it being queer and getting away with it in countries where it stopped being illegal, maybe it's on us to ask the questions. Maybe we need to stop telling off the people who didn't tell us about it, and maybe we need to be a bit braver with the questions we ask.

**Joyce Harper** 1:06:19

Yes, good. I like a question with the question, um, now I know that you love I know that you love swimming. And lots of people talked about, uh, swimming and water when I've asked so many people, what makes them happy and where's their happy place. So besides water, are there? And everyone says something so different, what makes you happy, Stella, and where's your happy place?

**Stella Duffy** 1:06:45

Watching the telly on a Saturday night with my missus, because I work two nights a week. She sees clients weeknight evenings. And we're so fortunate. Because actually, I think one thing that we probably do need to mention is, as you know, it is more difficult to do these things as a single person in a culture that bangs on and on and on about how the most important thing is to be in a couple. So I absolutely understand my relationship privilege, but after all the shit we've been through, one of the things we love is we have pizza Saturday, and we don't have a takeaway pizza, because, if they're full of shit, we buy the pizza from the supermarket and add the nice toppings that we want, and we share a pizza, and we watch telly, and I haven't drunk for six and a half years, and she's never really drunk anyway, but we might, I'll have a alcohol free cocktail, she might have a whiskey, And we watch telly, and it is a safe place. It is a home place, and it gives me great joy. The other places, I have a tiny garden in South London, and I we have apples, we have a cherry tree, we have pears, we have a grapevine that last year fruited brilliantly. Not so good this year. Last year I made great jelly, grape chutney, grape jam. I love having a garden. And when I've been very ill with my cancers, coming back to the garden has been as because until your scars have healed, of course, you can't go in the sea, particularly given the pollution in our seas in Britain, but coming to the land and putting my hands in the dirt is so well. It's like we're talking about the promise of the future. When I plant bulbs this autumn, and I always get them in late, and it doesn't matter, they come up anyway. You don't have to get your bulbs in in October. It's fine. Everybody. You put them in in January, they'll still blossom when I get around to getting my bulbs in, and my hands are dirty, and I know I won't see those bulbs for three months, four months, and I don't know if I'll be alive, then it's planting a seed for the future, and I love that. So the sea, the earth and mine. This is Lucky me. You are very lucky. And I must say that through the book and asking this question and asking about relationships,

**Joyce Harper** 1:09:12

I have a negative view on long term relationships, because I think was baggage for my parents, etc. But so many of you that I interviewed for the book, I felt such love when you talked about your part long term partners, and there is going to be an absolutely glowing part of the book, really praising those beautiful long term relationships. And I felt, honestly, I felt gushings of love come from the discussions with the women that that it's really made me change my view. I mean, I always, I always wish I had had a long term relationship, but you always your your girlfriend's always moan about all the noise this, and they're that, and they're blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, but hearing everyone say such lovely things now, Stella, I make my own pizzas from scratch, so I'm coming to your house to make you both the pizza from scratch with whatever toppings you want. So the challenge is, and we're going swimming. We keep talking about it, we're going to

**Stella Duffy 1:10:12**

Okay, so you come over and Fanny, you make us a pizza, and we'll all go swimming in the morning.

**Joyce Harper 1:10:18**

We will all go swimming in the morning, I'll bring my fanny my camper van, just in case anyone doesn't know. And the very last question. So I have asked you this before, and I can't remember what you said before, so whatever you like, what advice would you give your younger self?

**Stella Duffy 1:10:40**

It's okay. It's okay. The hard things are really fucking hard, and being scared of your death is deathly frightening. But making making some peace with my mortality when it slapped me right in the face, not going along beside me, like my dad's death and my sister's death and my mother's death, that actually my death, making some peace with my mortality has been so valuable. And I think my younger self couldn't know that until I'd been through the things I've been through. She was terrified, understandably, and I don't mean I won't be terrified again. I'm sure I could, but I know some different things now, and it's been hard won, but I'm glad I've won that knowledge. I'm really glad that I have the knowledge through the infertility, through the cancers, through the aneurysm. I'm glad I know these things, because they make because they're part of who I am. I don't, you know, I don't understand why people say, Oh, I don't regret anything. I regret loads of things, but they're a part of who I am, too. I just embrace them all. Yeah,

**Joyce Harper 1:11:59**

Stella, you are an amazing person. I've always loved, love, love talking with you. I don't know if I said at the beginning, but in the book interviews, you were the longest. By such a long way, we had to do two and a half hours. I did some, several of them in under an hour. But I love you. I love you, and I love your wisdom. And you are someone who has had so much in your life. You really, I mean, goodness me, your list of things is, I've never, never heard anyone that's put up so much, but it has made you this wonderful, wise woman that we all need to listen to. We need to listen to you. And hopefully some of your PhD will be written up as a book. I'm really, really hoping that that gets I'm really excited about that, and all the people that come to see you for as a therapist, I think they're in very, very good hands. And really, Stella, thank you so much for the time, and I'm looking forward to Pizza and swimming. Thank you so much, Stella. We're embracing age everyone.

**Stella Duffy** 1:13:07

Yeah, totally embrace like this.