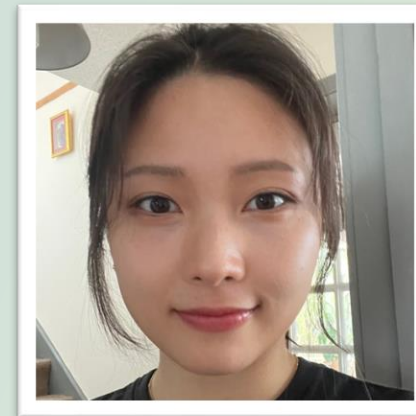
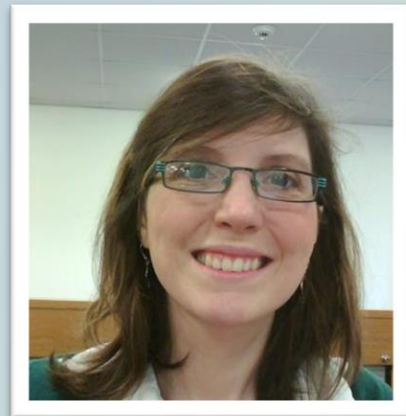


Neurodiversity and the menopause

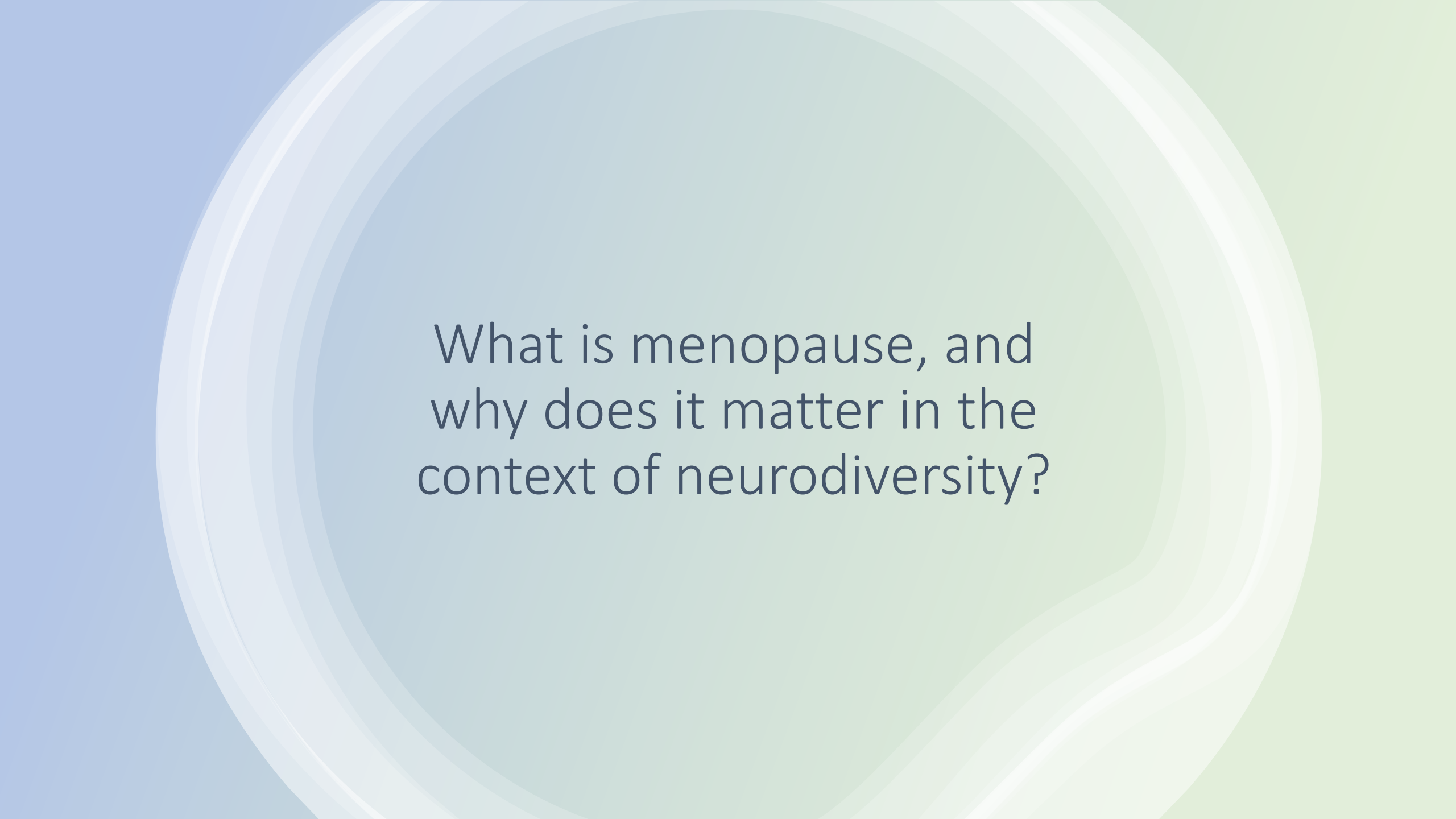
Dr Rachel Moseley and Ms. Eunhee Kim





This talk will cover:

- What is menopause, and why does it matter in the context of neurodiversity?
- Why might menopause be especially hard for autistic (neurodivergent) people?
- What does the research tell us?
- Implications for supporting autistic (neurodivergent) people

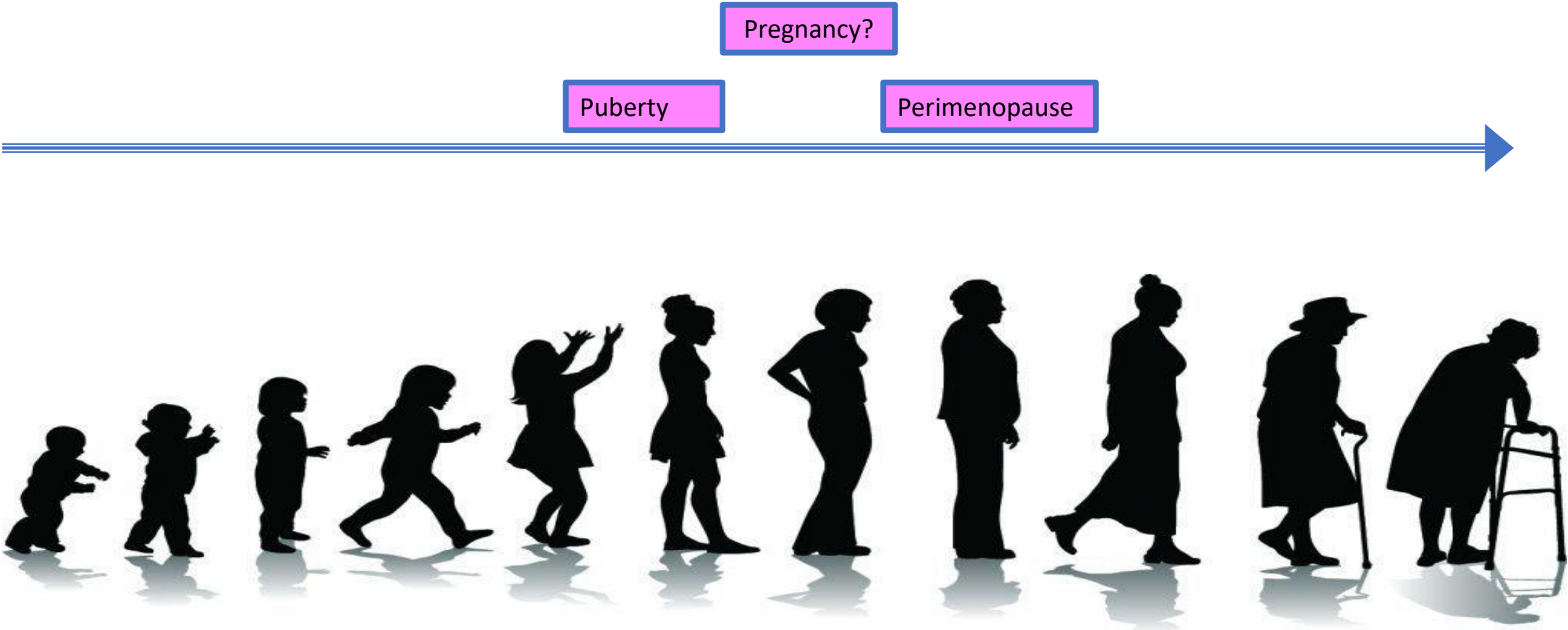


What is menopause, and
why does it matter in the
context of neurodiversity?

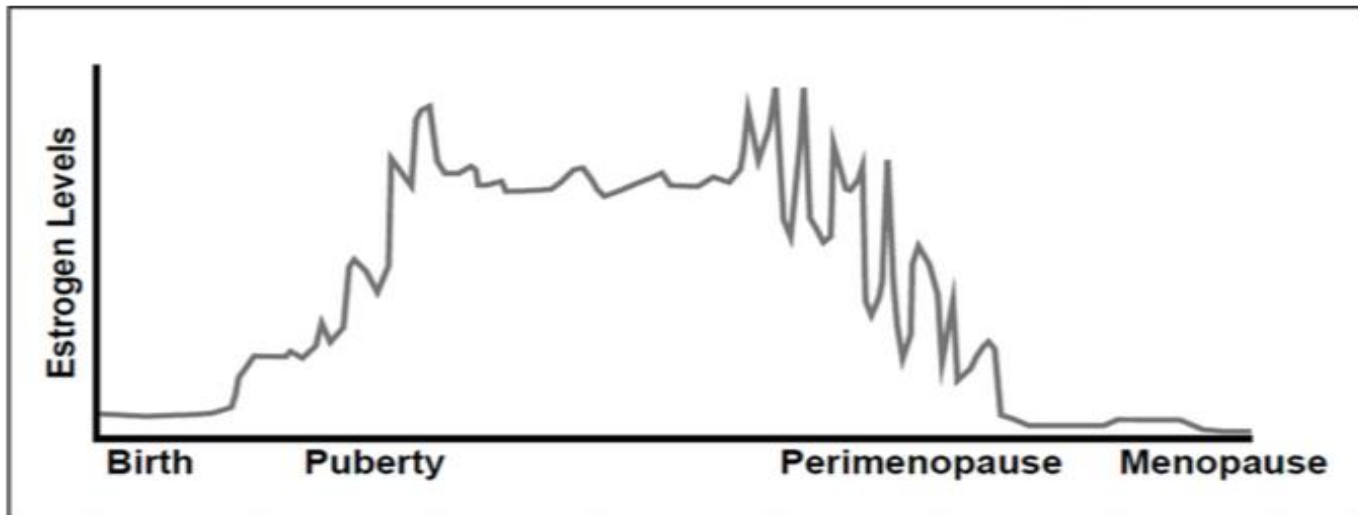
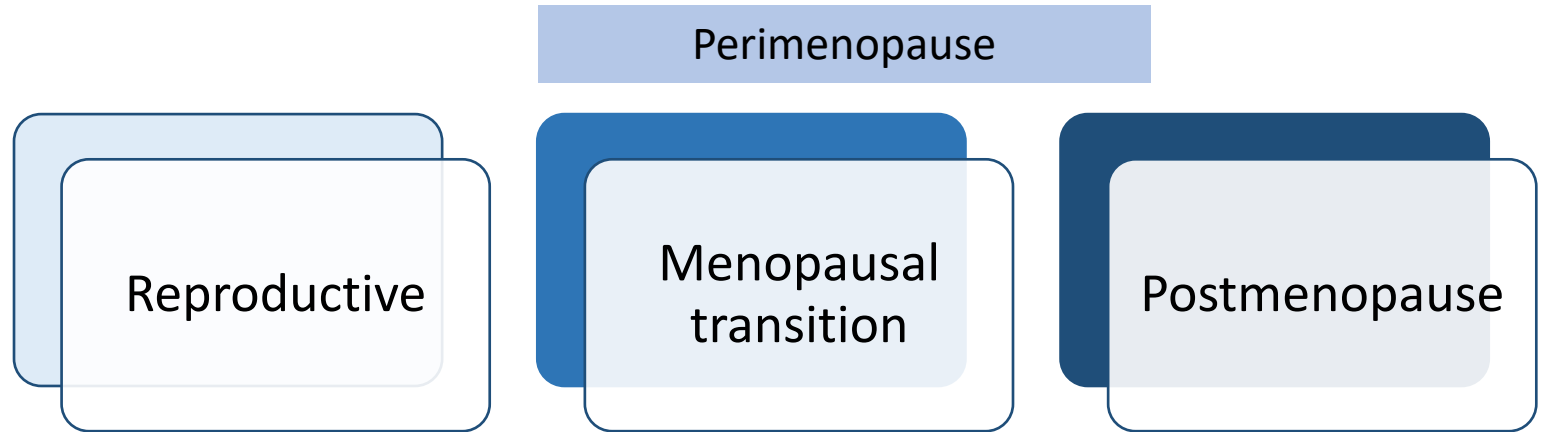


Menopause is *one of several* critical stages in lifespan development...

Reproductive transitions = sensitive phases of increased vulnerability to stress, mental and physical ill-health



Three epochs of the reproductive cycle for people assigned female at birth...



Oestrogen levels across the lifecycle in people assigned female at birth
(Hoyt & Falconi, 2015)

And those symptoms...?

- Symptoms start a few months or years before periods stop
- On average, most symptoms stop about 4 years after last period
- 1 out of 10 women experience symptoms for up to 12 years
- Huge implications for future health and wellbeing

Change in normal pattern of periods

Hot flushes/flushes

Night sweats - night-time hot flushes

Difficulty sleeping – daytime tiredness & irritability

Reduced libido (sex drive)

Problems with memory and concentration

Vaginal dryness

Headaches

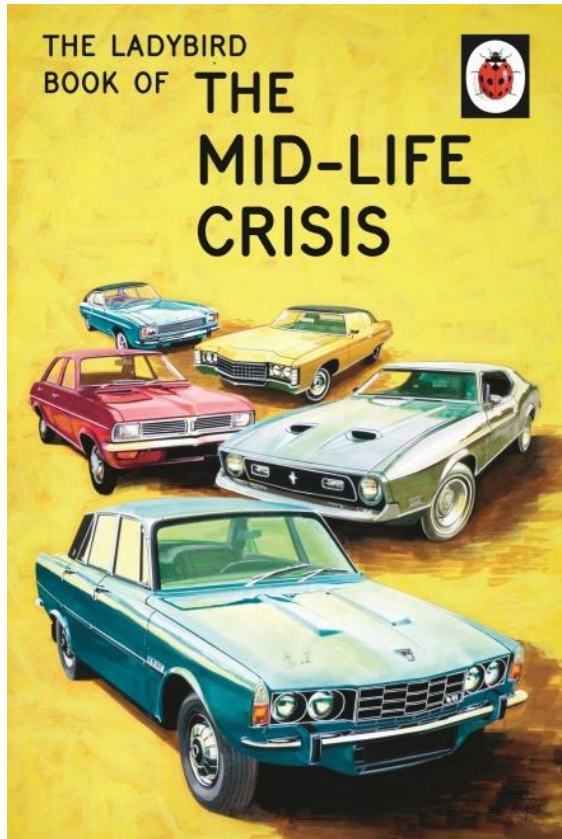
Mood changes – low mood or anxiety

Palpitations

Joint stiffness, aches and pains

Reduced muscle mass

Urinary tract infections



At the same time, you're going through midlife...

- Multiple role demands
- Financial pressures
- Redundancy
- Divorce
- Age discrimination



BEFORE MENOPAUSE

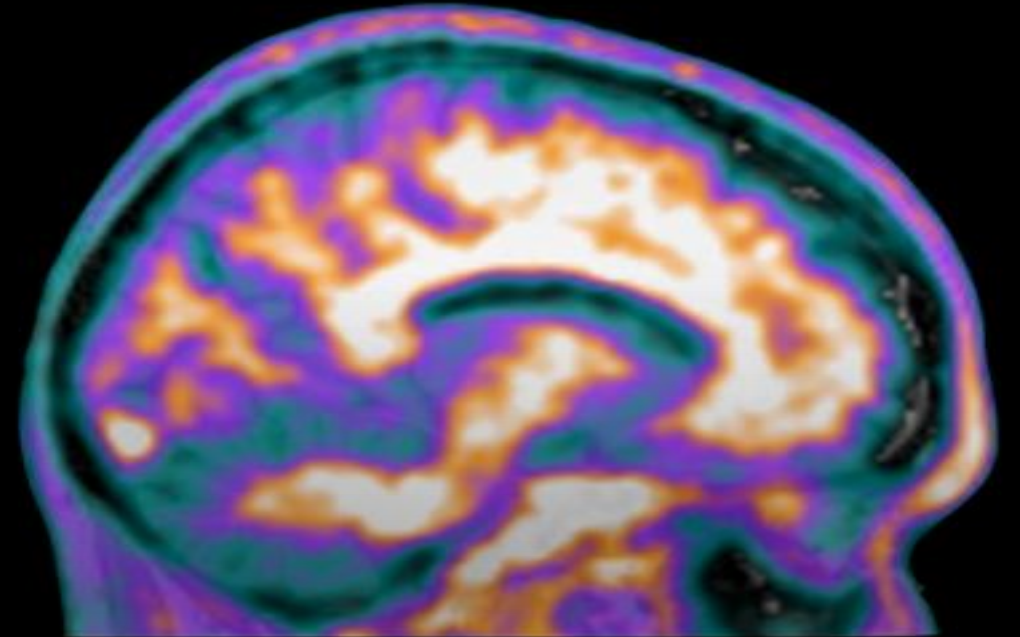
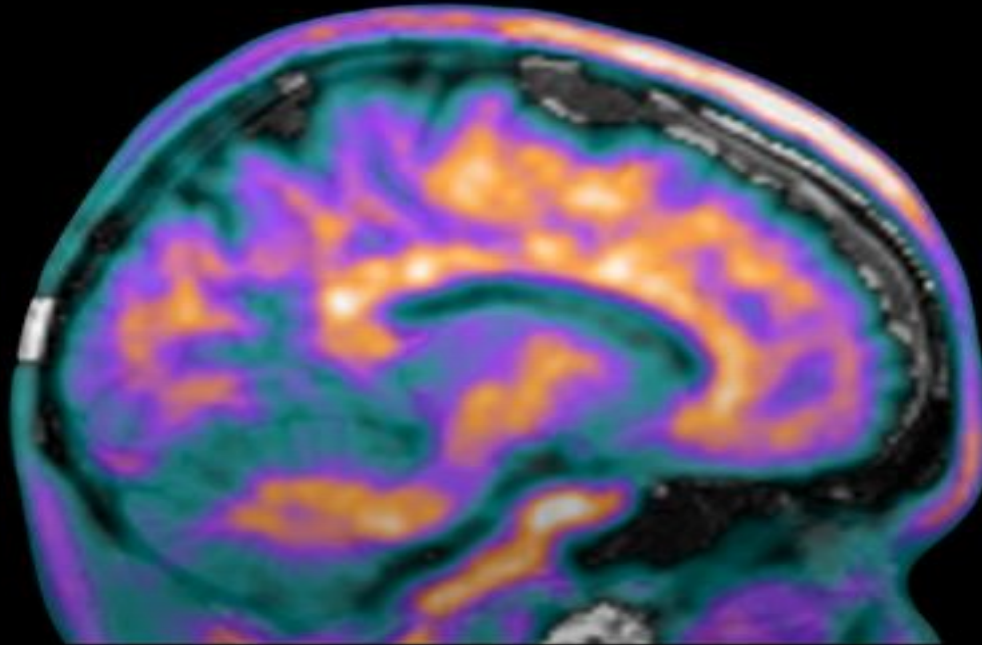
AFTER MENOPAUSE

Estrogen receptor
density

HIGH


LOW

LOWEST



Menopause is a *neurological* transition...

... a time of vulnerability for people with neurological differences, life adversity or physical/mental health conditions

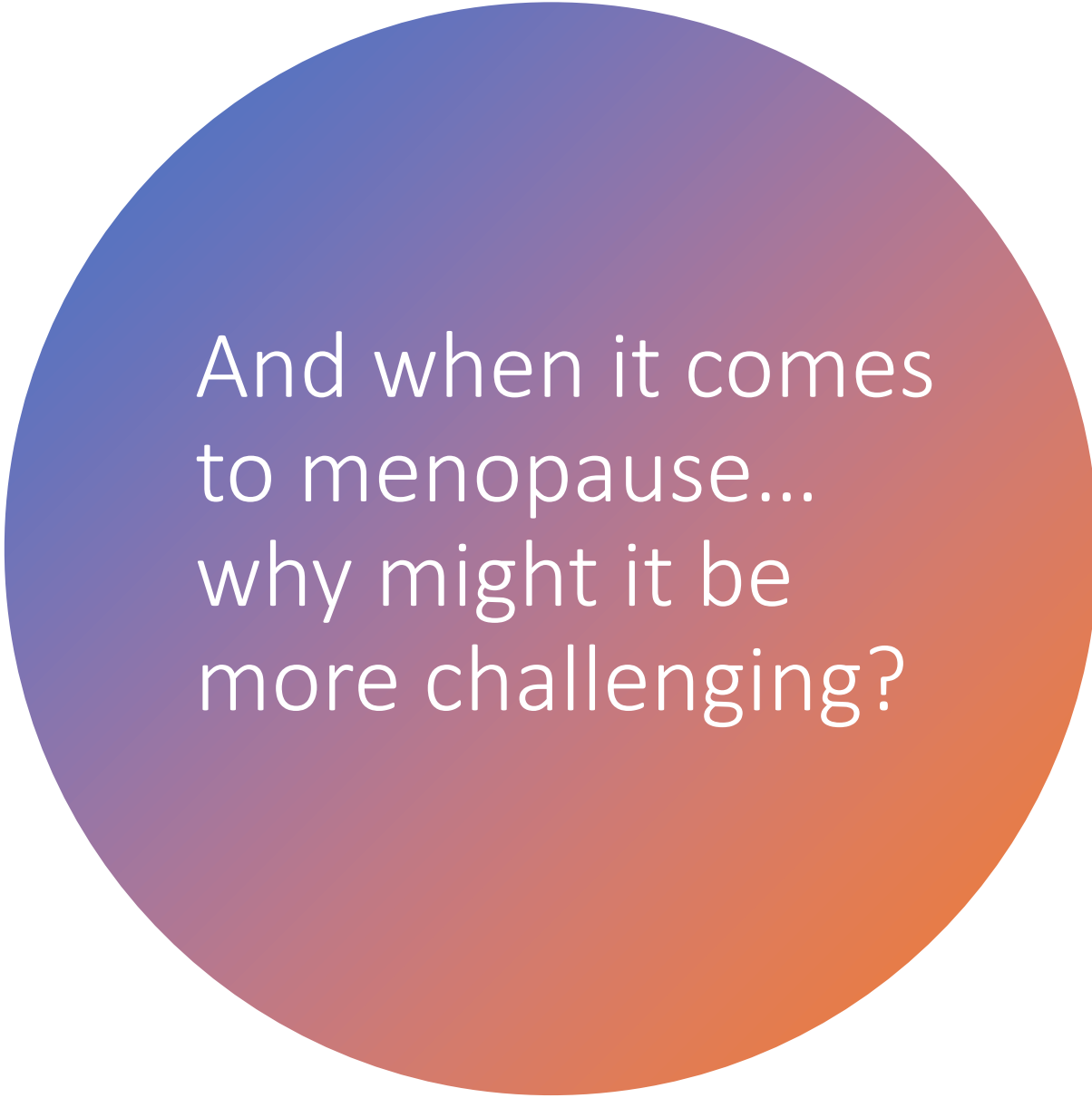


Why might menopause be
difficult for autistic
(neurodivergent) people?




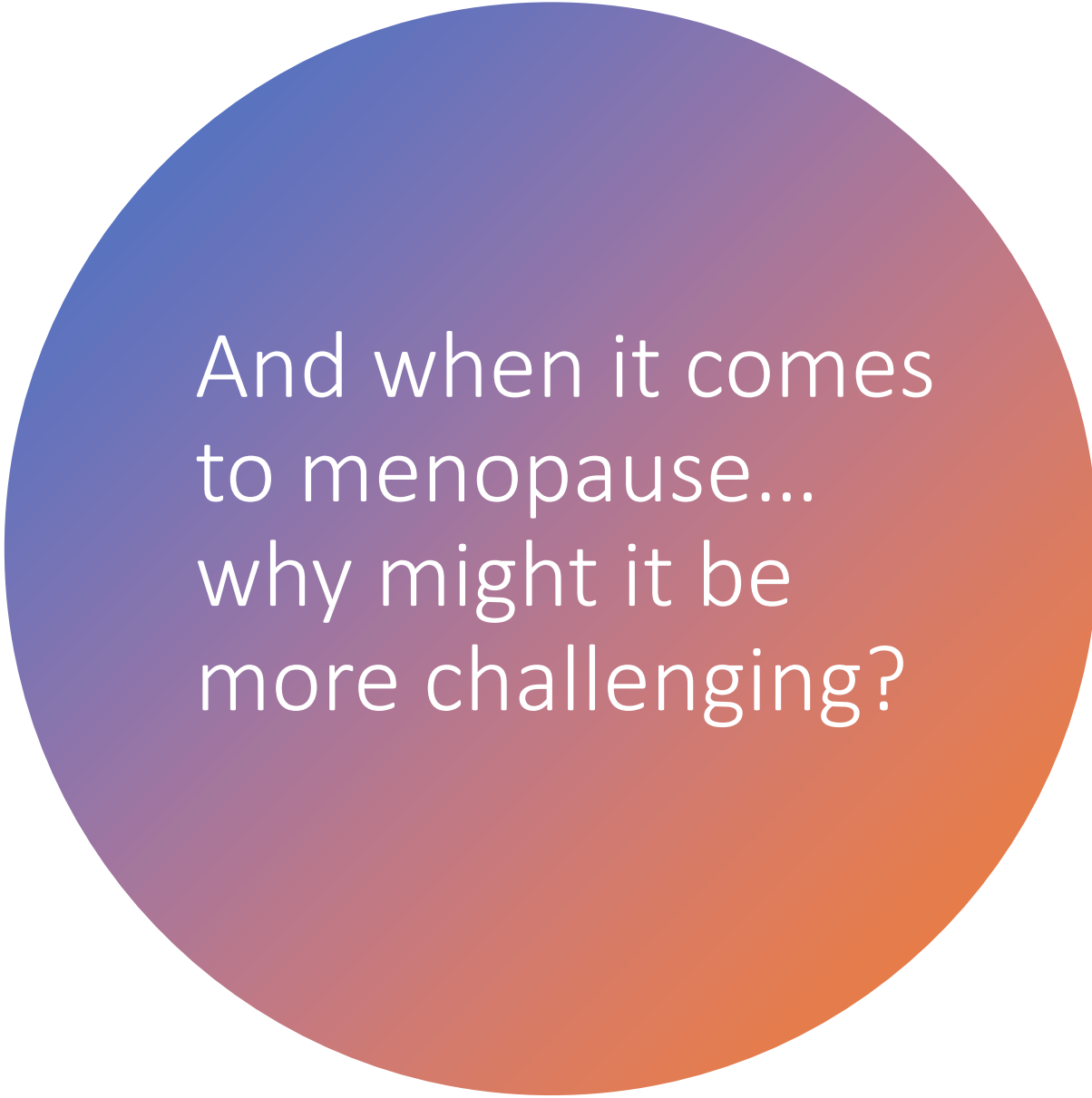
Research tells us that reproductive transitions are really difficult

- Hormone sensitivity
- Menarche, puberty and monthly menstrual cycles are *tough*
- Pregnancy, childbirth and the post-natal period hold their own challenges




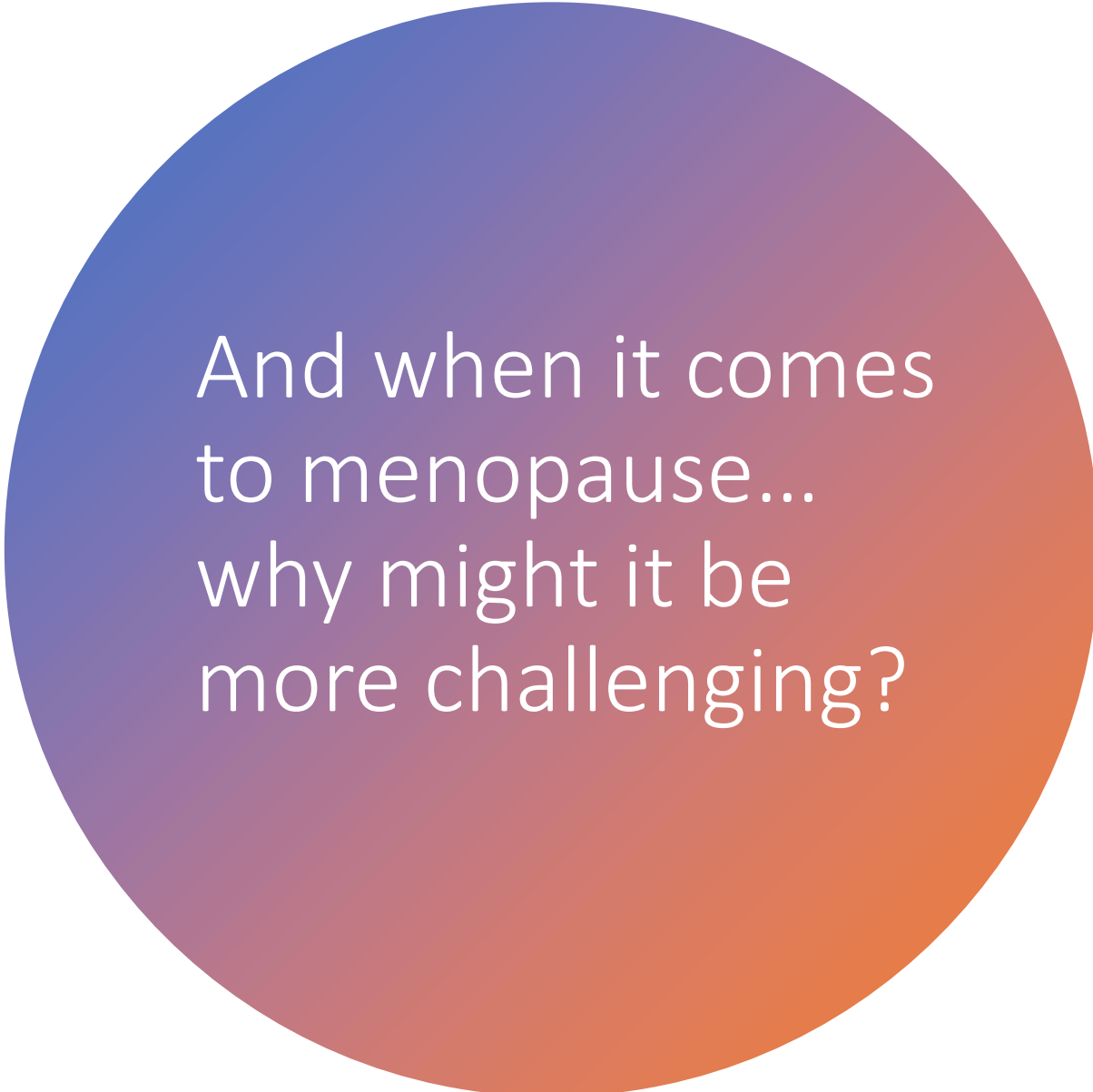
And when it comes
to menopause...
why might it be
more challenging?

1. Your body and mind change in ***unpredictable*** and often ***uncontrollable*** ways – difficult for autistic people who struggle with change
- 



And when it comes
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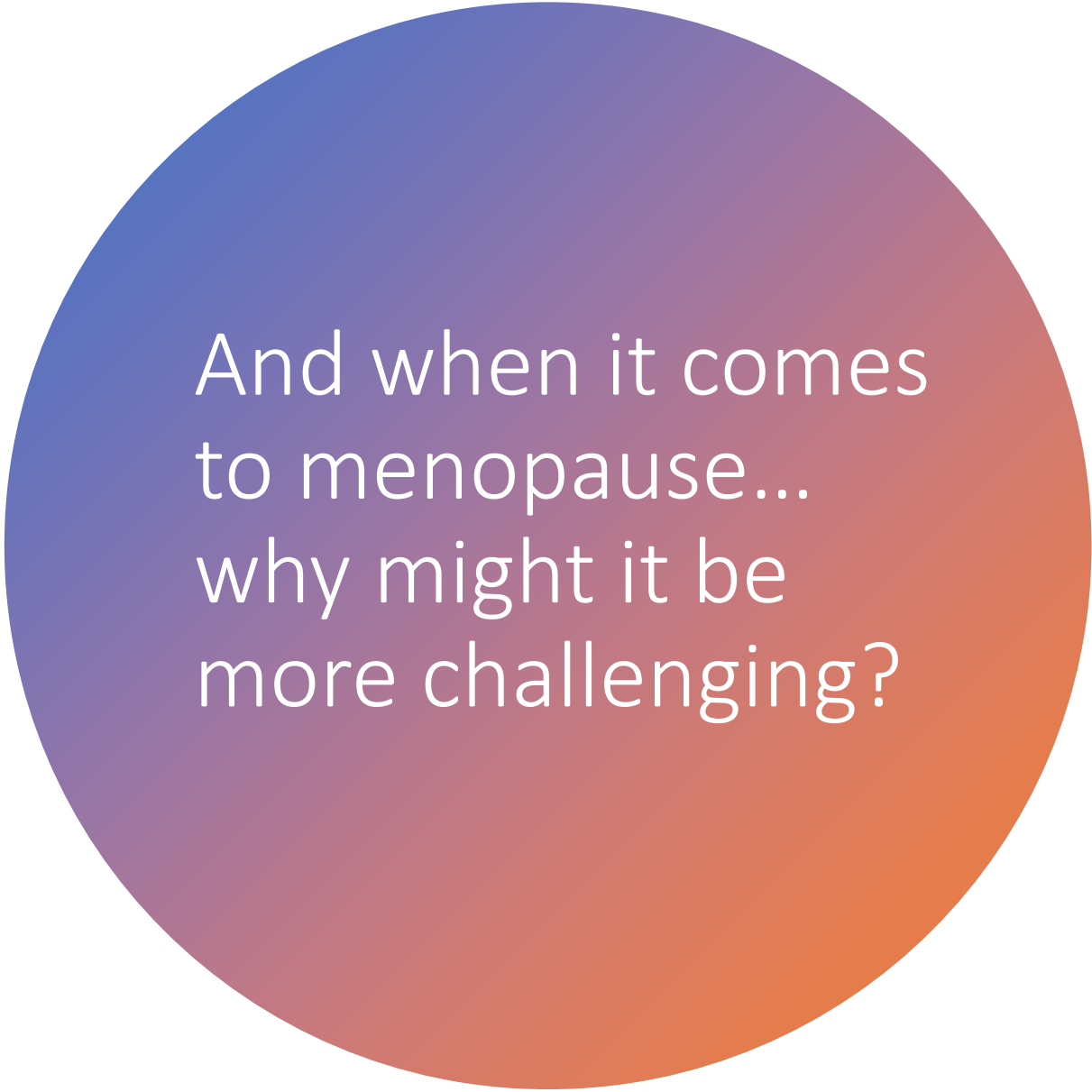
1. Your body and mind change in ***unpredictable*** and often ***uncontrollable*** ways – difficult for autistic people who struggle with change
 2. Menopause affects your ***thought processes, emotions, mental health*** and ***sensory experiences***.
- 




And when it comes
to menopause...
why might it be
more challenging?

1. Your body and mind change in ***unpredictable*** and often ***uncontrollable*** ways – difficult for autistic people who struggle with change
2. Menopause affects your ***thought processes, emotions, mental health*** and ***sensory experiences***.
3. They may enter menopause **less well-prepared** and with **less social and professional support**.

They may also be less able to communicate their experience to the people they *do* have around them.



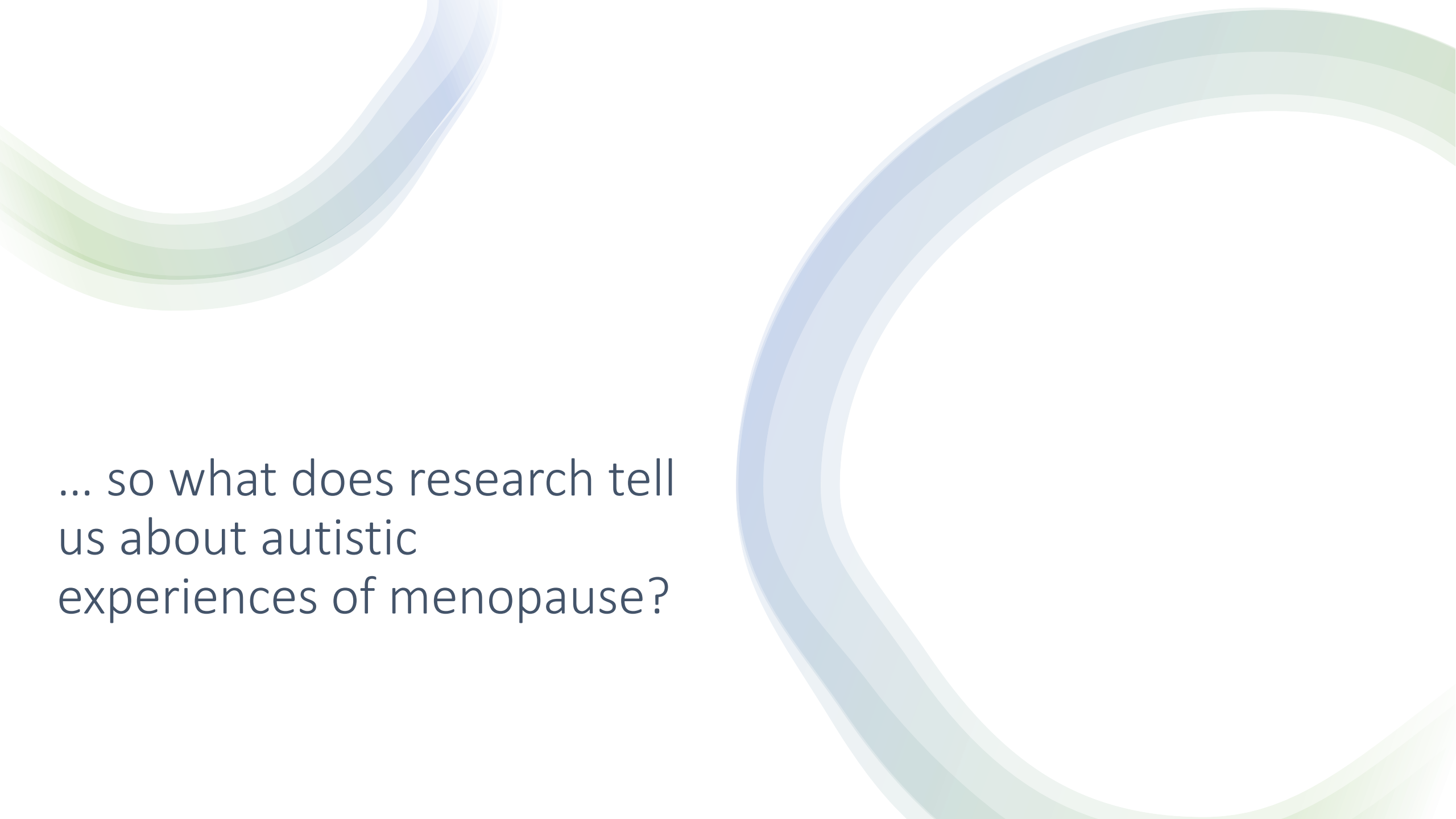
And when it comes
to menopause...
why might it be
more challenging?

4. They are more likely to have experienced ***past trauma***, which affects how you experience menopause.
 5. They are more likely to be trans or gender-divergent.
- 

6. They may not know they are autistic (especially millennials and older).

That means they cannot get appropriate support or be kind to themselves if they're struggling.





... so what does research tell us about autistic experiences of menopause?

Moseley, R. L., Druce, T., & Turner-Cobb, J. M. (2020). 'When my autism broke': A qualitative study spotlighting autistic voices on menopause. *Autism*, 24(6), 1423-1437.

Moseley, R. L., Druce, T., & Turner-Cobb, J. M. (2021). Autism research is 'all about the blokes and the kids': Autistic women breaking the silence on menopause. *British Journal of Health Psychology*, 26(3), 709-726.

Brady, M. J., Jenkins, C. A., Gamble-Turner, J. M., Moseley, R. L., Janse van Rensburg, M., & Matthews, R. J. (2024). "A perfect storm": Autistic experiences of menopause and midlife. *Autism*, 28(6), 1405-1418.

Jenkins, C. A., Moseley, R.L., Matthews, R.J., Janse van Rensburg, M., Gamble-Turner, J.M., & Brady, M.J. "Struggling for Years": An International Survey on Autistic Experiences of Menopause. Accepted, *Neurodiversity*.



We found that:

1. People often go in unprepared.

“On my own with my
body and feelings”

“I thought I was
going mad.”

We found that:

2. Menopause amplifies *neurodivergent difficulties*, and *neurodivergence* amplifies menopause.

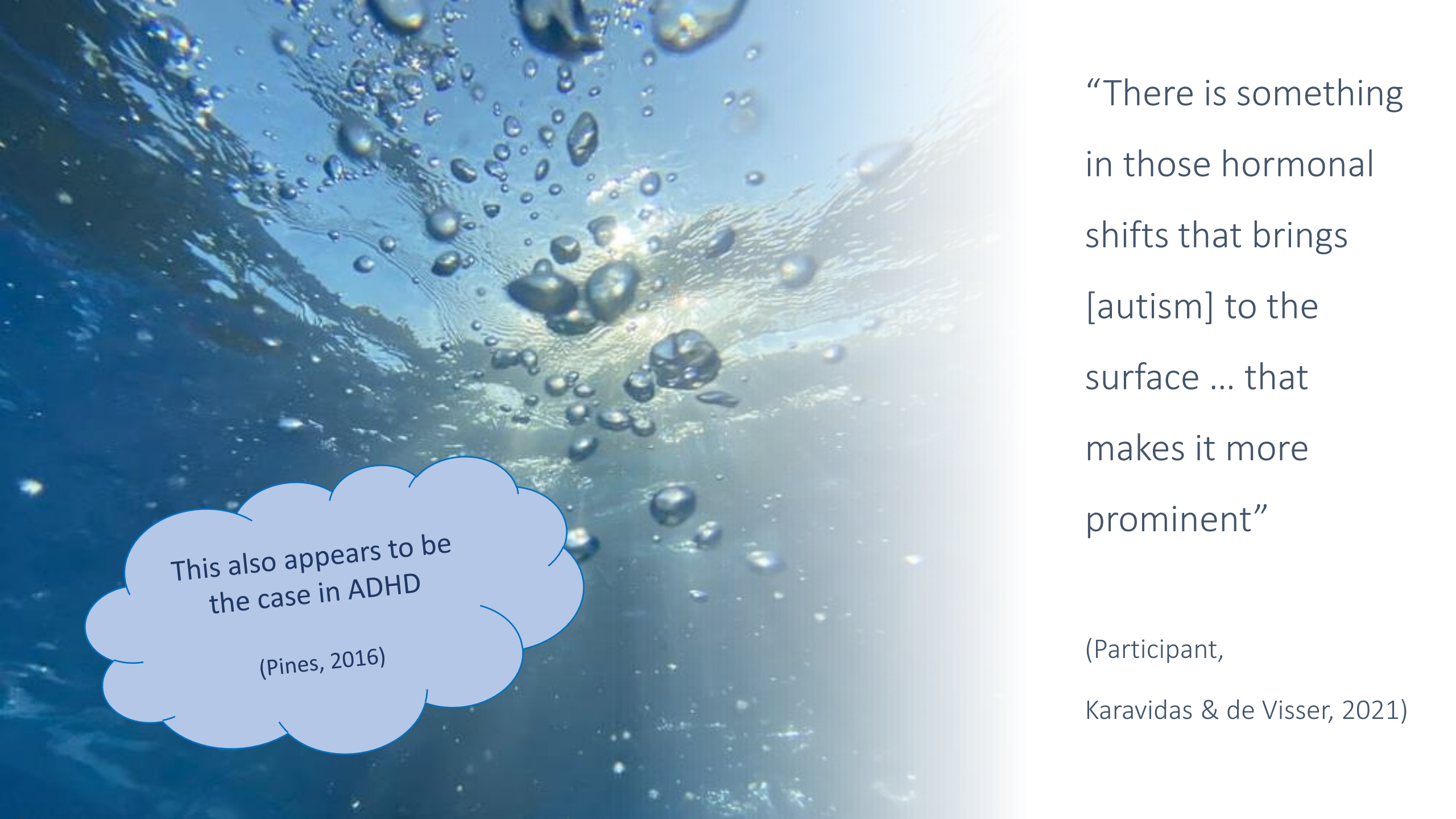
“The experience I had was very abrupt from being quite capable... to being unrecognisable as that person... being autistic can be a challenge but it does give us skills... My most noticeable thing was that I lost my skills [at menopause]... [how do others cope with] being robbed of their skills?”

“My ADHD is broken, it's got lots of D's in it, the deficit and the disorder. Before that I didn't feel it to be that way ... you could have these wonderful gifts.”

We found that:

2. Menopause amplifies *neurodivergent difficulties*, and *neurodivergence* amplifies menopause.

“I would say that I found out that I am autistic because I'm perimenopausal, because I've stopped being able to cope with my life, the life I was able to cope with before.”

An underwater photograph showing a large number of bubbles of various sizes rising from the bottom towards the surface. The water is clear and blue, with light filtering through from above, creating a shimmering effect on the bubbles and the water surface.

This also appears to be
the case in ADHD

(Pines, 2016)

“There is something
in those hormonal
shifts that brings
[autism] to the
surface ... that
makes it more
prominent”

(Participant,
Karavidas & de Visser, 2021)

We found that:

3. Menopausal symptoms have wide-reaching impacts.

“...a head full of cotton wool and a body which just isn't going to behave.”

“crushing tiredness and executive function of a 12-year-old”

We found that:

3. Menopausal symptoms have wide-reaching impacts.

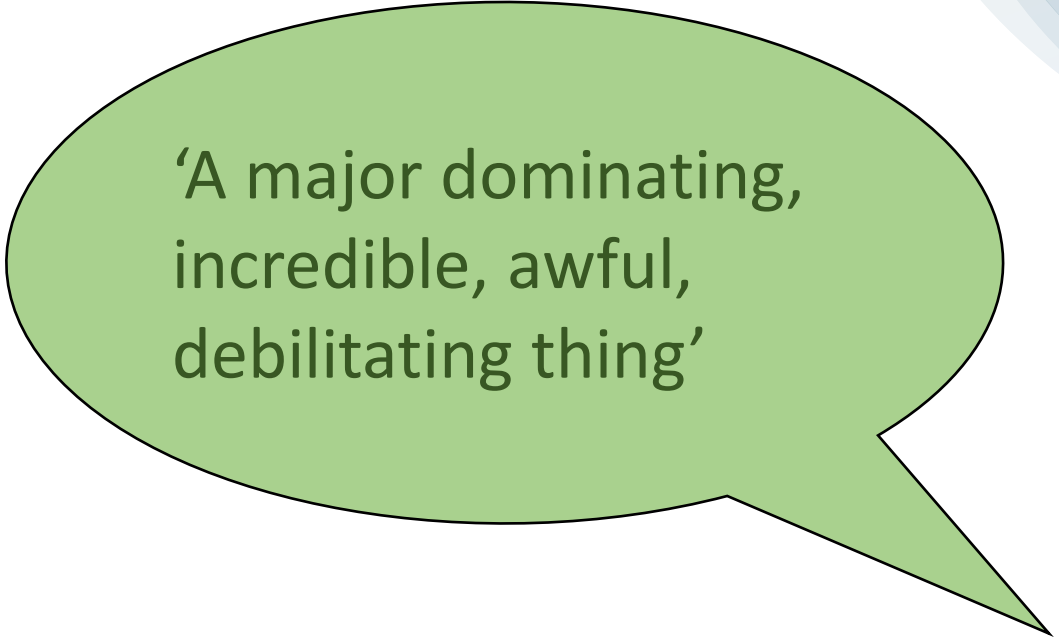
“They say ...
menopause, it's not
life threatening,
but it bloody is, it's
life threatening”

“Whereas previously I'd
be a little bit grumpy - I
was psychotic, like ... my
emotions have been
turned up a notch”



We found that:

3. Menopausal symptoms have wide-reaching impacts.



'A major dominating, incredible, awful, debilitating thing'

We found that:

3. Menopausal symptoms have wide-reaching impacts.

“I suspect that GPs etc thought that the symptoms weren't that bad because I wasn't breaking down and crying or giving any emotional detail. ... When you can't describe what's going on, you can't really ask for help.”


“I couldn't talk to him about it because I just didn't have words for these things”

We found that:


4. Menopause happens during a time of immense change... but people are affected to different degrees.

“a Venn diagram of chaos”


“My husband IS going to die before me probably, and I’m going to be on my own”



Autistic people do indeed have quantitatively higher levels of menopausal symptoms than non-autistic people....



Other studies paint a similar picture...




... and neurodivergent people are badly affected by menopause in a **work context**

“main driver for my work ethic disappeared... burned out.”


“thought I had early onset dementia... it was like my brain had fallen out.”

“I feel stupid, really stupid, and that's incredibly devastating to me. Because I've always relied on my intelligence, even though I've struggled with so many things...”

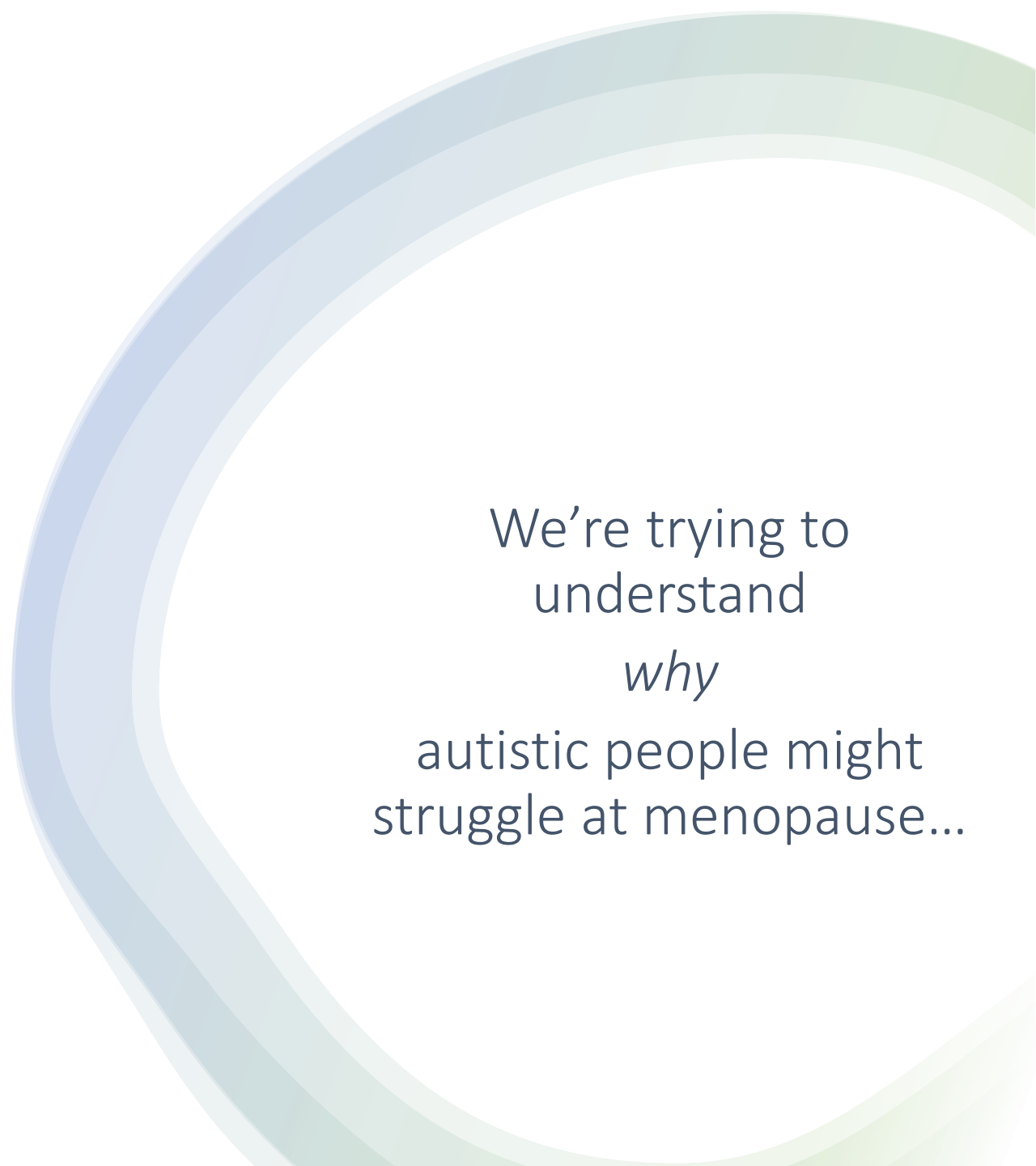
Gotterdello and Steffan (2024)



Other studies paint a similar picture...

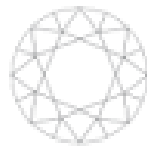


Could *menopause representations* explain some of the difficulties?



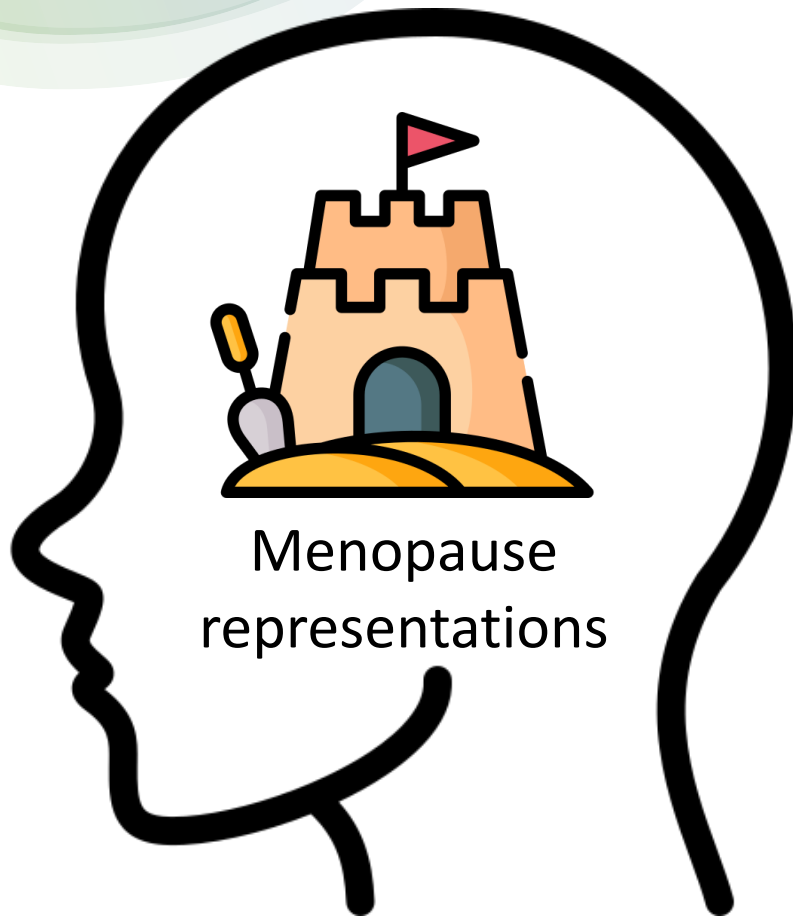
We're trying to understand
why
autistic people might struggle at menopause...

“Understanding health and wellbeing during menopause”




HENPICKED

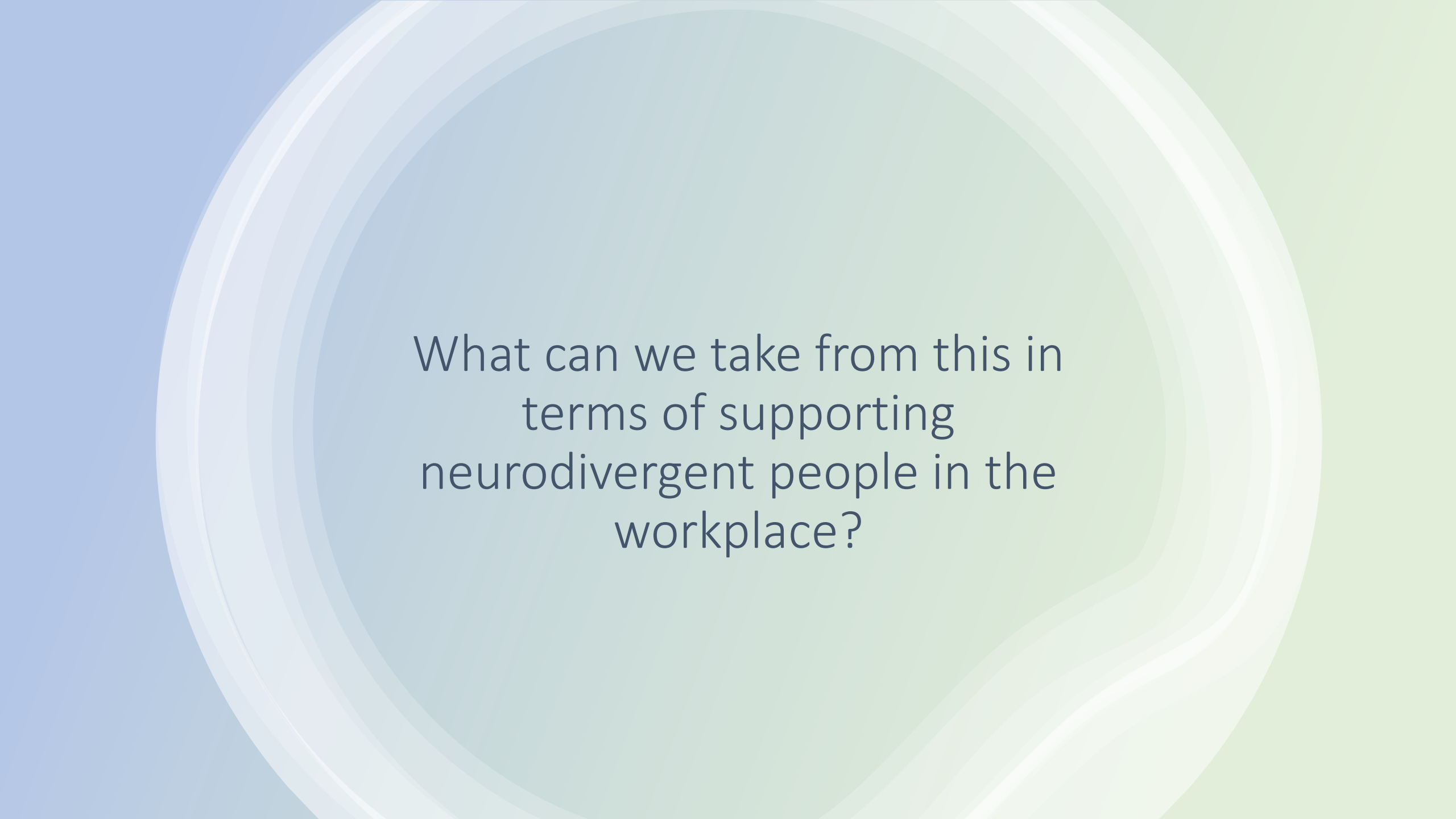
Menopause in the Workplace



People build *menopause representations* to set coping strategies to deal with various struggles related to menopause

- 
1. Under-recognised health needs and support
 2. Neurodivergent characteristics e.g. difficulty dealing with sudden, unpredicted body change
 3. Psychosocial factors such as negative experiences and mental health

We're trying to understand
why
autistic people might struggle at menopause...



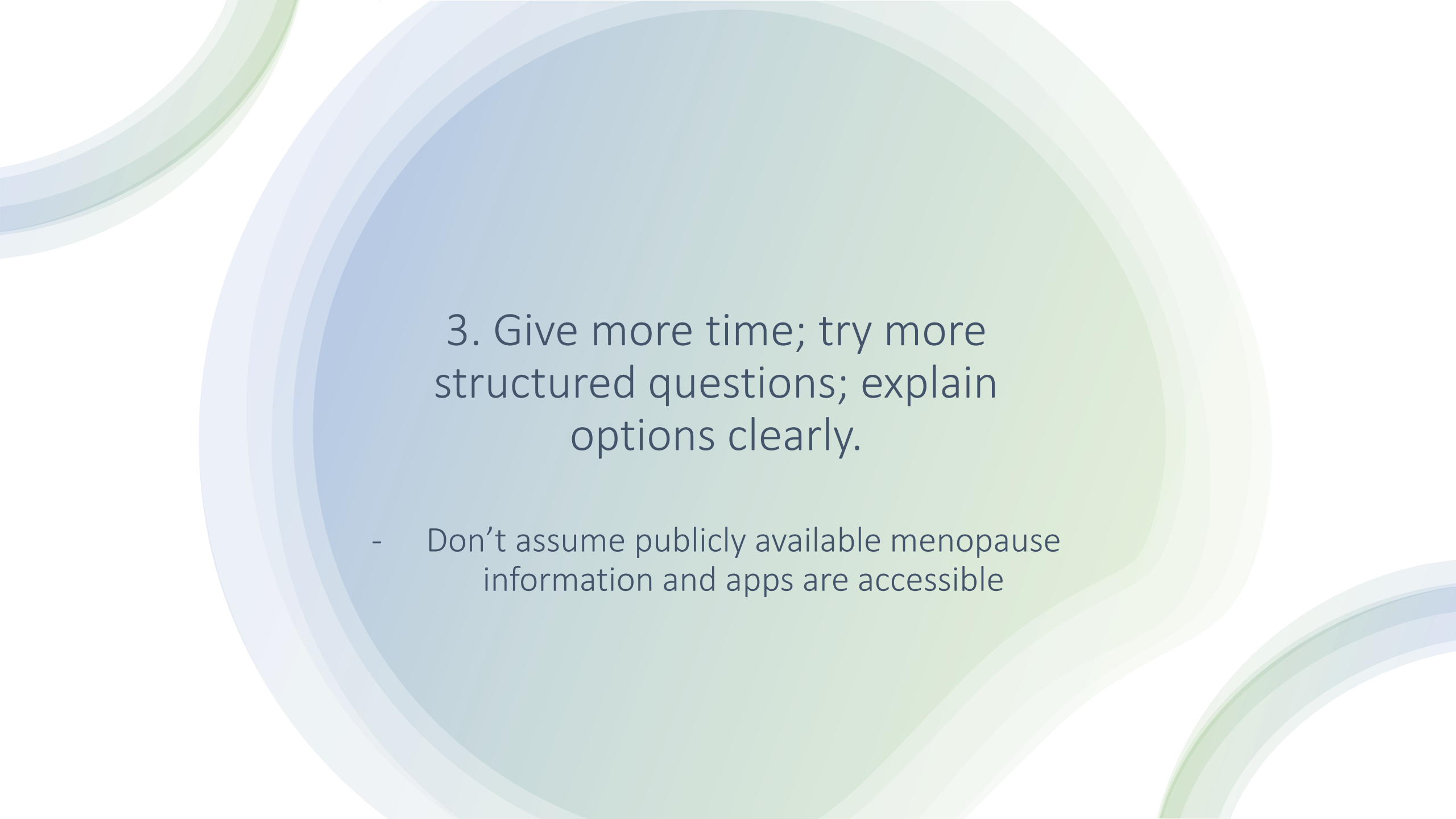
What can we take from this in
terms of supporting
neurodivergent people in the
workplace?

1. Be aware of this transition in people late 30s-50. Think “menopause on steroids”.

- remember heightened sensory, emotions, cognitive difficulties (impact on social function / masking)
- Likelihood that mental/physical health will worsen


2. Remember alexithymia, and that distress may look different.

- May not be able to describe what's happening, or say what they need.
- Hard to take off the mask, "don't want to be a nuisance"



3. Give more time; try more structured questions; explain options clearly.

- Don't assume publicly available menopause information and apps are accessible



4. Consider as treatment goals/interventions: self-compassion, distress tolerance/emotion regulation skills; connection with autistic community.

5. When faced with 'complex' patients (/suicidal behaviour, "EUPD", etc), be mindful of undiagnosed neurodivergence.

Similarly, dysregulated people presenting at other services (e.g. police) may be neurodivergent.

Thank you for listening:

we'd love to answer your questions.

Read the research and download our favourite resources at:

<https://www.scienceonthespectrum.net/talknotes>

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