

Listening Before Responding: What Menopause Taught Me About Systems, Signals, and Human Resilience



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For most of my life, I believed that health was something to manage after a problem appeared.

Like many healthcare professionals, I was trained to identify symptoms, investigate causes, and support treatment. As a Medical Technologist working in microbiology and mycology, I spent years analyzing cultures and identifying patterns of disease. The process was systematic: collect the sample, observe the growth, identify the source, and determine the appropriate response.

What I did not realize at the time was that this same principle applied not only to microorganisms, but also to human beings.

Years later, menopause would become the teacher that challenged everything I thought I understood about health, resilience, and healing.

What began as a hormonal transition evolved into a profound lesson about communication, adaptation, and the importance of listening before responding.

It also led me to develop a concept I now call Signal Literacy™—the ability to recognize, interpret, and respond appropriately to the signals generated by our bodies, minds, and environments before they develop into larger crises.

In a world increasingly focused on outcomes, performance, and productivity, Signal Literacy may be one of the most overlooked skills of the twenty-first century.

The Problem with Reactive Systems

Modern society is largely built around reaction. Healthcare often reacts to disease. Organizations react to burnout. Schools react to behavior. Communities react to crises.

Individuals react to symptoms.

Yet many of these reactions occur long after warning signs have appeared.

The challenge is not necessarily that signals

are absent. The challenge is that signals are frequently misunderstood, ignored, suppressed, or disconnected from their source.

A person experiencing fatigue may assume they simply need more coffee. A professional experiencing brain fog may believe they need to work harder. A leader experiencing irritability may attribute it to a difficult team.

A woman experiencing menopausal symptoms may be told that what she is experiencing is simply a normal part of aging.

In each case, the visible outcome becomes the focus while the underlying communication is overlooked.

The question becomes:

What if symptoms are not merely problems to eliminate? What if they are messages to interpret?

Menopause as a Communication Event

Menopause is often discussed as a reproductive event.

I believe it should also be viewed as a communication event.

During the menopausal transition, women frequently report symptoms such as:

- Brain fog
- Sleep disturbances
- Anxiety
- Fatigue
- Emotional overwhelm
- Reduced resilience
- Difficulty concentrating
- Mood fluctuations

While these symptoms are commonly associated with hormonal changes, they also reveal something important about the body's communication networks.

The brain, nervous system, endocrine system, immune system, digestive system, and cardiovascular system are not isolated structures operating independently. They function as an interconnected communication network.

When communication becomes disrupted, the effects can appear throughout the entire system.

The symptom may not originate where it is experienced. The signal may begin elsewhere.

This realization became a foundational insight in my work.

The Tree and the Signal

One of the models I use to explain this concept is an upside-down tree.

In this model, the roots represent the brain and the systems that influence communication and regulation.

The trunk represents the vagus nerve, one of the body's primary communication highways.

The leaves represent the organs, behaviors, emotions, and symptoms we experience in daily life.

Most people focus on the leaves. The leaves are visible. They are where symptoms appear.

However, leaves cannot thrive if communication from the roots is impaired.

If the roots are stressed, inflamed, sleep-deprived, overloaded, or disconnected, the effects eventually become visible throughout the entire tree.

This perspective encourages a shift from symptom management toward systems awareness.

Instead of asking:
"How do I get rid of this symptom?"

We begin asking:
"What is this symptom trying to communicate?"

The Missing Skill: Signal Literacy™
Signal Literacy™ is the practice of recognizing and understanding communication occurring within and around us.

It involves developing the ability to identify signals before they become emergencies. Examples include:

- Understanding fatigue as information rather than failure
 - Recognizing chronic stress before burnout develops
 - Identifying emotional overwhelm before mental health deteriorates
 - Addressing sleep disruption before cognitive performance declines
 - Exploring physiological changes before they become chronic conditions
- Signal Literacy does not replace medical care. Rather, it complements it.

It encourages curiosity before judgment and awareness before reaction. Most importantly, it promotes earlier intervention. In healthcare, earlier intervention often produces better outcomes.

The same principle applies to human performance, leadership, education, and community well-being.

Human Resilience Begins with Awareness
Resilience is often misunderstood as the ability to endure hardship.

While endurance has value, resilience may be better defined as the ability to recognize when adaptation is needed.

The strongest systems are not necessarily the systems that never encounter stress.

They are the systems that can detect changes, communicate effectively, and adjust accordingly.

The human body operates in a similar way.

The brain continuously gathers information. The nervous system interprets signals. The body responds.

Problems often emerge when communication becomes distorted or ignored. When we improve awareness, we improve our ability to adapt. When we improve adaptation, we improve resilience.

A New Conversation

As healthcare, technology, education, and leadership continue to evolve, there is an opportunity to ask different questions.

What if we taught people how to understand their signals rather than simply manage their symptoms?

What if organizations learned to recognize the early signs of burnout before productivity declined?

What if communities focused on prevention as much as intervention?

What if women's health conversations expanded beyond hormones to include brain health, nervous system regulation, sleep, stress, and resilience?

These questions invite a broader perspective.

They encourage us to move beyond reaction and toward understanding.

Listening Before Responding

The greatest lesson menopause taught me was not about hormones. It was about communication.

It taught me that symptoms are often signals.

That discomfort can contain information.
That awareness creates options.

And that resilience begins with listening.

Today, I believe one of the most important skills we can cultivate is the ability to pause long enough to understand what our systems are trying to tell us.

Before we react. Before we suppress. Before we ignore.
We can listen.

Because when we learn to listen to the signals, we gain the ability to respond with greater clarity, intention, and wisdom.

And perhaps that is where transformation truly begins.

Author Biography

Sheila L. Hall, MHA, MT, FMHC is a Healthcare Administrator, Medical Technologist, Functional Medicine Health Coach, educator, and creator of the Root to Respond Model™. Her work explores the relationship between brain health, nervous system regulation, menopause, resilience, and human performance through an integrated systems-based approach.