

Soap star Beverley recovered quickly from a hysterectomy...then her hormones went haywire

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New lease of life: Coronation Street's Beverley Callard

Soap star Beverley was back at work six weeks after her hysterectomy...but then her hormones went haywire...

To the Coronation Street crew around her, Beverley Callard - in character as Liz McDonald - looked her usual poised and professional self. Dressed in her normal skimpy costume, with big hair and defiant attitude, she stood waiting for her cue to enter the Rover's Return.

But suddenly the actress was overwhelmed with such feelings of hopelessness and self-loathing that she found herself unable to speak or move. 'I thought: "I can't go in",' she recalls.

For about a year she'd been feeling 'old, ugly, a terrible actress, a bad person'.

Finally, in 1997, this lack of confidence had become too much. 'With the crew and cast waiting for me, I stood there with tears pouring down my face, but no sound coming out.'

Anne Kirkbride, who plays Deirdre Barlow in the show, and is Beverley's closest friend on and off set, saw that something was wrong and called for the crew doctor.

Beverley, now 50, had managed to hide her feelings from both the cast and her closest family for months. 'I didn't admit it to a soul, but I wished I were dead. I couldn't have killed myself, knowing how it would have affected my loved ones, but I hoped I would be wiped out in a car accident or plane crash.

'I had two wonderful children, a great job and no money worries - an enviable life - and yet I felt completely bleak.'

Optimistic by nature, Beverley couldn't understand why she was feeling so low. The Granada doctor diagnosed depression, but it wasn't for another three years that the true cause was identified - depression due to acute hormonal imbalance, caused by a hysterectomy she'd had six years before, at just 33.

More than 50,000 hysterectomies are performed in the UK every year.

In pre-menopausal women the ovaries are retained (to prevent sudden early menopause).

Yet, in some women the ovaries fail to continue producing female hormones, resulting in depression and menopausal symptoms.

Although Beverley's problem was identified in 2000, she suffered a series of personal and professional crises before she finally began to regain her equilibrium in 2003.

It is only now that Beverley feels able to talk for the first time about her long struggle with depression.

Beverley's hysterectomy took place in March 1991, after she experienced excessive menstrual bleeding following the birth of her second child, Joshua. (She also has a daughter, Rebecca, now 32.)

Beverley, who had then been in Coronation Street for just over a year, was shocked when a smear test revealed cancerous cells in her cervix. Over the next few weeks, she went for three laser treatments under local anaesthetic.

However, despite the treatment, she was told that the cancer had spread into the lower part of her womb and advised to have a hysterectomy. Her ovaries would be left in place.

After the surgery, Beverley seemed to make a spectacular recovery, returning to work within six weeks.

It was almost five years before she realised she didn't feel her usual bouncy self. But in 1996, 'life became a battle and I began to dread work. I just wanted to stay under the duvet'.

Her marriage to her third husband, Steve Calder, Joshua's father, was in trouble and she says: 'For the first time in my life, I couldn't cope with my problems.

'I felt catatonic. I cancelled everything socially, often without bothering to make an excuse. I draped myself in baggy clothes.

'Even combing my hair was an effort. I had no confidence in my body, which was ridiculous because even now, at 50, I have no cellulite or stretch marks.

'I lost a stone-and-a-half without realising it. Ken Morley, who played Reg Holdsworth, always used to say I had the best bust in the business.

'One day he said: "What's wrong with you? You're far too thin". That was a shock. I hid away in my dressing room, avoiding conversations with the cast members.'

After a year of increasing despair, the day came when Beverley broke down on set. 'The pretence was over. My heart was beating fast, I was sweating - I didn't have a shred of self-esteem.'

Beverley was hastily written out of the scene and spent two hours with the TV company's doctor. 'I was shaking and felt numb. When he said I had clinical depression, it was a surprise. I never thought that I would suffer depression.'

She was prescribed Seroxat, an antidepressant that increases levels of the feel-good chemical serotonin - which is often low in those with depression.

Despite her collapse and diagnosis, Beverley returned to work the next day, hoping the drug would make her feel better, although she had been warned it could be six weeks before it took effect.

'Actually, I felt worse as the weeks went on. I never forgot my lines, but an hour after a conversation, I wouldn't remember what had been said.'

Fifteen months after her diagnosis, Beverley collapsed at home one evening. 'My heart was beating so wildly, I thought I was having a heart attack and couldn't stop vomiting.

'By then, I had separated from my husband - due to many other reasons apart from my condition, although that can't have helped - and I rang my mum. When she arrived, I was still in my pyjamas, pacing around in confusion.

'She called my GP and he sent me to a nearby branch of the rehab clinic The Priory.'

A psychiatrist decided to put her on another drug, Zisprin, which increases the activity of serotonin in the brain but has a marked sedative effect.

Beverley also had two hours of counselling every day while continuing to work six days a week.

The clinic wanted her to check in full-time, but she refused to take time off work.

'I refused to be a residential patient - I didn't want it getting into the Press. I felt ashamed of my condition. The counsellors kept telling me what a nice person I was.

'But it sounded hollow to me and after three months, I stopped going.'

Later that year, in 1998, Beverley left Coronation Street. 'I was in the public eye, which is hard when you're feeling so despondent. I wanted to do comedy instead and felt it would do me good.'

In December 1998, she made a TV commercial for her new exercise video. 'The producer said: "What are you on? You've got dead eyes in the video". I decided to come off the Zisprin, as it made me feel like a zombie.'

Beverley did it on her own, against advice to do so only under medical supervision - she was scared that a doctor would insist she stayed on the drug.

She says: 'I reduced the dose over four weeks and then had the most hideous withdrawal symptoms, a creeping feeling all over my scalp, as if spiders were climbing over my head, and terrible shakes. I felt freezing cold and had insomnia.

'After a few months without medication or counselling, I noticed my depression was worse at certain times of the month. I rang the doctor at The Priory to tell him, and he sent me to a hormone specialist.

'She checked my hormone levels with blood tests and told me my oestrogen levels were low.'

It was then, two years after she was diagnosed with depression, that Beverley learned the problem was actually her ovaries. They were no longer producing enough oestrogen, a hormone that affects mood, mental state and cognition.

Beverley was prescribed the antidepressant Clomipramine along with Climaval, an oestrogen supplement (the HRT) and Restandol, a testosterone supplement - women naturally make a small amount of this male hormone which boosts the sex drive and energy levels.

Slowly, she began to have days when she felt less miserable, but there was no overnight miracle. She still had many days when she felt her life wasn't worth the pain of depression.

'Then, in 2002, I began feeling that maybe things weren't so bad on some days. I didn't feel as heavy or weighed down anymore. I came off the other antidepressants and was put on Prozac, which I am still on, along with the HRT.'

In 2003 she felt able to return permanently to Coronation Street to face the gruelling workload and wear Liz's mini-skirts.

'I have never felt better,' she beams. 'I have a hot flush about once every three months and I call it a power surge.'

She is not concerned about other conditions linked with prolonged use of HRT, such as heart problems and ovarian cancer.

'I don't ever want to come off it,' she says. 'I would rather have a heart attack than depression.'

Perhaps sensing how Beverley has changed, the scriptwriters have injected a new note of humour into Liz's scenes. On New Year's Eve, viewers will see if her comedy partnership with actor Ian Reddington, who plays dopey drummer Vernon, will end in marriage or disaster.

Off-screen, too, Beverley feels she has a new lease of life. 'For my 50th birthday last March, I wore a slinky, backless catsuit by Amanda Wakeley and danced the night away. I felt old and useless when I was depressed. I feel decades younger now.'