Meet the CHANGEMAKERS

To make a difference in society and alter attitudes for the better, we need to be bold, shift the conversation and challenge the status quo. *GH* meets four women doing just that

'Conversations around menopause need to get louder'

TV presenter Lisa Snowdon's confidence was crushed when she was going through perimenopause. Now, she's campaigning for greater awareness to make sure other women are better prepared than she was.

Standing in Parliament Square on World Menopause Day last October, the atmosphere was buzzing. I was there in my role as patron of Menopause Mandate, alongside hundreds of women, including celebrities such as Carol Vorderman, Mariella Frostrup and Penny Lancaster. The aim was to raise the noise when it comes to perimenopause and menopause, campaigning for increased awareness and support.

I was in my early 40s when I started suffering low moods, panic attacks, anxiety and depression. My menstrual cycle became unpredictable. I had mood swings, which were unpleasant for my fiancé, George. It felt like I had an angel and a devil on my shoulders – the devil encouraging me to let rip, the angel desperately imploring me to stop. It was scary because I couldn't control it.

When I went to the doctor, I was prescribed antidepressants. Perimenopause wasn't mentioned; at the time, I wasn't aware of it. Over the next couple of years, the symptoms got worse and I experienced sleep deprivation, thinning hair, skin changes, weight gain and hot flushes. I'd wake in the night drenched in sweat. Shivering, I'd cuddle close to George, only to jolt away from him a few minutes later, suddenly burning hot like a furnace.

For seven years, I juggled trying to hold down a career and a relationship. There were days when I didn't want to say yes to jobs, times when I'd lose sleep because work seemed terrifying. I've been working in media for more than 20 years yet I'd wake with palpitations, panicking about not being good enough, having hot flushes and forgetting what I was saying mid-sentence. It was like I no longer trusted my brain. I felt like a shell of myself, my confidence at an all-time low.

I saw four doctors before I found a treatment plan that worked for me. In the end, I went down the HRT route and I'm on body identical hormones – oestrogen, progesterone and testosterone – which have been working for me. I eat well and move my body, whether that's walking or doing an exercise class. Now, aged 50, I've finally found a balance that works.

Many women at the top of their games have similar experiences. Many give up their jobs. Some feel they can't cope. That's why I campaign for better education and treatment. I've documented my journey on my social media channels, and since January 2021, I've hosted a Midweek Menopause Madness session on Instagram, where I tackle all aspects of the menopause.

Research has found 92% of UK women feel unprepared for the menopause. I partnered with *This Morning* to launch its Menopause Bus, which drives around the country offering advice; I'm working with Wellbeing of Women and made a short film for it with George; and I support TENA's #LastLonelyMenopause campaign to spark intergenerational conversations around the menopause. Meanwhile, my work as patron of Menopause Mandate continues. We're campaigning for free HRT that is accessible to all and pushing for better education on the menopause in schools.

Our hope is for there to be a menopause policy in every workplace and a specialist in every doctor's surgery so women aren't misdiagnosed or prescribed the wrong thing. More than anything, we want the conversations around menopause to get louder so everyone knows about it and there's more advice.

Thanks to the support of MPs such as Carolyn Harris, chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Menopause, things are shifting. For many years, women have suffered in silence, but that should not and will not be the case any more. I'm a believer that knowledge is power. By sharing our stories and uniting, we don't have to feel alone.

• *Lisa is supporting the #LastLonelyMenopause campaign by TENA. To find out more, visit tena.co.uk/lastlonelymenopause*

Making a change

Risk taker or careful planner? Sometimes I jump in feet first; other times I like to plan.

I'm most productive when... I make lists.

My biggest inspiration is... My fiancé, George.

I'm changing the conversation by... Being honest about the changes happening to me.

For me, inclusivity means... Providing equal access, opportunities and resources for everyone.

Creating community is important because... A sense of connection and belonging can be a lifeline.

To make change happen, we all need to... Keep the conversation going.

My proudest achievement is... Winning *MasterChef*!

I relax by... Cooking with a big glass of wine.

> I campaign for better education and treatment of menopause

'I'm shifting attitudes towards disability'

Kate Nash has experienced arthritis since she was a teenager. Now, as founder and CEO of PurpleSpace, she is helping make the world of work accessible for everyone.

Very often, society focuses on the challenges disabled people face, rather than also highlighting the life-affirming elements of our stories. As founder and CEO of PurpleSpace, an organisation that supports and champions disabled employees and works with companies to become more accessible, I've made it my mission to call out negativity and change perceptions. I want us all to feel able to display our vulnerabilities, as well as our talents, without judgement or repercussions.

I was 15 when I was diagnosed with juvenile chronic arthritis, or Still's disease. Before that, I'd experienced months of mobility issues and pain. I wanted to do the things everyone else did. Yet suddenly life was altogether different. I couldn't dress myself. I couldn't cut up food. I looked different and couldn't walk far.

> For most companies, at least 12% of people will have a disability, whether visible or invisible

I noticed people lower their expectations about what was possible for me. My mum said, 'It would be nice if you could get a little job.' I just heard 'little'. She was signalling to me that the world was designed awkwardly so it could be a struggle for me to secure a job. The pity people showed me was tough to deal with, but it set me on a path that would dictate my life.

I studied Sociology and Social Administration at Roehampton University, where I became interested in the politics of disability. Then, I got a job in a hospital, supporting people with learning difficulties move from institutional to community-based care. It opened my eyes to ways they could be belittled.

I went on to work in an adult training centre for those with learning difficulties, before a bad arthritis flare-up showed me I needed a less active job. I spotted a job advert for a campaigns director at what is now Scope, a charity that was pushing for anti-discrimination legislation.

I wasn't qualified, but was given a volunteer role, which led to a job as an assistant to a director. One of my proudest achievements was supporting parliamentarians to write the bill that eventually became the Disability Discrimination Act (now the Equality Act), which made it unlawful to discriminate against disabled people in connection with employment and access to goods and services.

I was a director for Young Arthritis Care, then chief executive of Radar (Disability Rights UK). In 2010, I went freelance. I was fascinated by employee resource groups (ERGs) – networks that support a particular group of people in a company, such as disabled people, ethnic minorities and LGBTQ+ employees – and worked with companies to set up networks for them.

Making a change

Risk taker or careful planner? Both.

I'm most productive when... I work with purpose.

My biggest inspiration is... Fellow travellers.

I'm changing the conversation by... Making it easier to be who we are.

For me, inclusivity means... Being able to assimilate all parts of our identity.

Creating community is important because... It excites and motivates us to keep going.

To make change happen, we all need to... Examine our souls in the dark – to know exactly who we are.

My proudest achievement is... Creating PurpleSpace and a community of game-changers.

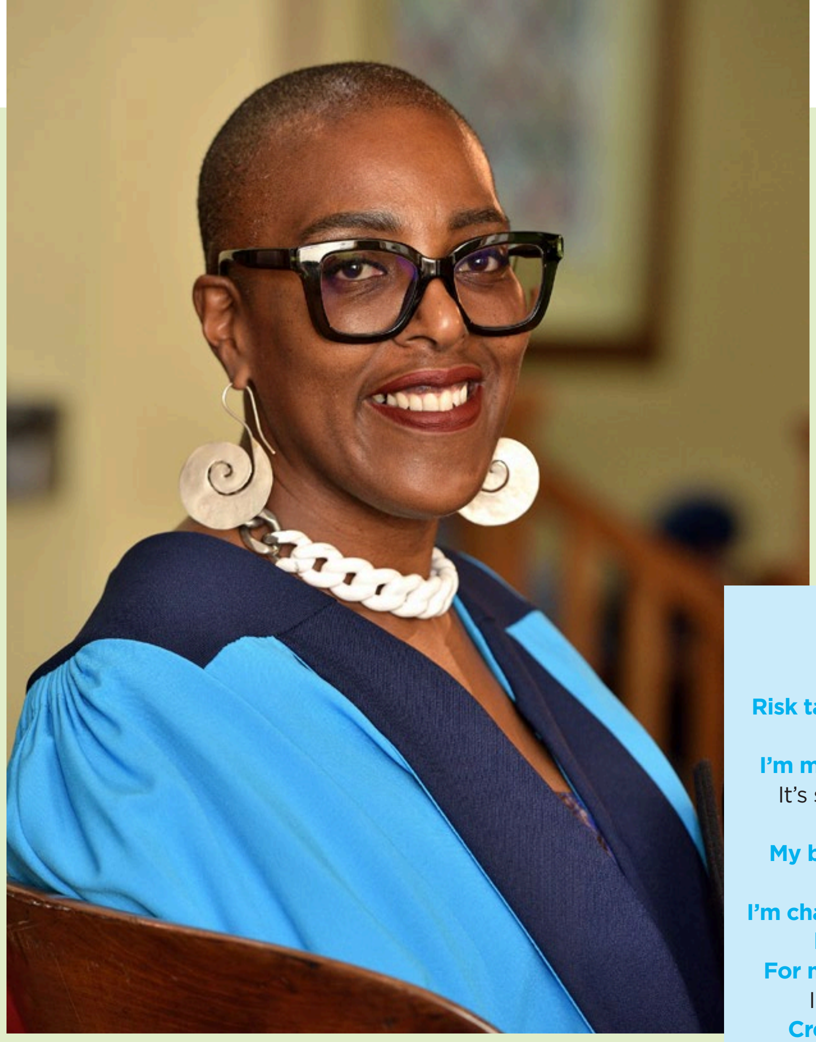
I relax with... Music, food, family and friends.

In 2015, I created PurpleSpace, a global online membership subscription companies can join to help them set up resource groups internally as well as providing training. We have more than 2,000 clients across 200 organisations, including Barclays, Google and the Home Office.

Disabled people are still 50% less likely to be in work than non-disabled people. For most companies, at least 12% of people will have a disability, whether visible or invisible, yet one in five do not feel comfortable sharing they have a disability with colleagues.

By empowering organisations from within, I'm hopeful the tide is turning. I'm extremely proud to have set up an organisation that plays a strong role in hastening the pace of change.

• *Positively Purple (Kogan Page) by Kate Nash is out now; purplespace.org*



'I want to help heal the most vulnerable'

Dr Jacqui Dyer shares how she's bringing about positive change in mental services through her leadership roles, including as President of The Mental Health Foundation.

On my balcony sit two plants side by side. I've found joy and comfort in watching them bloom. These plants are much more than a hobby. They represent my brothers, both of whom our family lost. The love I have for my brothers, I pour into nurturing my plants. They've become a key part of my ongoing healing journey.

My path was shaped by the circumstances in which I grew up. I'm one of five, and three of my siblings have experienced severe mental health challenges. When I was 18, one of my brothers was held at a police station as he was experiencing psychosis. After a few days with no improvement, he was detained at an asylum – it looked like a prison. There was huge stigma around what had happened to our family; it felt shameful. However, it gave me the drive to make a difference, to support those struggling with mental health and find answers to the questions that were emerging in my mind.

> I'm determined to help heal people when they are their most vulnerable

I went on to take an access course in social policy, which led to me studying social policy and public administration at university. After graduating, I worked in the substance misuse field. I then trained as a psychotherapist and worked in women's and children's rehab, eventually moving into a commissioning role in mental health services. I was hoping my job would allow me to improve service provision, but I often felt like I was banging my head against a brick wall. I remember my manager saying that for a lot of my colleagues, it was a nine-to-five role, yet he could tell that for me, it was a life's mission. He was spot-on. This realisation led me to take voluntary redundancy in 2009 and do a Masters in social work while I figured out my next step. That same year, my sister had a mental health crisis. I got through my dissertation, but spent two years unemployed and on benefits. My own mental health hit a very low point.

Making a change

Risk taker or careful planner? Risk taker.

I'm most productive when... It's silent or when playing hip-hop music.

My biggest inspiration is... The universe.

I'm changing the conversation by... Speaking out.

For me, inclusivity means... Infinite possibilities.

Creating community is important because... Positive connections help us to thrive.

To make change happen, we all need to... Work together respectfully with shared purpose.

My proudest achievement is... Black Thrive and the PCREF.

I relax by... Swimming.

It was 2012 when the fire inside me was reignited. The Ministerial Advisory Group for mental health was hiring advisers who had lived experience of mental illness. It was the first time I'd been involved in mental health policy at a national level and was hugely daunting; before meetings I'd have panic attacks. I was one of very few women there, and the only Black person. Thinking about what my family had been through kept me going.

Now, I juggle many roles. I co-led the mental health task force for England and I work with NHSE and Health Education England to create equality impact analyses, working towards an anti-racist, anti-discriminatory workforce and services that encourage people from diverse backgrounds to access support. I helped create the Patient and Carer Race Equality Framework (PCREF), part of the Mental Health Act Review, which will be rolled out as mandatory for all mental health services in 2023. I'm also President of the Mental Health Foundation and co-founder and chair of Black Thrive, a global initiative that aims to address inequities that negatively impact the mental health and wellbeing of the Black community.

I am proud of everything I've achieved, but it hasn't been easy. Both my brothers had mental health challenges. The youngest passed away aged 41 in 2013, and the eldest in 2020, aged 54. Mental health provision couldn't cater for either of their needs. If it had, I believe they could still be alive today. I've struggled with my mental health, too. After the death of my second brother, I experienced deep anxiety, depression and suicidal thoughts and attempts. I wanted to escape the pain of my family being in such crisis. Therapy, acupuncture and physical exercise are helpful, but this level of trauma is hard to emerge from.

My grief will stay with me for ever, but I'm determined to use it to motivate me in my activist work and improve services to help heal people when they are their most vulnerable and powerless.

• *mentalhealth.org.uk*

‘Attitudes to grief are finally shifting’

Caroline Sarll is the founder and patron of WAY Widowed and Young, which supports those widowed aged 50 and under. The charity marks its 25th anniversary this year.

No one needs to cope alone

The logo for WAY Widowed and Young is a swan, because they look calm on the surface, despite paddling furiously below to stay afloat. For many, this is how grief feels. But meeting someone else who has had a similar experience can make a huge difference.

This is why I set up the national charity WAY Widowed and Young 25 years ago – so no one needs to cope alone.

In 1969, my father died in a car accident when I was eight and my sister, Amanda, was 11. Attitudes to grief were very different then and it seldom got talked about, with a prevailing ‘stiff upper lip’ mindset. I hated seeing my mum struggle without any support. None of us were the same again.

After graduating from university with an English and German degree, I joined BBC Wales as a radio producer before becoming a freelance journalist. I loved my career, although the loss of my father continued to impact me. In my early 30s, I made a documentary for Radio 4 about children who had lost a parent, which was harrowing but cathartic.

A year after that documentary, in 1994, tragedy hit our family again. I opened the door to my mum, who told me my sister’s husband, Charlie, had died. He was just 37. Amanda was 12 weeks pregnant with their first child.

As Amanda and I sat with Charlie, waiting for the undertakers, we felt like history was repeating itself. I was absolutely determined that my sister would not battle her grief alone.

I made more than 100 calls to find out if there was support available that could help Amanda. There was nothing. This increased my anger and my drive to make a change.

When Amanda gave birth to her son, I was her birthing partner. Two years later, my husband and I welcomed the first of our two daughters. Life was incredibly busy, yet the feeling that there needed to be more support for people widowed young didn’t go away.

Starting a charity from scratch isn’t easy. I was awarded a small grant from a magazine competition, but otherwise was self-funded. I used my journalism contacts to send endless faxes to local and national media, as well as distributing leaflets in shops, post offices and doctors’ surgeries.

I set up a phone line based initially from my home and a PO Box in Porthcawl.

As interest grew, I realised it was time to set up our first official in-person meeting. On 26 February 1997, I drove to a hotel in Cardiff. From the moment I walked into the room, I could feel the raw emotion. Around 35 people turned up – some recently bereaved, others further down the line. It was a sea of lost, desperate faces. I was glad Amanda had come with me, as someone who really understood what they were going through. Hearing their heartbreaking stories, my work already felt justified.

Since that meeting, WAY Widowed and Young has developed hugely, helping more than 14,000 to date. The charity has 4,500 members across the UK and over 150 volunteers. There are in-person and virtual events; peer-to-peer support groups for specific needs, such as those widowed with children; and members have access to a 24-hour helpline that runs 365 days a year. It’s uplifting to see photos of members smiling – a reminder that shared sorrow can bring hope into otherwise shattered lives.

As a society, we are becoming more open, tolerant and accepting of the complex emotions that grief can bring. Looking to the future, we will continue our outreach and campaigning work, offering support and raising awareness as much as we can.

It will always be bittersweet knowing that something lasting, offering a lifeline to so many, has been created out of our double family tragedy. WAY Widowed and Young is the organisation to which no one wants to belong. But, my most fervent hope is that we will be there for anyone who needs us, for many years to come.

• *widowedandyoung.org.uk* □

Making a change

Risk taker or careful planner? Both. I don’t think they’re mutually exclusive.

I’m most productive when... I’m really busy. The more on my plate, the faster I work.

My biggest inspiration is... My wonderful late mum. Her love made me who I am.

I’m changing the conversation by... Increasing awareness of young widowhood.

For me, inclusivity means... Accepting differences.

Creating community is important because... Knowing you’re not alone can be a lifesaver.

To make change happen, we all need to... Stick our heads above the parapet and challenge the status quo.

My proudest achievement is... Raising our beautiful daughters to be feisty, loving young women.

I relax by... Sorry, what does relax mean?

INTERVIEWS: ELLA DOVE. PHOTOGRAPHY: MOLLIE ROSE/KINTZING, LIZ McAULAY, ROBERT TAYLOR