

Citation: Davina McCall

Chancellor Dharker, Graduates and Guests,

*Mythbusting, Taboo-tackling, Stigma-fighting, Lifechanging, and Lifesaving –*

these are a few of the words used to describe Davina McCall's work on the menopause.

In 2021 Davina's Channel4 documentary *Sex, Myths and the Menopause* catalysed a step-change in people's understanding of the perimenopause and menopause. Through this and her subsequent work, Davina began a national conversation on women's health, their choices and workplace cultures. This moment came after decades of championing and campaigning on women's health, and it is for this tireless advocacy that we're honouring Davina today.

Davina grew up, as she describes it, half-nun and half-wildchild. Her grandmother, who raised her in the Surrey countryside, was one of her heroes: a loving, strong woman who worked hard and spoke her mind. Davina's summers were spent adventurously with her mother in France, and while their relationship had ups and downs, she was proud to recently collect her French passport in what she has described as a healing process connecting with her French heritage. Davina has been widely praised for her openness in discussing the struggles with addiction that characterized her teenage and early adult years, before she got clean and, after persistent pursuit, landed her first television role with MTV. In an interview with Stephen Barlett she commented: 'Getting a 'no' is just a 'yes' that hasn't happened yet.' From these formative years we can see the power in honesty, the strength in vulnerability, and a certain robustness and tenacity that flow through her formidable career.

There was a time when those of us of a certain generation were all Davina, live on Channel 4, reminding one another not to swear, as the phenomenon of *Big Brother* swept the nation. With the prevalence of reality television these days it is easy to forget how pioneering *Big Brother* was, and therein, a risk for anyone's career. As well as iconic tv moments, what it brought to the fore was Davina's intense interest in people and her uncanny ability to read them. In shows that have followed, such as *The Davina Hour*, this combines with her obsession for learning, curiosity about societal issues and flair for conversation, and, in programmes like *This Time Next Year*, her sheer joy in people being empowered to own their dreams. Running through her extensive tv catalogue is a rare ability to connect, empathise and communicate, perhaps most apparent in those *Long Lost Family* moments where, as the nation's eyes are brimming, individuals and families have holes in their lives filled.

Alongside a prolific television career, Davina has been inspiring women through health and wellbeing programmes which, as technology has developed, have moved from fitness DVDs to online platforms. Through this, and in her wider menopause work, she has created intentional communities where women can support one another to shine. Davina's passion for fitness has carried through to her fundraising where she has raised millions of pounds for charities including Stand up for Cancer, Comic Relief and Sports Relief. For Sports Relief, she famously undertook a 500 mile triathlon – swimming, biking and running from Edinburgh to London. If that doesn't sound challenging enough, she did it *in February*. Reflecting on viewing the awful spectacle of a motionless Davina being pulled from a very chilly Lake Windemere, Lucy Mangan described Davina as 'the endlessly ebullient uber-host – capable of uniting an audience through sheer force of personality and, [who] if we could only find a way to harness her

to the necessary grids, could end the global energy crisis.’ In an emotional interview on *Loose Women*, Davina explained that what would keep her going was raising money for ‘women’s initiatives and projects’. Her partner Michael commented that ‘being close to someone who makes a decision and then puts so much of their heart into it’ is ‘life-affirming’.

For a woman who has bungee jumped out of a helicopter above the Grand Canyon, tackling the societal and media silence on the menopause might have seemed a straightforward undertaking, but Davina was warned off doing it as it might impact her career. And, it certainly has. Incensed by the lack of information when she was experiencing perimenopause, Davina’s documentary set out to inform, challenge assumptions, and convey real world experience. It won an AIB International Award for Broadcasting, with judges praising the ‘excellent and trustworthy presenter’ in a documentary which conveyed ‘thorough research with the human touch.’ Two months after transmission #davinamenopause was still trending on social media. What has been described in the media and journal articles as the ‘Davina effect’ saw an estimated 42% rise in the uptake of HRT, which highlighted issues with its supply, and increased demand in women seeking appointments with GPs and private clinics.

Davina’s documentary was a high-point in a movement for change. In October 2021 the UK government announced a set of new menopause-related policies, including the establishment of a menopause taskforce, and subsequently they appointed a ‘HRT tsar’ and the first Menopause Employment Champion to improve workplace support. In 2022 menopause was declared one of England’s seven priority areas by the national Women’s Health Strategy. This strategy was informed by the

*Women's Priorities for Women's Health* report (2022), to which Newcastle researchers contributed. Menopause research at Newcastle includes work to change narratives around the menopause and ageing, improve workplace cultures, and understand how the menopause impacts all aspects of women's health.

In May 2023 Davina's book *Menopausal*, written with Dr Naomi Potter, won the Book of the Year at the British Book Awards with the judges highlighting the need for the book and the conversations it has started. Davina wanted to produce an accessible and inclusive resource for both men and women and it is the best-selling menopause book of all time. Davina continues to work as an ambassador for The Menopause Charity and its founder and one of Davina's collaborators, Dr Louise Newson, said: 'I'm extremely proud and supportive of Davina's work as she shares the same ethos as I do when it comes to the perimenopause and menopause – empowering women to make informed decisions about their health and breaking the taboos associated with it and HRT.' This is perhaps the real 'Davina effect.' Davina's next book, *Birthing*, similarly seeks to draw on women's experiences to again emphasize a woman's right to feel empowered to make whatever choice is right for her. As her eldest daughter Holly put it, 'You see what's going on in yourself, and spark a light in others.'

In January 2024 Davina was awarded an MBE for services to broadcasting.

Asked what, in her Mum's career, has made her most proud, Holly immediately replied: 'that she was always present' – despite the busiest of schedules, first and foremost she was always a Mum. In paying tribute to her achievements, Davina's children Holly, Tilly and Chester said: 'Mum, as a woman who has dedicated her entire life to caring for and celebrating others, today we wish to celebrate you. Know that your

years of wisdom, selflessness and relentless hard work have changed the lives of so many for the better and whilst you might not have studied for a degree in the traditional sense, you've earned this honour a million times over and we are immensely proud.'

Chancellor Dharker. This is Davina. For her outstanding advocacy and campaigning on women's health, I present to you Davina McCall as a candidate for the degree of Doctor of Civil Law, *honoris causa*.

*Professor Vee Pollock,*

*Public Orator*

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