



*'It's taken a long time to get to where I am today,
but I'm really grateful that I went for it'*

'I don't want to live with regret'

TV presenter-turned-psychotherapist Melinda Messenger, 53, talks to Joanna Ebsworth about changing careers, following her heart, and the importance of taking on new challenges.

Melinda Messenger is living proof that you can successfully switch careers in midlife when you put your mind to it. Having graced our TV screens for almost three decades, the former glamour model-turned-presenter, 53, made the conscious decision back in 2010 to begin stepping away from the showbiz spotlight to pursue her childhood dream of becoming a psychotherapist. And years of academic endeavour later, it's clear the risk has paid off: having completed her diploma and master's degree, the mum-of-three now runs a private psychotherapy practice at the Centre for Psychotherapy in London. She has also trained to become a dream guide; taken a course in mindfulness at Oxford University; and is days away from qualifying as a reiki master and energy therapist when I meet her for the first time – along with *Platinum* Editor-in-Chief Katy Sunnassee – at a swanky celeb-packed party for her TV agent's birthday (she still dips her toes into telly work when the urge takes her).

Our meeting is short and sweet – just like Melinda herself who, at a petite five foot two, radiates enough warmth to heat a church hall. Our time is only cut short due to the fact that she's setting off on a charity trek up Snowdon the next day with her fiancé, television expedition leader and medic Dr Raj Joshi, who she first met when she was least expecting it, on the 2023 series of *Celebrity SAS: Who Dares Wins*. All I can do after wishing Melinda lots of luck on her next adventure and watching her head home for an early night, is grab another glass of Sauvignon Blanc, sigh a little enviously, and turn to Katy to ask, 'how does she do it?'. But then, Melinda



is the first to admit her journey to building a new career has been far from easy when I catch up with her over Zoom a few days later.

'Up until the point when I started to fully wind down my TV work around seven years ago and start training, I'd spent over a decade doing up to four different TV shows a year, often working every day back-to-back,' says Melinda. 'It was just one thing after another, and while I was really grateful to have all those opportunities, I also recognised if I didn't make a conscious choice to step away [from TV], I'd never get to be a psychotherapist, and that would be something I'd massively regret.'

It was during a stint as a contestant on *Dancing On Ice* in 2010 that Melinda says she 'got a calling' to change careers and take control of the situation –

however it turned out. 'I knew if I didn't do something about how I felt, something precious in me would be destroyed. So, I decided to honour that and see where it took me. It's taken a long time to get to where I am today, but I'm really grateful that I went for it.'

Melinda says lots of people regularly tell her they'd love to retrain for a new career, but admit they're scared of change. 'And I really understand all of that,' she says earnestly. 'I've faced real challenges; there were lots of false starts and huge difficulties, but I'm on the other side now. I'm fully qualified and accredited, have my own psychotherapy practice, and I've been working with clients for seven years as well as doing dream-guide work. I'm reaping the gifts and benefits of getting through the challenge.'

Continuing the hard work when it feels like the world is against you is a bit like harvesting,

suggests Melinda. 'You keep ploughing and ploughing the field – even when the weather's bad and you don't feel like it and you feel like the crop isn't going to yield anything – but you keep going because you believe in it. And eventually, you will take in the harvest and benefit from the work you've created.'

It's an incredibly inspiring attitude, I tell her, especially for those of us who feel scared by the idea of starting over in later life to follow a childhood dream or higher calling. 'It's scarier not to try,' says Melinda firmly. 'Imagine if you don't? Every new beginning is scary. Every new adventure is scary, but there's a really fine line between fear and excitement. Not doing something because of fear is much, much worse than trying something new or different and seeing what path it can take you down.'

More to the point, says Melinda, we shouldn't allow our thoughts and feelings about getting older prevent us from seizing every new opportunity that comes along. 'I think midlife is the best time of life, without fail,' she says emphatically. 'I feel that this is the time that women come into their own power, and you get to live the life you want to live. Usually, we've done our child rearing, we've built our careers, or we've looked after relationships and family members, and it's at this point where you get the opportunity to come into your own power. And we have an awful lot to give, to share, to offer. I think it's an extraordinary time, and quite a gift.'

A NEW CALLING

The type of psychotherapy Melinda practises is, she says, 'very in depth', requiring her to work with clients over several years to help them find out who they really were 'before the world told them who to be... before you got distorted and out of balance, or you lost the connection to yourself'. To this end, she focuses on helping people to change patterns in their lives, find their way 'back home' and, most importantly, heal, so they can 'live life as they were meant to, and not by the expectations that were placed upon them'. But before Melinda could begin to help others, she had to go through nine years of therapy herself as part of her training.

'As a psychotherapist, I can't take anyone anywhere I haven't been,' she explains. 'So, I've gone into the depths of my soul, self and psyche. I've gone to the places where there's nothing apart from death, destruction or fear. Very often, when I'm sat with a client, they can feel like they're the only one dealing with the situation they're in. But all the processes pretty much have similar core routes and themes. So, I can sit with somebody in their extreme distress, or fear, or loss or grief, and I can see what's happening.

I can see the process they're in, and I know they're going to be OK.'

'When a client's lost all hope, I can hold the hope for them until they're ready to take it back,' she continues. 'And that's how it helps to heal. My work is really challenging but deeply rewarding; it's a vocation. And you do it because you're called to do it. You couldn't do it otherwise, because there are much easier ways to make a living, let's put it that way.'

A DEEPER MEANING

As a child, Melinda says she wanted to be a teacher or a psychiatrist. But it was only when she got older that she realised she was more interested in healing. 'I was always spiritual, but I hid it, I guess,' she explains. 'I grew up in a family where spirituality wasn't accepted, and I didn't really see it around me, so I kept it private. But it was always in my nature as far back as I can remember; being really little and wanting to know the answers to why we were here, why we're human, what is God, and what is there that's bigger than us.'

'I just went on a journey of exploring different faiths, but essentially, doing this was all about looking for a way back to myself because all the answers were there anyway. Personally, I believe healing is about the whole body, the whole system – mind, body and spirit – so I wanted to find something where I could address all three, because that for me was the only way healing would be possible. That's when I decided to train in integrative transpersonal psychotherapy. In addition, I went off to Peru and Nepal to do my own shamanic retreats, trained in meditation and reiki and energy work for healing, and learned for myself directly what helped me to heal so I could offer those practices to others.'

FINDING YOUR "YOU"

Melinda admits to having tried most alternative therapies over the years, from Bach flower remedies, Qigong and yoga to using crystals to help her connect to different energies. 'There are a lot of powerful practices I've learned to trust in over the years to help me draw in strength when I need it, and I think that everything has a place,' she says. 'If you think about it, looking after your wellbeing is about how you keep your being well. It's not about your job, or the roles you play. Your being is who you are underneath all the roles and jobs you do. Your being is who you are when you sit quietly, when you can feel connected to your heart. It can feel different for different people.'

To that extent, Melinda believes self-care forms an essential part of looking after your wellbeing, whether that involves getting dressed up, using face masks, eating well, reading books,

'I've faced real challenges; there were lots of false starts and huge difficulties. But I'm on the other side now'





*'Every new
beginning is scary.
But not doing
something because
of fear is much
worse than trying
something new'*

socialising in the right company, or taking regular exercise. Ironically, however, she claims she's only recently started to enjoy fitness as part of her lifestyle since entering her early 50s – following years of telling herself that she wasn't the "sporty" type.

'As a child, I was always active, but I now recognise that I disowned that part of myself somewhere along the line, even though the outdoors is my favourite place to be,' she says. 'I love sporty challenges. I've done skydiving, lots of treks, and have taken part in reality TV programmes such as *The Jump* and *Dancing On Ice*. But I never acknowledge that I enjoyed doing those things.'

'Now, I realise that being active is an important part of me. I did *Celebrity SAS: Who Dares Wins* because I wanted the physical challenge of doing something I never thought I could do. Naturally, I struggled, because I'm only 5'2" and my Bergen [large rucksack] weighed the same as all the male contestants'. But what I got from the experience was getting to the point where I couldn't go any further, and I'd never experienced that before. Marathon runners talk about breaking through that moment, and when I felt it for myself, I was like "wow, that's real". It woke up a part of me that realised I like to be pushed and challenged physically. I just wish I hadn't discovered it so late in life.'

THE FUTURE'S BRIGHT

If finding a love for fitness was the last thing Melinda expected to gain from taking part in *Celebrity SAS*, you can be sure she definitely wasn't looking for love. But find love, she did. After being dismissed from the gruelling training camp covered in bruises, she was asked to pop into the programme's medical tent to see Dr Raj Joshi for a "quick chat about foot rot" (yes, really!). They kept chatting, and less than a year later, the pair got engaged on a trip to New Zealand last August.

'Yeah, I mean, I won't say too much, but it was the last thing I expected,' she says. 'It was interesting timing, because I'd just completed my training, and my children are all grown up now, so maybe the timing was right. I'm a great believer that when the timing's right for something, it happens. And again, I think when you're not looking for something, that's when it usually comes and knocks at the door, in the most unexpected places.'

I suggest that it's when you meet someone at your most real and vulnerable, that you can often begin a relationship from an authentic, more genuine place as opposed to an unrealistic place of perfection. 'Which never exists, does

it?', retorts Melinda, wisely. That leads us nicely onto the subject of her deciding to ditch the hair dye last year and embrace the grey – which subsequently sent the UK media into meltdown. Was she surprised by the reaction?

'Yes, I was!' she admits. 'And I'm still shocked about it. I couldn't understand why my hair colour was so significant, and people are still talking to me about it now. I was astounded, because I had people calling me up to say they'd been watching the story on the BBC news. But it's just my hair colour. Embracing my greys was meant to be freeing. And then, ironically, it became very un-freeing because there were huge expectations [for me to stay grey]. But it's fine. Ultimately, it's about living the life we want to live and not the life that others expect us to. Why does it matter if you've coloured your hair or not coloured your hair? Mine might be pink in six months. Who knows?'

