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Mental health When I was having trouble — walking was therapy

The TV presenter Julia Bradbury, 50, on the strength she draws from nature

I confess I'm addicted. To the natural world, to green spaces, the movement of leaves and to the evocative smell of freshly wet soil. I appeared on *Newsnight* recently to talk about how to embrace these cold, darker days and they introduced me as an "outdoor evangelist" and I guess that's true. I honestly believe that it is nature that is going to help me through this latest, toughest stage of the pandemic — and that it could help us all, no matter what we do or where we live.

I need to walk every day, not in a big beautiful landscape but to a park, along the canal. It keeps me sane. I need this time to mentally recalibrate and to stimulate me. Outdoor spaces are healing physically and mentally, and walking has been my therapy.

I spent much of the summer lockdown growing things (with varying degrees of success) in pots with my three children. I have twin girls who are five and a nine-year-old boy. Of course, it was easier then, in the warm sunshine. But even now, on the coldest, greyest days, I am so grateful for the garden.

In my late thirties I was diagnosed with endometriosis. After laparoscopic surgery I needed to recover for five weeks, so I went home to Rutland to the garden where I'd toiled earnestly as a little girl with my mum. The familiar sound of the wood pigeons cooing in the morning, eating apples from our trees, the peace and quiet of the tiny village and daily walks down to the reservoir sped up my recuperation while I contemplated my possible infertility at the hands of this silent disease.

A few years later I was going through a troubling time personally and dousing little fires at work. We were filming a *Countryfile* special in the New Forest — to film the dawn chorus at 4am — and because we were on location overnight I had some time when I could escape. I needed to think and talk to a tree and there was no better place. It was June and the forest was pulsating with life, the trees were almost in full leaf and the birds were chattering. I started to wander through the woodland looking up at the canopy of multiple greens, thinking of the various decisions that lay ahead for me. Mighty redwoods, oak, beech, yews... "What a truly special place," I thought. These giants are hundreds of years old, some even a thousand, and they have survived.

I considered all the other species that were reliant on this spectacular ecosystem, the orchids, insects, fungi, bees and beetles. I took a deep breath and filled my lungs with forest air, reminded that we are part of something so much bigger. I stroked the bark of a giant redwood and put my arms around it, holding on for about a minute. "Thanks for the chat," I said, heading back to camp, my mind feeling so much clearer. As Albert Einstein said, when



Julia Bradbury

you "look deep into nature you will understand everything better."

Whenever I have a problem, if I need invigorating or calming down, nature is always where I turn. Green spaces, big mountains, little plants, huge trees, it doesn't matter. Humans have a biological need to connect with nature (it's called biophilia). And we need it now more than ever.

I feel incredibly fortunate that my childhood was wrapped in a mossy blanket of Mother Nature — an upbringing that cemented my link to the natural world that has stayed with me my whole life. My dad, Michael, took me walking across the Peak District from about the age of seven, filling me with stories about his childhood there and teaching me to tickle trout — catching them with no hooks, no lines, no spears, just my bare hands. Even though my Greek mother, Chrissi, could definitely not be described as outdoorsy, she would spend hours with me in the garden in Rutland where we would potter together, plant things, scythe the grass, tend to the roses and harvest the enormous cooking apples from our two unidentified apple trees in the garden; enormous fleshy things that we still eat to this day.

While it's tricky to argue that gardening is in our DNA, being at one with nature is. The need to relate to the

landscape and to other forms of life, as Isabella Tree says in her brilliant book *Wilding*, is in our genes. For millions of years our survival depended on it, and in less than a hundred years our lives have changed unrecognisably. Nowadays some people don't have any contact with the natural world at all.

I am reluctant to utter the words "silver lining" when it comes to Covid-19 and the death and damage it has brought. The lockdowns have been unbearably tough for most of us. But I think that the reset towards the natural world and an understanding of how important it is in our lives is one positive everyone can take away from this disaster. In the absence of gyms, swimming pools, tennis courts and even playgrounds we've all been driven to reconnect with nature. More than 80 per cent of us live in an urban environment and millions have taken a renewed interest in their garden if they're lucky to have one. A survey by the Horticultural Trades Association found that 64 per cent of British adults reported growing plants and flowers: that's 2.9 million people more than in 2019. Millions more have found solace in their local park or along canals and riverbanks.

Without realising it we're now all practising mindfulness: gazing out of our windows at the changing seasons, not just hearing bird song but listening to it. Research shows that just under half the adult population are spending more time outside than before Covid-19 and most of them reported that nature is important to their health and happiness. This is what we need to remember in 2021 and beyond. We need the magically smart, beautiful, life-affirming natural world. **Cornwall & Devon Walks with Julia Bradbury**, 8pm on Wednesdays on ITV; routes for all of the walks featured in the series can be downloaded free at theoutdoorguide.co.uk

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