

# “Walking has got me through tough times”

**JULIA BRADBURY'S** LIFELONG PASSION FOR THE OUTDOORS HAS NOT ONLY SHAPED HER CAREER, BUT PULLED HER THROUGH SOME OF THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES OF HER LIFE. HERE, SHE TELLS **KIRSTY NUTKINS** ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF WALKING FOR MENTAL HEALTH AND THE SECRET TO FEELING FABULOUS AT 50.

Anyone who has watched Julia Bradbury on TV will be familiar with her big smiles and boundless energy. Whether she's scaling a mountain or wading through mud in her wellies for her hit ITV walking documentaries, she does it with infectious enthusiasm. So it might come as a surprise to know that, like many people, Julia has battled with anxiety during the Covid-19 pandemic.

"In the first lockdown last year, I completely lost it," she admits. "One day, something just flicked in me like a switch; I was doing some ironing, and something went wrong with the iron. Suddenly, I was inconsolable! I think I was crying for two hours.

"I filmed some of this and put it on Instagram, just to show people that it happens to everybody, and it's absolutely fine if things get on top of you. You have to admit when you feel stressed and let your emotions out."

Julia later revealed that the meltdown had been partly caused by a health scare. After finding a lump in her left breast during a work trip to Costa Rica in March last year,

she ended up leaving it several weeks before taking action — the pandemic happened and then life got in the way. She only did so when a friend told her she was having surgery for breast cancer. Luckily, a mammogram (which Julia also documented candidly, with photos on Instagram) revealed the lump was benign.

"It was scary. I was going to see the breast specialist, and my feelings and thoughts were swirling. I kept thinking, 'I hope this is all right'. I felt complete and utter relief when it was, but a little bit foolish that I'd left it. It's made me very aware."

During low points in the past year, Julia has found solace in nature. She's been a walker her entire life — ever since her dad used to pick her up from school in Sheffield as a kid and take her on hikes in the Peak District — and she's presented shows like *Britain's Best Walks* and, more recently, *Cornwall And Devon Walks With Julia Bradbury*. But the lockdowns reaffirmed to her the importance of being outdoors, not only for physical health but for mental health, too.

"One in four of us will develop a serious mental health problem in our lifetime, and the pandemic will no doubt have a long-term impact on all of us. I really believe that getting outside in the fresh air and appreciating the beauty of the natural world helps, even if it's just for 15 minutes every day. You'll feel more productive, happier and healthier for it.

"I live in London and those sweeping landscapes you see in my shows aren't on my doorstep, but I still manage to walk to a park. That's my time — to let go of emotions, to think problems through and really deal with any pressures and worries that I have."

It's not the first time Julia has turned to nature to help her through a difficult period. A few years ago, she opened up about her struggles with depression in her late 30s; a culmination, she says, of work and personal issues building up. She was also diagnosed with »

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## People

endometriosis, which affected her moods, and when she was told the condition could have an impact on her fertility, she worried she may never be able to have children. She ended up seeking professional help from a psychiatrist and says that her daily walks became even more important during that period.

"Walking has undoubtedly got me through tough times. Back then, I started walking harder and I made sure I built outdoor time into my life. Even if I was filming, I would get up early and go for a walk before breakfast, to think and breathe," she says. "I wouldn't say that my depression was very serious, in that I wasn't on the suicidal scale, but it was causing me sleepless nights and I was very anxious. Everything just seemed heavy at that period in my life.

"The therapy really helped me, too. It's lovely to talk to friends and family, but sometimes you need an unbiased ear."

Despite the endometriosis, Julia gave birth to her first child at the age of 41, a son named



Julia says that walking, the great outdoors and therapy has helped pull her through depressive periods.



Zephyr (a Greek word — inspired by her mum Chrissi's heritage — which means 'a breath of fresh air'). But when she and her husband, property developer Gerard Cunningham, tried for a second baby, it proved much harder. She ended up enduring four gruelling rounds of IVF before having her "miracle" twin daughters, Xanthe and Zena, who were born in March 2015 when Julia was 44.

"My lovely chicks, as I call them, are my proudest achievement. It wasn't an easy route to become a mum and there were some tough moments.

"What kept me going through the IVF was my desire for my son to have a sibling. It's stupid really, but that thought is innate in all of us — that you don't want to leave your kids on this earth on their own. I wanted him to have that connection because I'm very close to my sister, Gina, and my partner has eight brothers and sisters, and he's close to many of them. Having twins was just a Brucey bonus! Now, I have the dream and I'm so, so grateful."

Julia has recovered fully from her depression, and says becoming a mum was the turning point. "It changed things for me. Something kicked in where I became the protector. It distracted me from my own anxieties.

"It's interesting, because psychologists often advise their patients to do something for someone else because it takes the pressure and focus off you, and I think that's true. Whether that's looking after a pet or a houseplant, it's something that you can nurture and grow. I found that taking care of the kids became the priority."

**"I'm fit and I have plenty to live for. I don't feel like I'm getting older."**

While Julia admits that husband Gerard isn't outdoorsy at all, their children have luckily inherited her adventurous streak and, come rain or shine, they're outside rolling in the leaves and climbing trees. Soon, she hopes they will be tackling some of the hikes she shared with her father as a child.

"I can't wait to take them on the Kinder Scout walk, which is one of my favourites in the Peak District. I was telling them all about it the other day and they were very excited. Sadly, my dad can't do those walks anymore because he has bad knees, but I want to recreate some of those special memories with them."

When Julia's not lacing up her hiking boots, she keeps active with yoga, practising at least four times a week. Although she doesn't diet, she's conscious about what she puts into her body.

"I'm always thinking, 'Is this full of additives? Is this GMO free? Is it full of sugar?' I eat a lot of plant-based meals, and make sure my family has vegetarian and vegan days. Mixing it up is part of a healthy diet. The meat we do eat is sustainable and comes from a farm that cares about the welfare of their animals."

Whether it's down to her diet, her exercise regime or just feeling more content now that she's a mum, Julia says she's happier than ever and that turning 50 last summer wasn't something she feared. "I'm fit and I have plenty to live for and be enthusiastic about, and I have a positive outlook, so I don't feel as if I'm getting older. I also »



“I hope I’ll be doing ‘Julia’s OAP Walks’ in 20 years!”



Julia says she's feeling happier than she ever has, saying: "I have plenty to be enthusiastic about and have more experience and knowledge now than I've ever had."

have more experience and knowledge now than I've ever had," she reflects.

"I feel comfortable being 50 — I just hope everyone else is! You hear all these horror stories about women hitting their 50s and all the work drying up. I think things are changing now, but you never know."

The fact that she is already planning two more TV series (details of which are still under wraps) would suggest her career is still on an upward trajectory. And when not filming, she's busy working on other projects. She co-founded The Outdoor Guide, an online resource bringing together information on walks around the UK, with her sister Gina, and they've recently launched The Outdoor Guide Foundation. The charitable scheme aims to donate at least 10 waterproof suits and pairs of wellies to each of the 20,000-plus primary schools in the UK, to ensure all kids have easy access to the right gear.

Julia has built a successful career around her love of the outdoors, but she admits she could have ended up on a very different path. Her first big TV role was as the Los Angeles correspondent for GMTV back in 1996 and

she went on to host other shows, such as *Watchdog*. But when she heard that there was a series being planned for BBC4 called *Wainwright Walks*, following the mountain routes of the renowned fell walker Alfred Wainwright, she engineered a conversation with the commissioner.

"I knew I wanted to get involved, and I'm so glad I went and had that chat. I was doing *Watchdog* at the time and this was something that was very different for me. *Wainwright Walks* was on BBC4, which had no marketing budget and a small number of viewers, and somehow it made its way onto BBC2. It was a moment where outdoor television changed, and it was career-defining for me."

Julia, of course, became a mainstay on *Countryfile* for 10 years, presenting the show alongside her good friend Matt Baker. But while she has fond memories of that time, she says quitting the BBC show and moving over to ITV in 2014 is something she'll never regret. She's now making the walking shows she loves and hopes she'll be able to do it for years to come.

"That would be a dream," she says. "I hope I'll be doing *Julia's Bradbury's OAP Walks* in 20 years!"

## Through the years



Julia's first stints on TV were as GMTV's Los Angeles correspondent and co-hosting *Top Gear* during the 1990s. From there, she went on to co-host *Are We Being Served?*, investigating customer service in the UK.

Many of us will know Julia best from her decade-long work on *Countryfile* alongside Matt Baker, and *Wainwright Walks*, which she describes as being career-defining.



Julia and husband Gerry have been married since 2000 and together they have three children, Zephyr, Xanthe and Zena.

Passionate about charity work, Julia has campaigned on behalf of many different causes over the years, including Macmillan Cancer Trust, The Outdoor Trust, Bowel & Prostate Cancer and Keep Britain Tidy.



## WHAT JULIA SAYS

“I loved having the contrast of inner-city life in Sheffield and exploring with my dad. That quality time we had together in the Peak District instilled a love for the outdoors in me.”

“THE GREEK BIT IS DEFINITELY IN ME — BUBBLING OVER, FIERCE, PASSIONATE. I CAN BE A HANDFUL!”

“I have a duty to be proud and positive about the way I look and wear it as a badge of honour.”

“TURNING 50 IS A GOOD MOMENT TO BE GRATEFUL AND THINK, 'OK, WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM THE NEXT 30 OR 40 YEARS OF YOUR LIFE?'"