



'HEALTH HAS TO BE PERSONALISED'

With October being Breast Cancer Awareness Month, we speak to **Julia Bradbury** about how her diagnosis transformed her approach to healthcare

Interview: **Joanna Ebsworth**

I considered myself to be fairly healthy before my cancer diagnosis in 2021. I walked, enjoyed nature and ate reasonably healthy food (or so I thought), but I know now that I didn't really do any of those things with intention and purpose or think about how they fitted in with my lifestyle. Once it was confirmed to me that I had breast cancer, I started doing research – which quickly turned into 'me-search' – and I realised there were fundamentals I was getting wrong. My job was, and still is, very involving with a lot of travel and crossing time zones, but I didn't really honour my sleep or look after myself emotionally or psychologically. I also didn't understand the importance of moving or eating at the right time during the day, or why it is so crucial to sync our circadian rhythms with the day-and-night cycle of the earth.

Today, I take a 'whole person' approach to health. And that means taking care of my body, environment, nutrition, sleep and mental health all at the same time. Because you could be eating the healthiest diet, but if you're not sleeping very well, that's really going to impact your health. And if you're sleeping well and eating well, but you're not doing the recommended amount of movement

per week to get your heart rate going – as well as spending enough time outdoors in nature, which is a different thing entirely and important for very different reasons – that can really impact your health, too.

My new book *Hack Yourself Healthy* is about my personal journey to reclaiming my health. I've put myself through all these incredible tests and experiments to really examine myself in detail for it, and there are lots of experts who help to unpack everything in an accessible way. It's not a biohacking book, but I do mention biohacking because it's just self-optimisation. It's about learning what you can about yourself and then tweaking the bits that need attention, because what I have learned over the years is health has to be personalised. What's good for one person might not be good for another person, or it might not be optimising them.

Exercise is a great example of something we should be optimising for personal health. If you're a woman in your 50s and you're postmenopausal (as I am), and maybe cortisol is an issue for you (which it is for me), you wouldn't necessarily want to be doing all the very high-intensity training you might have done in your 20s because that's

potentially going to raise your cortisol levels and possibly create an issue with weight. I get a lot of women saying to me, 'I exercise so much and I run, and I do HIIT, but I can't lose any weight'. And I would suggest that it might be worth exploring the interplay between your cortisol levels and fat, especially if you are being chased permanently by the famous sabre tooth tiger, in a constant state of stress, and exercising at a high intensity all the time.

My movement prescription involves resistance training twice a week and walking every day. My daily walks might equal around 10,000 steps due to the amount I move, but I'm not obsessed with the count. What's more important for me is getting out of the indoor environment, which isn't that healthy. Just because you go to the gym five days a week, it doesn't mean you're healthy. In fact, I would push back on that. I would ask, 'if you're going to the gym five days a week, when are you doing outdoor exercise? When are you doing something that's not in the gym?'

If going to the gym is your way to exercise and do your weights, absolutely do it. But I just can't emphasise to people enough that being outside as much as you can is

'I take a "whole person" approach to health – body, environment, nutrition, sleep and mental health'





so important for us all. It's so valuable to take every moment away from the indoor lights, the paint, the glue that sticks our carpets together and all these VOCs (volatile organic compounds) that we're constantly inhaling, including the fire retardants sprayed onto your sofa. I personally think all of these things are contributing to the massive spike in all sorts of diseases that we're seeing, including obesity, Type II diabetes, cancers and autoimmune diseases.

That's why I take my at-home weights, kettlebells and yoga mat outside to work out whenever I can.

I take regular walking breaks throughout the day to get away from my desk.

Aside from the physical benefits of walking in nature, my experiments with the professors at the European Centre for Environment and Health, who work out of the University of Exeter, emphasise how important nature exposure is for productivity and wellbeing. They demonstrate that we could save the NHS billions - the exact sum is in the book, and it is mind blowing - if we all took regular daily 'nature snacks' as I do. So, walk to work, go for a walk before bed and take regular breaks in green spaces to give your brain a break. If you can just build it into your day, that is something that saves you and saves our health system.

Our cortisol levels rise in the morning to get us ready for the day ahead. But I've had mine tested, and they rise and keep on rising to very elevated levels which are not healthy. That's why I wake up when the sun is rising and give myself half an hour to sit on the window ledge outside my bathroom, so I can get the morning light into my eyes while I do breathwork and chanting. This helps my cortisol to rise gently and regulate

my hormones, because UV rays are different in the morning (the spectrum changes throughout the day). And, because I'm not instantly jumping on the phone and stimulating dopamine, I wake up in a much calmer way.

You don't need a cancer diagnosis to make changes to your health. One thing I realised was I was moving too quickly through life, and I wasn't taking any time to rest and repair. But there are simple techniques you can

embrace to genuinely change your life.

I learnt about breathwork through yoga, which I practised before my diagnosis, but I had never incorporated that control of breath in others area of my life. Whereas now, I know breathwork can help you to slow down your heart rate and get yourself out of a stressed state. Most of us breathe too quickly and gulp in air, when

you want to be taking light, gentle, soft breaths to get the maximum amount of oxygen into your body. I'm also about to start using some emotional freedom techniques, like tapping, and I'm going to do another course of speaking therapy, because I've got stuff I need to deal with. I want my body to be emotionally free, and that takes work.

My philosophy on nutrition has completely changed since my diagnosis. I've always been slim, despite my very large appetite, and I used to have a very high sugar diet. Now, however, I eat a properly balanced diet, and I don't snack anymore because it's not great to be constantly digesting. I used to love going out quite late for dinner, but I've realised you want to be repairing and rejuvenating when you're sleeping, and that doesn't happen if you're having dinner at 9pm and going to bed at 11pm or 12pm.

I do an overnight fast for 14-16 hours as that's really good for repairing the gut.

In *Hack Yourself Healthy*, I talk to the world-renowned circadian rhythm expert Professor Satchin Panda, who recommends avoiding 'your first calorie' for the first one or two hours after waking to avoid any interplay with cortisol which is high in the morning. That includes my milky coconut coffee, so I start my day with filtered water at room temperature and then my Hunter & Gather Restore electrolytes. I find starting the day hydrated improves my cognitive function and it also makes me feel more 'awake' than coffee does first thing in the morning.

I love having a savoury breakfast in the morning.

I always include some protein and fats in the morning because that helps to reduce sugary cravings, and I'm well known for drinking my olive oil. It's high in polyphenols, which has been reported to provide some 'anti-cancer effects', and I've even got the team at Hunter & Gather doing olive oil shots now! I've loved using their products for a long, long time, including its seed oil-free mayo, avocado oil and olive oil. Seed oils are a controversial topic, but I don't like them because much of the time they are usually manufactured using hexane as a solvent for extraction. This is followed by bleaching and refining in order to remove the hexane! The trace amounts are supposedly negligible, but I'm uncomfortable with the whole process, so I always cook with avocado or extra virgin olive oil, as well as using both for my salad and veggie dressings. 🌱



Julia Bradbury is an ambassador for real food brand Hunter & Gather (hunterandgatherfoods.com). Her new book, *Hack Yourself Healthy: Reclaim your health to boost your energy, clear your mind and live a long, vibrant life* (Piatkus, £22) is out now.

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