

# 'After my diag walking was therapy'

Presenter Julia Bradbury explains how embracing the great outdoors helped her find courage during her cancer battle

**W**hen *Closer* catches up with Julia Bradbury, she's fresh from a family holiday in Greece. Given that her beloved mum is Greek,

it's a place close to her heart, and this trip was particularly special.

"I celebrated my birthday there," says Julia, who's 53. "My little boy's birthday is a couple of days before mine, so we always have what we call the 'double bubble' celebration. We did loads of family things for two days, including swimming in the sea, which was magical. I walked, listened to the crickets, and watched the sun rise too. Every birthday is a blessing to be alive now, and I'm so looking forward to the year ahead."

As a former presenter of *Countryfile* who has hosted several TV shows about walking, it's perhaps no surprise that Julia's always been a fan of embracing the great outdoors. But it's become even more important to her since she was diagnosed with breast cancer two years ago. Fortunately she's now in remission, but she still pulls on her trainers every day without fail and strides out in the

fresh air. It's one of the many changes she's made since facing the "biggest crisis of her life", when a 6cm tumour was discovered in her left breast in July 2021.

## GETTING OUTDOORS

"I didn't know what to do with my feelings of uncontrollable sadness," recalls Julia, who with her partner, property developer Gerard Cunningham, has Zeph, 12, and twins Zena and Xanthe, eight. "I tried not to show my children my fear. Telling them, 'Mummy has cancer' is one of the hardest things I've ever had to do.

"When I left hospital [after a mastectomy], I promised myself I'd get outside every day. You're basically giving your entire body a physical and spiritual makeover every time you walk. It's like therapy, and one of the most valuable tools I know. It really is our superpower. After my diagnosis, a simple daily walk in the park gave me courage in the fight of my life. And after my mastectomy, short, tentative walks gave me faith."

Julia has now finished her treatment, but her experience also inspired her to



overhaul her diet, devote time to doing daily breathing exercises, and spend as much time as possible in what she calls "nature's green gym". In fact, she's so passionate about the benefits of walking and the great outdoors that she's written a book about it – *Walk Yourself Happy* (Piatkus).

## MAKING CHANGES

"In some ways, I feel my cancer diagnosis saved my life," she says. "It prompted me to make changes to the way I eat, sleep and exercise. Before my diagnosis, I was pushing at all edges of my life. I was pushing the work, the fun, and ever-expanding my capacity. But I lived a life that wore me out, and of course, you can't keep doing that. And getting a life-changing health diagnosis is a really good time to change things up a bit. It's good to take stock and change things every once in a while, and putting your health first is a great place to start."

While Julia readily admits she still feels fatigued at times, those changes have helped her become calmer, more resilient





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*During her battle with breast cancer*

and more connected to her friends and family. "Of course, I also feel huge gratitude for my life," she adds. "There have been moments in the past when walking and being in nature has helped heal me, like when I went through four rounds of IVF, but the lightning bolt moment has been since my mastectomy. It's been eye-opening. Whatever our situation, lack of movement is the worst thing we can do to ourselves."

**HEALTH BENEFITS**

She adds, "Walking is one of the simplest and best forms of exercise there is – but it is so much more than that. After three minutes, your blood pressure decreases, and after five minutes your mood improves. Creative thinking improves after 10 minutes, while blood sugar levels decrease after 15 minutes. Walking also helps with weight loss and reducing your risk of heart disease."

"Walking is one of the easiest and best things you can do – plus it's free. You can also multi-task in nature's green gym – you can walk and work out while soaking up the benefits of daylight, focus on your breath or, if you go with a friend, nurture your relationships along the way. So, start putting one foot in front of the other to make healthy changes!"

*By Sophie Barton*



# → STEP OUT TO TRANSFORM YOUR LIFE!

Julia Bradbury reveals her top tips to help you incorporate more walking into your daily routine, and how to get the most out of it for your health and happiness...



## EMBRACE MORNING LIGHT

Walking does wonders for your wellbeing at any time of day, but getting out in the morning ups the ante. That's because soaking up natural light kickstarts your body clock, which can in turn boost your energy levels and improve your sleep. Research also suggests people getting more morning light are less likely to report feelings of stress and depression. "I've learnt to worship the morning light," says Julia. "That light between 7am and 9am is really important to take into your body, and we do that through our eyes. Your body has evolved to respond to daylight, and even on a dull day you'll get more

lux (a measurement of light) than you do under artificial light. Even on rainy or cloudy days, I'd urge you to be outside for at least 30 minutes."

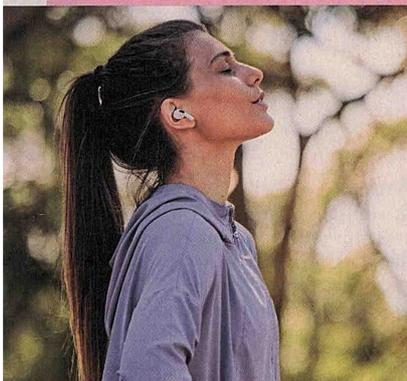


## ENJOY NATURE SNACKS

You don't have to embark on long hikes to embrace the healing powers of walking. Julia - who is now in remission after a mastectomy following a breast cancer diagnosis - punctuates her day with short "nature snacks". "I take a break from my desk regularly and head outside, even if it's only for five minutes," she says. "It's a great habit to get into - your productivity will go up, and you'll be better at your job. Widening your gaze and looking at the horizon is good for your eye health too, especially if you work on a screen. I also walk after each meal to aid digestion, and in the evening to calm myself down before bed. Instead of taking my phone, I listen to the sounds and look around to see if I can hear a bird chirp, or see a cloud float past. These small things make me smile."

## USE YOUR NOSE

You might not give much thought to the way you breathe when you walk, but inhaling through your nose can help you feel calm - plus experts believe it's healthier too. "You breathe in up to 25 per cent more oxygen through your nose," says Julia. "You also filter out bad bacteria." Nasal breathing can feel weird at first, so start with five minutes a day and build up. In her book, Julia speaks to expert Patrick McKeown, who suggests relaxing your jaw and breathing in and out through your nose in a regular and easy manner. Breathe softly and slowly - if the sensation of breathlessness is too much, slow down to a pace that's right for you.





### EDIT YOUR LIFE

If you're thinking you can't squeeze in a daily walk, try reframing the way you think about time. "Going for a daily walk might mean choosing to sacrifice something on your to-do list, but realistically we will never clear our inboxes, or get to the end of the washing pile," says Julia. "It's about prioritising what matters for you and your family, and editing your life accordingly. If we don't take care of ourselves, the cost can be huge, as I learnt to my detriment. If you can't do 10,000 steps a day, don't let that be a reason not to step outside. Even five minutes is better than nothing."

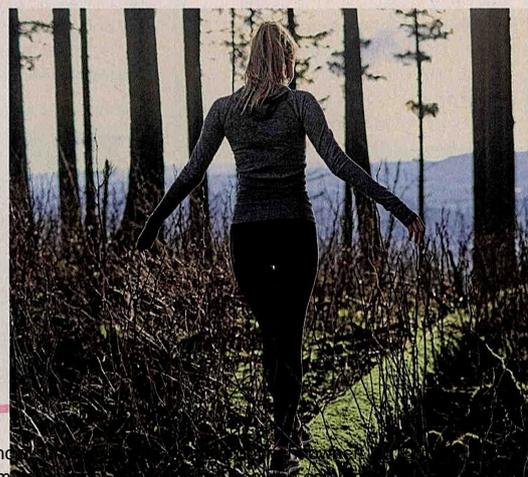
### MAKE IT SOCIAL



You can slot walking into your lunch break, the evening, or even before your children are awake. It can also double-up as social time. "Recently, I've been walking more with my friends," says Julia, 53. "We've stomped through parks and ambled around city streets enjoying conversations, helping each other navigate tricky times and laughing." Julia also says that finding walking buddies will help provide motivation. "Set up a WhatsApp group, so you can involve friends and encourage each other. On the days you can't walk together, you can still persuade one another to get outdoors and share pics of what you see along the way."

### ADD SOME STRENGTH TRAINING

Walking is a great way to get fit, and Julia recommends taking advantage of "nature's green gym" while you're out. "Combine walking with strength training," she says. "Try wearing ankle weights or wrist weights, or carry a backpack containing water bottles. You can do great exercises outside too - balancing on logs is good for your brain, or try doing a 'passive hang' from a tree." This simply involves finding a sturdy tree branch, then reaching your hands overhead, holding onto it and relaxing, so your head sinks into your shoulders. If you can hang completely, do so. "This is one of the most beneficial movements you can do," adds Julia. "It helps with grip strength, shoulder mobility and posture, and reverses the effect of gravity compressing your spine."



● *Walk Yourself Happy* by Julia Bradbury is out now (Piatkus, £20)

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