

# Take a step in the right direction

Presenter Kate Humble tells Anna-Marie Julyan how walking can be beneficial to mental health and help us to stay positive

When she's not rounding up sheep with her faithful Welsh sheepdog Teg for the BBC's *Off The Beaten Track*, or presenting programmes such as *Animal Park*, Kate Humble likes to walk. And she's written a book about it. *Thinking On My Feet* is the story of her year's journeys and, while she charts the changing seasons and places she visits, it's about more than that. It's about how walking helps Humble, and others, cope with life.

At times moving, the book is hugely uplifting, and the source of all this positivity makes herself known to me as I'm sitting with my nose in the chapter on autumn. A curly blonde head and bright smile dip into view as I wait in the foyer of her publisher's offices to be summoned for our interview. Humble has just been for a quick walk and picks me up herself on her way back in.

Conversation ranges from Humble by Nature, the 117-acre rural skills centre and working farm she and husband Ludo run in partnership with tenant farmers Tim and Sarah, to the merits of Dorset sheep. Home is an old stone farmhouse and smallholding in the Wye Valley with three dogs, Badger (their first), Bella, who likes sleeping upside down, snoring and sausage rolls – 'this is not a book for her' – and Teg.

It's Teg who accompanies Humble on many of her longer treks. In the book she charts how over nine days last summer, with



**CANINE COMPANION** Welsh sheepdog Teg often accompanies the TV star on her journeys

rucksack and camping equipment strapped to her back, they traced the River Wye from its source 136 miles back to their home. This morning in London she strode an hour and a half to her first appointment 'because it's a really nice way of starting the day'.

'I'll walk every day if I possibly can,' she says. 'For me, it's multipurpose. It is lovely, of course, being in beautiful countryside with my dogs, my footsteps being the first in the dew, seeing the sun come up and the birdsong, but actually – and this is what the book tries to encapsulate – I've found it's a good way of giving yourself a bit of space in the day.'

A lot of the walks in Humble's book take place early in the morning, at that promising time when the sun is just coming up and the world is waking. She decided to start a diary, to record what she saw with the hope of turning it into a book.

**'There is something about the rhythm of your feet that gives you clarity of thought'**

'I thought, it can't only be me who feels that there's something very beneficial in this incredibly simple, free activity that is very achievable by anybody,' she says. 'First, I wanted to look into whether there was a scientific basis to this, or was I just mad? And second, when you find something you love, you simply want to tell people about it.'

She describes that feeling that most people experience at some time or another of struggling with a problem or an anxiety-inducing situation, and how going for a walk somehow helps.

'There is something about the rhythm of your feet that allows the cogs in your brain to shift in a way that gives you the clarity of thought you don't have sitting at a desk or pacing up and down a corridor,' she explains.

Neuroscientist Baroness Susan Greenfield wrote a book called *A Day In The Life Of The Brain*, which Humble alludes to. So how does going for a walk help?

'What's interesting is it makes you think: what is a thought?' says Greenfield. 'What's thinking? I like to compare a thought with a feeling. With a feeling you might scream



or laugh and it's out there, over and done with. But every thought you have has something in common that emotions don't have, and that's a beginning, a middle and an end. You finish up in a different place from where you've started. How did you get to that different place? By a sequence of different steps.

'The man who developed the treatment for Parkinson's disease said "thinking is movement confined to the brain". It would follow therefore that if a thought requires a sequence of steps confined to the brain, if you physically make those steps, it enhances and reinforces that process of thinking.'

It doesn't have to be walking, but anything with a sequence – playing an instrument, gardening or sport of any type, Greenfield explains. 'In this world of the screen, we're no longer sequencing and that's to our detriment.'

On Humble's travels she highlights the numerous small joys that can be observed simply by spending time in nature. The excitement of coming unbidden across a carpet of bluebells in spring, how the whooping calls of a pair of curlews helps cheer her up when she's been poorly, the

## KATE HUMBLE'S TOP REASONS TO GO WALKING IN AUTUMN

**1** Our woodlands are beautiful at this time of year – I always think of them as putting on nature's equivalent of a firework display before they 'close down' for the winter. To find forested areas that are near you, go online at [woodlandtrust.org.uk](http://woodlandtrust.org.uk) and click on the 'Visiting woods' button.

**2** I love going to the coast in the autumn. A wild walk along the clifftops blows the cobwebs away and helps you build up an appetite for hearty autumn food. We are lucky to have such brilliant access to so much of Britain's shoreline with lots of really beautiful footpaths and beaches to explore. Discover some wonderful places to go by visiting [nationaltrust.org.uk](http://nationaltrust.org.uk) and clicking on 'Days out'.

**3** And finally this is a perfect time for spotting local wildlife – deer are rutting, red squirrels are more likely to be visible, jays are collecting acorns etc... For the best places to observe them, go to [wildlifetrusts.org](http://wildlifetrusts.org) and click 'Visit'.



**SHORE THING** Britain's coastal pathways provide many miles of wonderful walking



**FOLLOW MY LEADER** Back on the farm Humble spends much of her time tending to her sheep

keeee-wick and responding woooooo of a pair of tawny owls on an October evening.

'Nature itself is a remedy, and control is one element of that,' explains Greenfield. 'Being in nature, you have to be the one who is in control. You decide whether to go and smell a flower, which path you're going to take and how fast you're going to go. In an urban environment you have to dodge people and walk when the light changes.'

Someone badly in need of taking back control, and of a remedy, was young soldier Sam Doyle, aged 31. Humble met him at the end of last year in Inverness where he was walking alone with his dog, Jess. He had come back from a tour of Afghanistan suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and had attempted suicide on three occasions.

'After the third time something in his head told him to put a backpack on his back and start walking,' says Humble. 'The first day, he started from Blackpool beach, heading north. He went four miles and it nearly killed him. He said: "Kate, for the first month it was miserable – I hated every minute. The second month I thought okay, I'm doing this now; I'm going to keep on. And the third month I started taking detours because the world was so beautiful." Humble's voice catches. 'And you think: if walking can do that for someone at rock bottom... you know.'

When Humble got in touch with Doyle a few weeks ago to see where to send the book, it turned out he'd stopped walking. He had met a girl and settled down, they were going to have a baby and he was continuing work as an advocate for the charity PTSD Resolution ([ptsdresolution.org](http://ptsdresolution.org)). In the book, he describes how walking gave him a sense of liberation, freed him from a life he couldn't quite cope with at the time.

When people are stuck in a rut we tell them to take small steps, or simply to take a step in the right direction. Humble's book about going for a walk can inspire absolutely anyone to make a change. Because all you have to do is step outside the front door.

*Thinking On My Feet* by Kate Humble (Aster, £20) is out now

## IN MY OPINION *Fi Glover*



The Radio 4 journalist airs her views

I have a colleague who is getting pretty fed up with all the public admissions of poor mental health. It is happening a lot. Claire Foy, Ruth Davidson, Adele, Lily Allen, Prince Harry, all have been very open about traumatic anxiety/depression in their lives in a way that would not have been possible say 40 – or even 10 – years ago.

The aforementioned colleague is not a petty person, so her dislike of the misery memoir is not callous or mean spirited. I think she worries we are all being asked to enter into the kind of pact we used to make behind the bike sheds where we told each other our secrets in return for lifelong loyalty and free entrance to the pity party. You admitted things because you wanted people to like you more. The more you revealed, the more you reeled them in. But even if the current honesty about mental health issues is as self-serving as that, is that a bad thing? If at last we can talk about such stuff without the room becoming darker, and the consequences more severe, then who cares if it is a bandwagon that also helps build careers?

**'On Strictly Susan Calman came across as a can of fizzy pop just waiting to explode with joy'**

I've been thinking a lot about whether I share that cynicism because this weekend I am off to the Cheltenham Literature Festival to interview Susan Calman – the comedian you are most likely to know as the fun bubble from last year's *Strictly*. She came across as a can of fizzy pop just waiting to explode with joy every week. Calman says *Strictly* was a life-changing experience for her as she's suffered from depression for as long as she can remember – something she documented in her first book *Cheer Up Love*. *Sunny Side Up* is her second work and the one we shall discuss in a windy tent in the southwest of England.

In it Calman investigates our modern condition of pessimism, and challenges us to do something to change it. She says 'fear, anger, rude behaviour, intolerance, spite and bullying are all in evidence every single day of the week'. She also points out that our leaders are setting rather a poor example – 'they snipe at each other with less class than two drunks at a bus stop'. Her message is that we all have the power to change. We just have to shout louder with our kindness, empathy, warmth and *fun*. She describes it as a 'Calmanifesto'. That's annoyingly good. I really liked her book, so I won't spill the beans about all that's in it. Suffice to say one of her suggestions is to dance more.

It's so tempting to make a joke about Theresa May and *Dancing Queen* here that I'm going to stop typing so I don't. In the spirit of Calman I'm going to pull back from the brink of mean. Can I be that kinder person? Gosh. I think I can.

@ffiglover

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