

A spinal op was the wake-up call Clare Barry needed to take a slower path

Words by Kim Jones

A decorative brass door-knocker, the crumbling red bricks of a once-grand town house, the intricate pattern of veins on a leaf frisking along a breezy pavement and the scent of rain hitting the asphalt. Entrepreneur Clare Barry's senses were overwhelmed as she took a walk around the residential streets of her neighbourhood in Ealing, west London.

"It was as if I was seeing the beauty around me for the very first time," she reveals. "I was simply strolling around the ordinary streets I normally dashed through every day but it was the most thrilling, exciting walk I think I'd ever taken. It was as if fireworks were going off around me."

It was spring 2014 and just a couple of days earlier, Clare had undergone surgery on her lumbar spine – a microdiscectomy – to relieve the pressure from a prolapsed disc. Her consultant had discharged her without painkillers but with instructions to take a daily walk.

"On those first few walks, I was nervous of feeling pain, so I took each step slowly," recalls Clare. "It meant that for the first time in years, I was forced to stop dashing around and breathe deeply and really notice my surroundings."

Every working day, as many busy Londoners do, Clare would normally cover a couple of hurried miles on foot – on her commute to the station from her home and from the station to work, to meetings, snatched lunch appointments, hasty drinks after work, catch-ups with friends across town and then home again.

"Getting from A to B was never an experience to pleasure," remembers Clare. "I'd always be in a rush, perennially late, talking on the phone or hurriedly answering texts and forever with a head full of distractions – be it ruminating over a work issue or fretting about emails I needed to answer, cursing myself for having an empty fridge yet again, making mental notes about who I needed to see and when and wondering how on earth I was going to fit everything in."

"Walking was just a chance to madly multitask. There was no time to stop and savour anything."

However, following her back operation – and forced to slow down – the businesswoman began to see walking in a whole new light.

"It was wonderful," smiles Clare. "I got the chance to see that the fast-paced urban streets I'd normally ignored were full of little bits of beauty and imperfections to stop and marvel at. Noticing what was around me – the colours, the smells, the juxtaposition of

Walking back to happiness

old crumbling bricks with the glass and metal of new architecture... all of it helped spark my creativity. Being out in the air and taking time to slow things down also helped clear my head and made me realise that this could be a new start for me, before it was too late."

Clare freely admits she was heading for burnout before she had her operation. She worked in her dream – but demanding – job as co-founder of the London School of Economics and Political Science's entrepreneurship hub and led a hectic social life, too.

"I crammed every hour of the day with stimuli," says Clare. "I was gregarious and would party hard, catch up with friends, take city breaks away and always had a phone in my hand. There was no quiet time and little opportunity to cook healthily and then I'd wonder why I felt anxious a lot, couldn't get to sleep at night, suffered bouts of IBS and was getting severe flare-ups of back pain from a prolapsed disc and nerve damage. I recall having to take a meeting lying flat



Explore the outdoors and its beauty, with or without company

on the floor in my business attire because my back pain was so bad and feeling lucky that I could make eye contact with my boss through a glass table top. It was madness. I suppose I thought I was Wonder Woman.”

Eventually, she realised her lifestyle was harming her health but she felt trapped.

“I had a London mortgage, bills. I felt I had no choice but to carry on,” she says.

But her daily post-op recovery walks made her think differently.

“With a fresh eye, a clear mind and space to contemplate, I realised I did have a choice. And what’s more, I had an idea about how I could forge out a new career – helping other people avoid burnout to the bargain.”

Clare handed in her notice at work and in the summer of 2014, set up Urban Curiosity Walkshops. These are mindfulness walking sessions for busy people, offering a chance for them to tune into the cityscape and to notice the details they normally miss. It’s a chance to unplug and detox from the digital world and to place themselves in the real world instead.

“My Walkshops offer a chance for busy people, whether full-time mums, business people or city dwellers who feel overwhelmed and rushed off their feet, to reclaim time and headspace for what really matters to them,” explains Clare. “The experience encourages people to get off their phones, to explore the streets with a fresh perspective and to feel inspired, re-energised and creative again, rather than frazzled all the time.”

The Walkshops are led by Clare and take place in various parts of London including the East End, Bermondsey, Bloomsbury, Oxford Circus and Little Venice. She also offers the chance for anyone (anywhere in the world) to join an e-course and receive daily lessons and prompts by email, worksheets, videos and interviews with inspiring urbanites, an audio meditation and a Walkshop guide encouraging you to get outside and be curious about your city again.

“It’s wonderful to see people wind down, relax and be inspired by surroundings that they might have otherwise ignored,” says the entrepreneur. “Recently, a mother on one of my walks told me that she’d been dreading the monotony of walking her children back and forth to school four times a day for the next 10 years. However, my walk had inspired her to make each walk the chance to really engage with her children and to see the walk to school as an adventure, encouraging the children to be curious, to play I-spy and see letter shapes in trees and hedges and patterns in flowers or pavement cracks. Her walks back home from school are now a chance to mindfully move and find calm.”


Other participants have told Clare how her Walkshops have encouraged them to make

changes in their lives – to take up writing or painting in their spare time, to carve out more downtime for the good of their health or to make changes at work to try to avoid the very burnout Clare was approaching a few years ago.

Clare, now 39, feels healthier than ever.

“I exercise more, make better food choices, am calmer and sleep better, too,” she smiles. “I’m looking forward to living the next 20 years of my life much differently to the last 20 years.

“I also have a stronger sense of purpose – I feel the work I do is meaningful. The World Health Organization predicts nearly 70 per cent of us will live in an urban place by 2050. Self-nourishment is more important than ever if we want to avoid getting ill in towns and cities addicted to speed.

“My mission is to show everyone that it is possible to live in a hectic city and still find moments of quiet, calm and heartfelt human connection every day. We don’t have to constantly sprint from here to there at a pulse-pounding pace. We can find equilibrium. We can choose to thrive and be happy.” 

Find out more at urbancuriosity.co.uk.

Be inspired

Other ways to walk to better health

- Walkingforhealth.org.uk offers 1,800 short weekly walks across England, designed to help people lead more active lifestyles.
- Nordic walking, using a technique similar to the upper body action of cross-country skiing, burns up to 46 per cent more calories than walking without poles and can release neck and shoulder tension, improve your posture, strengthen the back and abdominal muscles and reduce impact on the joints. Find and join a local walk at britishnordicwalking.org.uk.
- Walkinginspirit.co.uk offers mindfulness walking retreats in the forests and mountains of Somiedo Natural Park, Spain, along paths that are still used by bears and wolves.
- Sharphamtrust.org hosts walking retreats in Dartmoor, Devon, to develop mindfulness and meditation practice. Sections of each walk are held in silence.
- “Walk and talk therapy” is a counselling session which takes place while strolling outdoors. Walking and fresh air can help you feel more grounded and the relaxed environment can help you open up more. Find therapists near you through the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy website bacp.co.uk.

