

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



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