



“Look how
relevant the WI
is right now”

‘You could save the world if you dealt with mental health’

Comedian, writer and mental health advocate **Ruby Wax** OBE, on mindfulness, her inner demons and why the WI has never been more relevant

Words ELEANOR WILSON Photography PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE

Ruby Wax is good at saying things the British would rather not say. For more than 30 years, her outspoken American persona was everywhere: interviewing the likes of Madonna, Imelda Marcos and the Duchess of York on a series of hilarious documentaries and talk shows, and popping up on everything from *Absolutely Fabulous* to *Comic Relief*. But in 2010, Ruby changed direction, launching a stage show that turned the spotlight on her own inner demons.

Part stand-up comedy, part therapy, her show *Losing It* revealed Ruby's lifelong struggles with depression and opened the way for her audience to talk about a once-taboo subject.

‘My show was the first – when I talked about depression and still kept it funny and then let it go dark – and now everybody's talking about that,’ she says, delightedly.

Mental health awareness has been her driving force ever since. The latest of her three books on the subject bears the grand title of *How to be Human: the Manual*. Ruby collaborated on it with Dr Ashish Ranpura, a neuroscientist, and Gelong Thubten, a Buddhist monk, to cover the scientific and spiritual aspects of why our minds work the way they do. The trio are touring the UK with their *How to be Human* live show until early December.

‘I find it stressful being in the house and not touring, because you're always talking to people (on tour),’ says Ruby. ‘That's my kick, because everybody always opens up and I like that. It's never shallow.’

How to be Human is partly confessional and partly educational, with space for the audience to shoot questions at Ruby and her two experts. ‘I don't know why somebody wouldn't find this the most interesting thing on earth,’ she says. ‘Maybe I'm deluded.’

‘But everybody always wants to know who they are, and this is as close as we can get.’

Ruby gets personal with her audiences, talking candidly about her time in hospital after a breakdown, feeling like a failure and a constant outsider. Then, a message of hope: our brains aren't perfect,

and that's not our fault, but we don't have to live at the mercy of our minds. It's struck a chord with audiences all over the UK. One fan asked her to sign a book with the message, ‘Bipolar rocks!’

She's not just speaking from personal experience: Ruby graduated from Kellogg College, Oxford University, in 2013, with a master's degree in mindfulness-based cognitive therapy. She also earned an OBE for services to mental health and is a Visiting Professor in Mental Health Nursing at the University of Surrey.

She discovered a link to her past on BBC One's *Who Do You Think You Are?* last year, when she found that her great-aunt and great-grandmother were both committed to mental asylums.

The 2018 NFWI Make Time for Mental Health campaign echoes a point Ruby's been making since 2012, when she asked in a TED Talk: ‘How can every other organ in your body get sick and you get sympathy, except the brain?’ She's still asking, even as major companies begin to take stress seriously as one of the major contributors to absenteeism.

‘If you don't care about mental health, well, it's going to drain the economy,’ she says. ‘Imagine how you could save the world if you just dealt with that. Let's concentrate on that one organ, because everything comes from the mothership.’

Ruby welcomes the WI's campaign and says she wants more progress on a national level. ‘I don't think very much has changed in the government; they just keep talking about it and shifting money around,’ she says. ‘But I think people are getting really angry and something's got to give. Maybe I'll lead a march to Downing Street – I've always threatened that.’

Last year she launched the Frazzled Café initiative, after the release of her second book, *A Mindfulness Guide for the Frazzled*. It's a charity that runs fortnightly meetings in Marks & Spencer cafés around the country for participants who apply online. Groups of up to 15 people meet with a facilitator to talk about stress, share their worries and act as a resource for each other. On 10 October, to mark World Mental Health Day, Sky announced it would become the first

company to run Frazzled Café meetings in-house for its staff.

‘If you know other people who are like you, you can compare notes because you’re not so ashamed, and they can answer the questions you have, such as, “Where do I get help?”’ says Ruby. ‘Some people say that saved their life, just to chat.’

Scientists, most famously British anthropologist Robin Dunbar, have found through field studies of humans and primates that the optimal size for a community or social network is somewhere between 150 and 230. Much higher than that and we won’t form close bonds with the people around us; social problems arise and we start to feel lonely, stressed and anxious.

Ruby calls projects like Frazzled Café ‘the most effective thing we can do right now’ to promote mental health at a local level.

Group support is, of course, something the WI has been offering for 103 years. ‘We need community, but that’s kind of eroded. We’re not going to get it back, so we have to form groups, like WIs, where you can speak as yourself and not be scared, knowing that it stays in the room,’ says Ruby.

Her mother-in-law, Priscilla Bye, was a devoted WI member in Devon. ‘She saved the universe with her WI. I loved what they were doing,’ Ruby says. ‘It’s such a great community and look how relevant it is right now. You hit the zeitgeist.’

This year the WI joins a wave of organisations encouraging public discourse around mental health, including Heads Together, a 2017 initiative formed by the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge and Prince Harry to ‘tackle stigma and change the conversation’.

Ruby couldn’t be more thrilled with these developments. ‘A parent who has a kid that’s about to commit suicide, somebody who’s cutting themselves, they’re going to notice this time. Before, nobody noticed – now you’re going to start saving lives.’

She points out that one in four people struggles with a mental health problem. ‘If it’s not you, it’s your mother.’

Mindfulness, Ruby’s specialty and a major focus of *How to be Human*, has become a mental health buzzword. At the back of the book, there are exercises so readers can try it for themselves. ‘All mindfulness is, is being aware of what’s going on in the moment,’ Ruby says.

Mindfulness is a way of focusing on physical sensations such as breathing in order to learn how to manage your thoughts. When you notice your mind wandering, you acknowledge the thought and then let it go, focusing on the present again.

This process helps you gain some perspective on your thinking patterns: you’ll notice if you keep returning to the same unhelpful, negative thoughts, and that awareness allows you to redirect your attention and break the cycle. It’s also about being kind to yourself instead of criticising yourself for thinking negatively.

‘You learn to live with the demons,’ Ruby explains. She was forced to confront one particular demon while on a silent retreat in September this year. ‘There are 200 people and I’m looking for where I should sit, because they’re probably really popular and I want to be included in it and then I’m scared that maybe they won’t like me,’ Ruby recalls.

‘So I noticed that this is my pattern and rather than it overwhelming me, I started to think that was quite amusing.’

Ruby employs mindfulness as an early-warning system for her recurring depression. But, she cautions, it’s not a good idea to concentrate so hard on your own thoughts if you are already in the midst of a depressive episode or struggling with another severe mental health problem. Mindfulness is a way to keep from ‘ruminating’: the



Ruby collaborated with Dr Ashish Ranpura (left), and Gelong Thubten, when writing *How to be Human*

everyday worrying we all engage in without realising that it makes us stressed. When you’re happy, mindfulness allows you to enjoy it without reaching for more.

Ruby emphasises that ‘you don’t have to sit on a gluten-free cushion’ to practise mindfulness – it can be done anywhere, anytime.

‘My mind is always churning: somebody didn’t call me back, why was that theatre not full. I’ll just send my focus to my breath, going in and going out. And those thoughts don’t go away, but you get a little bit of distance.’ She might be an expert now, but what about the first time?

‘Oh, I hated it,’ she says. ‘I still don’t really like it, but I don’t like going to the gym, either.’

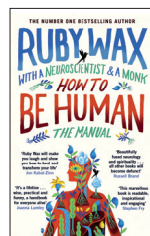
Training her mind has paid off, though: Ruby says it’s helped her to ‘get used to herself’ and treat herself with compassion. She’s keen to distinguish compassion from simple empathy, the act of feeling someone else’s pain. ‘Dr Ashish told me he deals with people in total crisis and if he felt their pain, he’d be useless: you don’t want your doctor to cry,’ she explains.

Compassion, by contrast, is about taking action without needing to join someone in suffering. For carers and for activists like Ruby – and many WI members involved in mental health initiatives – understanding these mental boundaries can be the difference between staying for the long haul and burning out. The message is: do what you can because every little really does help.

‘You don’t have to let somebody suck you dry; just do the action,’ says Ruby. ‘When I do something tiny, I feel really good. If I went overboard, I’d start resenting it and saying, “You’re taking up my life”. So if you notice that, pull back. You’re not a jerk, you did something nice.’

Ruby is still on a quest to better understand the human mind. Her latest project is *No-Brainer*, a 12-part audio series released on Audible in October this year, in which she meets scientists around the world who are researching stress, compassion, nature versus nurture, the teenage brain and a swathe of related topics.

The takeaway from that series is the idea that we can choose which thoughts and feelings are useful, and which are habits that we can break. But we will always need to lean on our fellow human beings: friends, family, and what Ruby calls our ‘great community’ of the WI.



- *How to be Human: the Manual* (Penguin Life), will be published in paperback on 27 December
- To read more about Ruby, visit rubywax.net
- Turn to page 40 for more on the Make Time for Mental Health campaign