



‘Mental illness is not selective and it’s not a weakness’

Comedian and author Ruby Wax is known for her transparency surrounding mental health – and now she’s opening up about spending time in a psychiatric hospital. Louise Atkinson finds out how this experience has shaped her, and how we can all help break the stigma

Last summer, Ruby Wax spent five weeks in a mental health clinic. Most people – particularly those in the public eye – might want to keep something like that under wraps, but Ruby has chosen to write about the experience in painfully honest detail. In fact, these scenes form the backdrop of a new book – and an upcoming UK tour – aptly titled: *I’m Not As Well As I Thought I Was*.

As an actor, comedian and author, Ruby has made a career out of finding the humour in difficult circumstances, but there is a serious current of stark revelation running through this book.

In its opening pages, she describes the sounds of distressed screaming echoing throughout the hospital, sitting for days in curtain-drawn darkness because it felt as though daylight burned her eyes and being unable to focus on anything except episodes of *Friends* on TV – but struggling to follow the plot.

‘My mind was a cacophony of shrieks from hell,’ she writes, ‘I couldn’t even hear my own thoughts because it was so loud and there was a typhoon of mental torture raging inside.’

When we meet over Zoom, a few weeks before her 70th birthday, I am keen to find out why she wanted to lay this anguish bare to the world.

Of course, it’s not so surprising; in the last two decades, Ruby switched her focus from stand-up comedy to using her humour and celebrity to strip the stigma from mental health. In her late 40s, she completed a degree in psychotherapy and in her late 50s qualified with a master’s degree in mindfulness-based cognitive behavioural therapy at Oxford University. She made an online series on mental health issues for the BBC and works closely with mental health charities. She even established an online forum called Frazzled Cafe, where she encourages people to talk openly about stress, anxiety and depression. In 2015, Ruby’s tireless campaigning earned her an OBE.

She chuckles when she confesses the new book was not supposed to be about mental health. It was originally conceived as a guide for finding deeper meaning, peace and happiness on a series of life-changing trips and experiences.

‘The editors didn’t expect me to end up in a mental hospital, but that’s what happened!’ she shrugs. So instead of ditching the project, she wove diary entries from her hospital stay in with transcripts from her therapy sessions to paint a graphic picture of a woman experiencing mental crisis.

Her rationale? She wants you to know what it’s like – no more brushing depression under the carpet.

‘I want more people to understand how debilitating this sense of shame can be,’ she says. ‘If you have a physical illness, there’s usually a lump or an X-ray to prove something is wrong. But mental illness is invisible, and you can end up feeling guilty for making a fuss, worrying that others will assume you are being self-indulgent, attention-seeking, maybe making it all up, while you are simultaneously being carpet-bombed by abusive voices in your head.’

She adds: ‘As depressives, we stigmatise ourselves far more than other people do – the shame can be almost as killing as the disease. But mental illness affects one in four of us. It is not selective. It is not a weakness. It is a disease.’

By her own admission, Ruby comes from a long line of ‘insane

ancestors’. She says: ‘Many of the relatives on my father’s side enjoyed a buffet of schizophrenia, bipolar and personality disorders.’ Family anecdotes are peppered throughout the book and point towards a dysfunctional childhood.

In fact, Ruby built her comedy career cataloguing her parents’ eccentricities, but she says she lacked true awareness of the damage their behaviour inflicted.

Although she says she has lived with mental health problems all her life, she was only diagnosed with depression and put on medication after the birth of her third child (now aged 30). The drugs kept her on an even keel until a breakdown and a period in a psychiatric hospital 12 years ago, and then again, up until this second breakdown last year.

She says this latest episode came out of the blue, but when you read about the succession of new challenges Ruby had taken on, it’s perhaps not so surprising that her mental health began to unravel.

SINKING INTO QUICKSAND

Ruby’s quest for the meaningful experiences she would accumulate for the book commenced in the spring of 2022, with one month at a silent mindfulness retreat near San Francisco (a whole month with no talking!). She returned briefly to the UK, then was off again to the Dominican Republic to swim with whales with her husband, Ed, followed swiftly by an intense period working with Afghan asylum seekers in a refugee camp in Greece. Then she squeezed in a TV advert for crisps, a UK book tour, root canal surgery

and filming a travel documentary into a three-month period.

By the time Ruby set off for a Christian monastery to explore faith last May, she was exhausted and, she says, ‘losing my marbles’.

‘There had been little spurts of darkness prior to this, but I always managed to put out the fires by recognising the signs early and doing something to ward it off,’ she says. ‘This time, I hadn’t noticed the speed picking up or that toxic fog was rolling into my brain or the sense of sinking in quicksand.’

But when she arrived at the monastery in Leeds, she knew something felt wrong. ‘At first, I thought maybe I had a virus or jetlag,’ she says, ‘then a sudden lightning flash hit me.’ She called her psychiatrist to tell him she was spiralling; he could tell by the sound of her voice that she was in trouble, so he booked her into a clinic and told her to get there quickly.

When I ask for details of those first few weeks in the clinic, she says she can’t remember. ‘It’s like childbirth – when you’re in trauma, your mind blocks it out.’

In the book, she writes: ‘Once you’re in it, you hardly know where you are. You don’t exist any more. Your spirit has left the building. Your body is no longer connected to your mind and you can’t figure out who’s moving your limbs.’

She describes a beige room that had all protruding objects removed for safety (no taps in the sink, no rail in the wardrobe, no nozzle on the shower head) and says: ‘I didn’t come out of my room for I don’t know how many days. I never opened the curtains. I needed darkness to match mine. I hunkered down because there was a typhoon of mental torture raging inside.’

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Ruby's sense of overwhelm was so great that she refused contact with everyone except Ed and their three adult children.

I ask if the place bore any resemblance to most people's idea of mental institutions as epitomised by the Jack Nicholson film *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*, but she quickly corrects this. 'It's a safe place and you feel a great sense of relief to be there,' she says. 'At a mental hospital, you are with your people. If others recognise your mental issues, it means you are not alone. That can really take the pressure off.'

'When you're in crisis, the outside world feels dangerous; you struggle to find where the obstacles are,' she continues. 'But inside the hospital, you know exactly where the parameters are.'

She points out that she was lucky to have private health insurance to cover the cost of her stay and expresses concern about the fact that many people in her condition would have struggled to get a bed via the NHS. Indeed, a recent report from the mental health charity Mind has warned that 'people are waiting for hours and even days in A&E for urgent mental healthcare' as the demand for beds is outstripping the number available in many parts of the country.

The last time Ruby was in a mental hospital 12 years ago, she stayed for five months, but this visit only lasted five weeks. Ruby puts her relatively speedy recovery down to a combination of a treatment called repetitive transcranial magnetic stimulation (RTMS), which uses magnetic pulses to rearrange the neurons in the brain, and a fresh mix of antidepressant drugs. She also believes it was significant that she was offered a form of therapy called eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR) with a therapist specialising in trauma.

As part of the therapy, she was encouraged to analyse her tough and unconventional childhood. 'This was the first time I'd talked about my parents without joking,' she says, 'but the therapist helped me realise I created a funny personality to cover up the fact that most of the time I feel empty and rudderless. I built myself some impenetrable armour.'

When you're back, it's clear

RETURN TO THE REAL WORLD

It wasn't until after her 20th and final treatment of RTMS that she noticed 'a very small chink of light' and wrote that 'the veil of doom seems to be lifting'. So how did she know she was ready to leave? 'You are free to go when there's no longer any reason to be there. When you're back, it is clear,' she says simply.

For Ruby, one obvious sign of recovery was getting her curiosity and sense of humour back. She recalls speaking to an elderly woman wearing a stained nightgown and high velvet boots: 'She was in full makeup, though her red lipstick was nowhere near her lips, and she was wearing a silver crown made out of foil.' The woman told Ruby she'd kept prawns in her freezer, but wolves had come to her house and stolen the frozen prawns, so then she left vegan moussaka out, which – to her surprise and consternation – didn't stop the wolves stealing her prawns. 'I asked why she thought the wolves were vegan and she looked at me as if I was the crazy one!' The comedic brain was clearly back.

There's no doubt Ruby found her clinic experience enormously beneficial. Now, back living her regular routine,



How to support a loved one through a mental health issue

From Mind (mind.org.uk)

- ✓ **Listen** – simply giving someone space to talk can be very helpful. You don't need any special training to show someone you care about them.
- ✓ **Try to stay calm**, even if they are distressed. It shows they can talk openly without upsetting you.
- ✓ **Avoid making assumptions** – don't assume you know what has caused their feelings or what will help.
- ✓ **Ask how you can help**, perhaps by offering to keep track of medication, organise paperwork, accompany them to a doctor's appointment or exercise together.
- ✓ **Avoid using judgemental phrases** such as 'Cheer up', 'I'm sure it will pass' or 'Pull yourself together'.
- ✓ **Aim to keep social contact** as normal as possible, such as chatting about other parts of your lives.
- ✓ **Look after yourself.** Supporting someone else can be stressful. Making sure that you look after your own wellbeing can mean that you have the energy, time and distance you need to be able to help. And try not to judge yourself if you don't always get it right.

I'm no longer scared like I once was

she says she's feeling good and itching to get out on tour so she can continue shattering the stigma that still surrounds mental illness and share her stories with the widest possible audience.

She's smiling again, and feeling genuinely happy. 'I don't feel any fear any more about what's coming,' she says. 'Even though I may change in the next 10 minutes and life may become more painful again, I'm not scared like I was.'

• *I'm Not As Well As I Thought I Was (Viking)* by Ruby Wax is out now. For details of Ruby's UK tour, see rubywax.net. *Frazzledcafe.org* is a charitable forum set up by Ruby, where people can share their stories in a supportive, anonymous and non-judgemental environment

SEEKING SUPPORT IN A CRISIS

- If you think staying in hospital could help you or a loved one, Mind recommends asking your GP, psychiatrist or another healthcare professional to refer you and get the help you need.
- If you choose to go into hospital, you are considered a 'voluntary patient', which means you have the right to come and go from hospital (within reason) if you choose. But the shortage of available beds may mean this isn't possible.
- If a group of mental health professionals agree that hospital treatment is in your best interest to keep you or others safe, they could 'section' you under the Mental Health Act.
- In a crisis, mental health charities can be very helpful. Try mind.org.uk (0300 123 3393 or text 86463), rethink.org (0808 801 0525), samaritans.org (116 123) or sane.org.uk (0300 304 7000). □

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