





## TALK

## RUBY WAX

WORDS:  
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From the Royal Shakespeare Company to prime-time TV; from best-selling author to script-editing *Absolutely Fabulous*; from an Oxford University Masters degree in Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy to an OBE for services to mental health. Ruby Wax has seemingly done it all. She now teaches individuals and corporations how to defrazzle their minds in a frazzled world. She has created a User Manual on how to become aware of when we're nearing our 'tipping point'; for taking control and becoming aware of our over-stressed and over-critical minds, so we become 'the driver not the driven'.

"We know so much cognitively about the world, but no-one tells us how to manage our minds," she says. "It's like having a Ferrari on top of your head, but no-one gave you the keys." Using her background in neuroscience, Ruby teaches us how to train our brains. "We work like neural-wi-fi. Our mental states work like viruses. If we're wired, we pass that to everyone around us. If our minds are calm, that state will spread to our co-workers, our families, the community and eventually to the world. The key to happiness and success is to be the master of our thoughts and not the slave."

**What do you think are the biggest challenges people face today in maintaining their mental health?**

I'm not going to blame social media because it's here and I don't believe in whining about things that are inevitable. But we're pulled in too many directions, and we haven't got enough blackboard space in our minds. We weren't meant to take in everything, but the problem is everyone is pretending that to be busy is a great thing. Nobody is saying "Wait a minute, I can't take this anymore." I think it's lack of honesty, because you're considered a loser if you say that, and the truth is too many people are burning out. We don't study what our limits are.

**How important is community and connection in fostering mental and emotional health, and how can people cultivate it?**

Well, that's the problem - we don't have community. I think that's what's lacking, and loneliness is the biggest killer. That's why I created Frazzled Cafe - to eliminate the feeling that you are alone. It's been going for seven years now and gives you the opportunity to

come and speak from the heart. When people speak that way, they feel more human, and they don't feel lonely.

**What role does humour play in maintaining a healthy mind, and how has it helped you in your own journey?**

I make a living out of comedy and that is probably because I have dyslexia. When I try to form a sentence, it comes out all over the place. When you're mentally ill, it doesn't matter what's funny as you're not laughing. So I guess watching or listening to comedy is a healthy thing in maintaining wellbeing. You first have to pull yourself out of a hole and find a level of contentment. A good sign that you're experiencing a good state of wellbeing is that you can laugh.

**If you could offer just one piece of advice for navigating the chaos of modern life, what would it be?**

I am going to recommend mindfulness because I have studied it. Mindfulness has the most empirical evidence that it changes the brain. But you have to practice it every day and people don't want to do that. They want to take a magic pill. But there are other ways like Tai Chi or prayer. I mean, who am I to say? But it has to be done every day. That discipline of taking control of your mind rather than letting 'it' control you. So you're taming it like you would a wild child. And that's the only way.

**What inspired your passion for mental health advocacy, and how has it shaped your approach to life?**

It all began when I was outed by Comic Relief when they put a poster image of me in the London tube station saying: One in four people have mental illness. I never would have said this for risk of losing my job. So, I had to write a show and pretend it was a publicity poster. The show appealed to a lot of people, and in the second half the audience would stand up and tell me their stories, that's when I realised I was onto something.

So I opened up the theatre to the public for free to hear the big boys of psychotherapy such as Peter Fonagy and Mark Williams. And I also served cookies! From this I learnt how interesting it is when people aren't afraid anymore and that you can form community in seconds. But it takes somebody brave to say, "Here's what's really going on." I don't want any bullshit. Don't tell me you're fine when you're not fine.

### How do you personally recharge and maintain your own mental health?

Well, I'm on medication. That's how I recharge. But it doesn't always work which is why you have relapses. So when you relapse, you have to change the medication, but it's not foolproof. I might have been more of a mess if I didn't do mindfulness. I have to do it every day. But then it suddenly creeps up on you, so I have to compensate by practising mindfulness.

How can people recognise when they need to slow down and prioritise their Wellbeing, especially in a culture that glorifies 'busyness'? Our minds often aren't very good at making this assessment. For me it would have to be a friend who reminds me that I'm going at a speed that is unhealthy. The body can show me in the same way you can look in someone's eyes and tell if they have a mental illness and are burning out. I think somebody has to call it because it can feel so shaming to slow down. It really helps if somebody can compassionately tell you that you need to slow down. Sadly, we are not trained to know how to do this for ourselves. Mindfulness is a discipline. I'm a million miles away from the top of the mountain, but at least I'm trying.

### What about therapies such as Somatic Coaching. How might this approach help people slow down and priorities their Wellbeing?

Yes, Somatic Coaching is really good. If you are going too fast you won't be able to feel anything. So the trick is to become aware of what is really going on. When there is so much fear being held in your nervous system then it has become locked into 'fight and flight' and you are flooding your brain with too much cortisol which means you are unable to feel anything in the body.

When you start to become aware of your bodily sensations you start to notice that you are holding your breath, your head is in a fog, there is pain in your heart and everything is strangling you. A great somatic therapist would help you explore what's going on in the body. You get better quicker when you start to feel the body. Instead of five months, it's five days. The body can take it, your mind can't. In fact, paradoxically, that's all that mindfulness is - the awareness of the body!

### What do you think about the growing awareness of mental health in workplaces, and what more can be done?

I don't think it's changed enough yet, but I do think businesses are trying. It's sad to think that employees are still in fear that they might be fired for speaking out about having a mental illness. I often get hired to give talks within the workspace. I tell people that this talk isn't going to change your life. It's you who have to change your habits.

### What has been your biggest personal breakthrough in your own mental health journey?

To know when I'm not well. I can read it now because of mindfulness. I can tune into my body, and I can tell when I'm not well. Then I start to turn things down and say 'No' to people and not be ashamed that I have depression. I stop getting caught in a loop where I do more things, going to a thousand parties. Instead, I've checked in to retreats or somewhere where it is silent.



Any advice for someone considering going on a silent retreat? I'd say, just do two days to start, and to check the person's credentials. I went to Oxford and studied with Mark Williams. It could be really dangerous if you aren't working with a professional. Go to established places like Gaia House or the Sharpham Trust.

### Can you tell me about the retreat you co-hosted at Broughton Sanctuary in February?

We've been running 'Keeping it Real in a Frantic World', a five-day retreat for the last few years at Broughton Sanctuary. It's a glorious 5-Star venue with incredible facilities. I co-led it with the monk, Thubten, who is brilliant at describing mindfulness in a humorous way and I'm good at explaining the science in a humorous way. Thubten and I have a really good rhythm together. I think it's fantastic.

On this retreat I also taught people one-to-one. You have these delicate creatures who don't know each other in the beginning, but they all leave exchanging numbers. You form community as well as taking them through a training. The teaching answers questions that people have right now, such as, where do our thoughts come from? Why are they so vindictive? We try and answer them, but I like to do this with science. In May we are doing a shorter version of this retreat at 'The Big Retreat' in Pembrokeshire.

**The Big Retreat Festival, Pembrokeshire, 23rd - 26th May 2025**  
Voted one of the 'Top 5 Wellbeing and Adventure Festivals' by The Guardian.

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