



Jonathan Dimbleby, image ©BBC

# GETTING THE BALANCE RIGHT

Broadcaster, Jonathan Dimbleby, talks to **Minal Chande** about managing arthritis, and balancing career and family life

**F**ather of four, Jonathan Dimbleby, juggles family life and a hectic TV and radio schedule. On top of that he has osteoarthritis.

Jonathan will be a familiar voice to many on BBC Radio 4's topical debate programme *Any Questions?* Every Friday morning, he leaves his home in Totnes, Devon, to travel across the UK to where the week's programme is being recorded. He's keen to get back home to his family, and particularly newborn daughter, Gwen, so that can sometimes mean arriving home at 2am. At 65, this bounding around is no mean feat. Particularly when five years ago, Jonathan was preparing for a hip operation.

Work can take Jonathan even further afield. In 2006, he travelled 10,000 miles across Russia for a documentary series. 'I

met some wonderful people but it was a gruelling journey.' His experiences were broadcast on TV last year and he also wrote a book. Now, he's planning a new series on Africa. Over his career, Jonathan has written and presented many documentaries, including one on Prince Charles, and until the trip to Russia he presented ITV's weekly political programme *Jonathan Dimbleby*.

Despite his busy schedule, Jonathan says that he has got better at balancing family life. 'Early in my career, I was always away because it was all about climbing the greasy pole. Nowadays, I do the work that interests me but I have no interest in the pole. I think I spend more time with the family now, and I regret not spending more time with them before.'



## The first twinges

Jonathan first noticed something was amiss with his joints in his 40s. 'When I was about 40, I got a tremendous permanent ache in my left shoulder.' A visit to his doctor led to a diagnosis of osteoarthritis but he was disappointed not to be told anything else. 'The doctor said: "You've got arthritis, there is nothing you can do – just treat it as a creaky door." It was very dispiriting.'

Being in the public eye can be a challenge on the days you are not feeling up to par. Hiding away can be an option for some of us, but not when you are making constant TV and radio appearances. 'I had a lot of discomfort in my hands, on the inside of my thumbs. So when I shook hands with someone, I would yell with pain. I would be at Downing Street and yelling. There was one person I would avoid as he had a very firm handshake – Douglas Hurd.'

Although Jonathan had led an active life up until that point, he made changes to his lifestyle right away. 'I did lots of exercise. I stopped eating so much red meat, and drinking white wine.' He also decided to try taking glucosamine. 'I started glucosamine and have been taking it daily ever since.'

## A pain in the hip

Jonathan's hip has also been troublesome. 'I used to be very uncomfortable at night and I had to pick up my leg to turn in bed. Whilst walking, I would suddenly lose strength and stumble. You always think it will go away. But if I played tennis one day, it would hit me hard the next day.'

He thought it was his back playing up at first. 'I had physiotherapy, chiropractic and acupuncture, which helped for a short bit.' Jonathan eventually went to his doctor and was told that his hip was affected by arthritis. 'I like to think my problem with my hip was because I rode horses a lot,' he jokes.

Jonathan was referred for a hip resurfacing operation. 'The pain had reached six out of 10. I know other people get worse than that but I think you should get it done early. My advice to anyone would be don't live with it.'

Hip resurfacing is an alternative to a hip replacement. In hip resurfacing, the damaged surfaces in the hip joint are replaced with a metal surface. Instead of removing the whole head of the thigh bone as in a total hip replacement, the top of the bone is shaped down and covered with a metal cap. This fits into the metal socket attached to the pelvis.

Jonathan spoke to his healthcare team to



find out the long-term outlook, how soon he would be mobile again and the risks. He also went online to read as much as he could. 'Arthritis Care comes up quickly on a web search. It's a good website.'

He was mobile quite quickly after the procedure. 'I was out of bed the next day doing physiotherapy. I think I was out of hospital in five days once I had shown I was able to



## The more open we are, the more understanding and compassionate we can be

go up and down stairs. I had to wear a stocking, so I had a nurse for a bit to help put it on.'

The effect on his pain was fast. 'Within weeks of the hip operation I was aware of discomfort being removed. I could sleep again.' He was back on TV within three weeks of his operation. 'By three months, I was doing everything again, including playing tennis.'

## A healthy lifestyle

Jonathan is a big believer in a healthy lifestyle. 'Arthritis triggered that. My wife, Jessica, and I, eat sensibly. I love butter and cream like most people, but I contain the amount of fat and meat I eat. You just have to control it.'

In terms of exercise, he is not a fan of the gym. 'The gym is not fun. I like walking. I walk quite a lot and play tennis.'

Balance is a key element. 'You have to find some joy as well. I'm quite holistic about

wellbeing,' he says. 'Relaxation is sitting down to supper with my wife, walking the dog, looking after the chickens, or sailing.'

## Opening up

Whilst a lot of celebrities are more likely to share details of the latest lavish party they have hosted than their health problems, Jonathan believes in being open about his arthritis. 'I think you should be completely open about all diseases. Burying the problem exacerbates it. People would see me limping – I would be half-aware of it myself. I would say: "It's my wretched hip". I was completely open about arthritis once I knew what it was. The more open we are, the more understanding and compassionate we can be.'

Jonathan also thinks that talking about your condition can help you to manage it. 'Don't just allow it to wear you down, get out there talk, read, listen. We all adjust to pain, and we think that it is inevitable. It is quite wearing as a result and so more easily depressing – that's why the more help and support you can seek the better.'

As for the future, Jonathan seems in no danger of slowing down. 'I will be flat out now until next spring. It is likely that I will need my other hip done – I was supposed to see my consultant about that but I had to cancel because of work. So watch closely in spring, if I am limping on the Africa programme, I've not had my other hip done.'

Jonathan firmly believes in the power of taking control of arthritis. 'It doesn't inhibit my life now. I'm very lucky. I get the occasional twinge, on damp days. Don't let it get to you – you get to it. Don't think it will go away, something can be done – go and find it.' 