

# Life

SOMETHING FOR THE WEEKEND



FEARNE COTTON

I felt like a right freak after my first panic attack

by Chloë Hamilton

Fearne Cotton was in the middle of writing her latest book, *Calm*, when it happened. The broadcaster and writer was happily driving along a motorway with a friend, talking about Prince Harry. All of a sudden, she began to feel very hot. Confused, she removed her coat and wound down the window. Then, her chest began to tighten. She struggled to breathe. Her world started to spin.

Scared, she pulled over. The panic attack had left her unable to drive and terrified about

what was happening. Only half-an-hour from her house, she was driven home by the AA, so scared was she by the idea of getting back behind the wheel.

Cotton says now that the experience was both terrifying and debilitating. "It was almost like what I was seeing and experiencing around me was not what my body was feeling," she explains. "They were disconnected. It's not how I had thought a panic attack would feel." She later learnt that motorways can induce panic attacks in people who are susceptible. "The speed and the experience of what you're seeing can bring them on." She hasn't driven on one since.

The fact that the incident happened while Cotton was writing a book about stress is an irony not lost on her. "It was like, holy crap, thank you universe for sending me a big chunk of stuff to write about," she reflects wryly.

Cotton's new book, *Calm: Working Through Life's Daily Stresses to Find a Peaceful Centre*, is a follow-up to *Happy: Finding Joy in Every Day and Letting Go of Perfect*. As with *Happy*, the book features expert advice, interviews, ideas, and exercises to help people find their own state of calm. In total, Cotton - who opened up about her own depression and anxiety in *Happy* - has sold 165,645 mindfulness books over the past year, across three titles (*Happy*:

*The Journal*, a companion to *Happy*, was released last year). This amounts to a staggering £1.4m in revenue over the past 12 months.

But commercial success, it seems, comes second to hearing other people's stories, which makes her feel "deeply nourished". "It could be one Instagram comment where somebody has been through a tough patch and hearing my story has made them feel less alone," she says. "A random person who I've never met who has gone out, got the book, sat on the couch on a Sunday, and taken the time to listen to my story and then come back and tell me theirs. That's sort of bizarre, and more than I could have wished for." >>

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People's responses on this occasion, she explains, have made her realise how prevalent panic attacks are. "I felt like a right freak after the first one," she admits, revealing that although she'd been "spinning a lot of plates" at the time, she had felt she was "in control". The incident triggered alarm bells.

"If I want to be a good mum, a good wife and friend and person who can be capable at work, I need to take care of myself," she explains. "It was a chance to think: I need to step back from a lot of this stuff. I do need to be a bit more selfish."

In the flesh, Cotton is as friendly and approachable as she sounds on Radio 2. But there's a vulnerability to her that might not at first be apparent. Quick sentences and fidgety hands betray a nervousness that suggests she's not completely at ease - that being on the other side of an interview isn't something she's entirely comfortable with.

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A big advocate of self-care, in her new book, she writes about the importance of looking after oneself in small but significant ways. "I think British people find it excruciating to think they should luxuriate in such a thing as self-care. It seems quite an American thing still."

In fact, self-care need not cost the earth, she argues, while reminding me of her own working-class credentials. "It doesn't have to be a luxurious, expensive treat for the elite. I'm not from that world." Instead, healthy practises such as early nights, nutritious food, exercise, meditation and breathing techniques are useful habits to develop.

"It's just a constant thing," says Cotton of her own self-care rituals. "It's not waiting until I'm in a dark place. It's carrying it on as part of my lifestyle - like cleaning your teeth."

One rather curious practice Cotton has tried is transformational breathing with breathing coach Rebecca Dennis, which she describes as like therapy but without talking. "It's the trippiest thing ever," she says, revealing that she cried during her session. "When you do a session with her, it's about unlocking inner grief and things that have happened that you didn't express at the time and it's all sort of hidden in your body. It's bizarre."

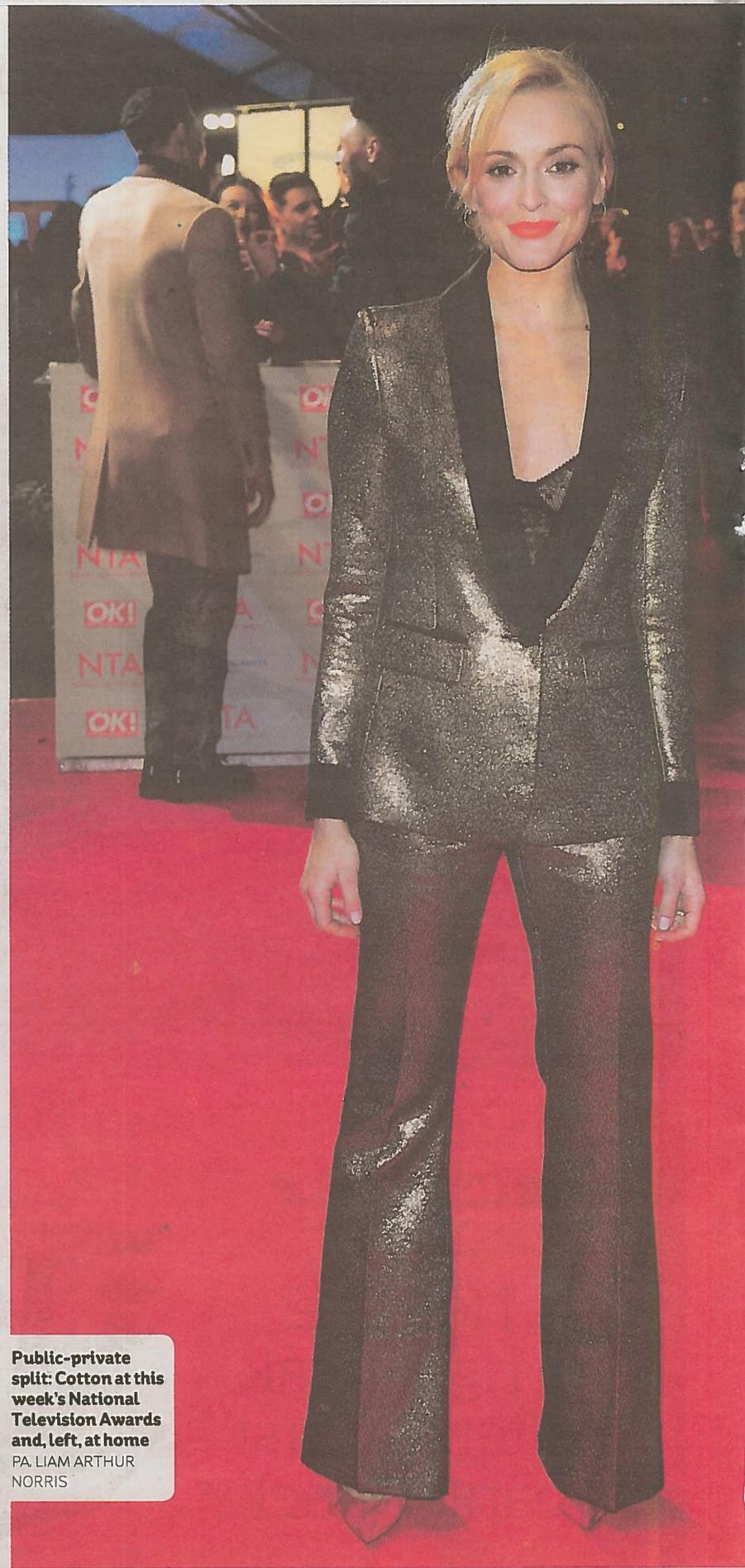
Simplifying your life, too, is important. Interestingly, Cotton doesn't think women can have it all. "When I became a mum and a step-mum, you think: 'I'm a woman in this day and age where I can have it all! And I don't think you can."

"For me, the thing that I've chosen to let go of is probably a little bit of reckless fun and a bit of social life. And that's all right because it'll come back. But I've chosen to not make that a priority. My priorities are my children, my family life, first and foremost. And my job and the creativity around it, because it makes me feel buzzed."

#### Slower lifestyle

The Cotton of old, who worked long hours and spent her evenings at gigs surviving only on bar snacks and gin and tonics, is long gone. "I read every night," she explains, adding that she likes to tuck herself up in bed at half nine. "I'm so tired from the kids waking up early and cleaning and cooking for the kids and getting them to school that I have to go to bed early so I can rejuvenate and get back to normal again."

Cotton, who regularly shares snippets of her life with her 2.1 million Instagram followers, is mindful that although social media can be "inspiring", it can also induce stress and anxiety. "I think social media suggests that there should be no



**Public-private split: Cotton at this week's National Television Awards and, left, at home**

PA. LIAM ARTHUR NORRIS

failure, everything should be perfect and amazing and wonderful and if it goes wrong, shame on you."

Does she advocate digital detoxes, then? Absolutely. "I think it's lovely to have some things that are private and secret and just happen without any fuss, and are cherished." There are no photos, for example, of the births of her two children. "No one apart from my husband and the doctor were there. But my god it's so prominent in my head."

### The fame game

The DJ, who was 15 when she first appeared on screen, presenting early-morning GMTV children's programme *The Disney Club*, has always been reluctant to lay the blame for her mental health issues at fame's door. She even admits she can't remember much of what life was like outside the public eye.

"It doesn't really have any massive negative impact on my life," she says, before adding: "You get used to a mass judgement most of the time on things you're doing and that can be great or awful and you work through that as best you can."

What kind of judgement? "Maybe there's a certain subconscious guard up that people might look at me, or if my kids are freaking out in public that they're judging me."

Mostly, though, she feels that fame has given her the opportunity to speak out about mental health. "It's given me a space and an audience to talk about things that I think are worth discussion."

She hopes that *Calm* will act as a "virtual friend" for people who aren't quite ready to talk about panic, stress or anxiety issues. "Those are the people who probably need a book more than ever. I think reading someone else's story is a good step in the right direction."

She admits that she's not "got it sussed" herself: self-care takes time and commitment. "I go through phases of being very dedicated to all these things and then being a bit of a slacker and vegging out and watching Netflix."

📍 @Fearnecotton

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*Calm* is published by Orion Spring, priced £18.99 (eBook: £9.99)

## Calmer breathing: try it yourself

By Rebecca Dennis

If you would like to try the breathing exercises which Fearné uses to negate stress and anxiety...

**Sit or lie down** in a comfortable, quiet spot where you won't be disturbed.

**Close your eyes** and ensure your shoulders and jaw are relaxed and the spine is straight.

**Take a long deep exhalation** out of your mouth.

**Close your mouth** and inhale deeply through your nose, directing the breath deep into the belly. Visualise filling a balloon of air in your centre as you do this.

**Exhale gently** through the mouth – visualise the balloon gently deflating as you do this.

**Notice any sensations** that arise in the body. Acknowledge them and gently bring your attention back to your breath.

**Be aware of your thoughts** and rather than trying to push them away, gently push them aside and come back to the inhale and exhale.

**Visualise the breath** calming and relaxing the mind and all the systems of the body, and as you exhale, allow it to release any tension.

**Try to do this for 15 minutes** and notice the difference it makes to your day.