

# ‘How we got our SPARK BACK’

Every relationship can weather tricky times, but it's often those periods that bring you closer together, as these three couples discovered



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# 'Training together has made us stronger than ever'

Being told their daughter had a rare illness rocked Nikki Donohoe, 38, and her husband Jamie, 42. But they have found hope – and shared happiness – through running together.



## NIKKI SAYS:

**W**e were elated after our daughter Niamh was born in May 2016, but after six months we began to see that she wasn't developing at the same pace as other babies her age. She wasn't sitting up, crawling, walking or saying her first words, and as each expected milestone passed, our concern became all-consuming. Inevitably, our relationship was pushed way down the list of priorities as we focused all our attention on our little girl.

In August 2018, the bottom dropped out of our world when we were told that Niamh, who's now three, has a very rare chromosome disorder that will delay and limit her development. Finding out that she is one of just 55 people worldwide known to have NAA10, also called Ogden syndrome, knocked us for six; it was like falling into a black hole.

For a long time, normal life was suspended. We just existed, struggling to share in the joy of other families. We were sensitive and difficult to be around, but at the same time lonely and isolated. I'd want to talk, but Jamie, who has a daughter from a previous relationship, found it hard to open up. Every conversation would begin and end with Niamh, but we'd end up going round in circles, unable to deal with the enormity of the situation, let alone help each other.

We'd been together nine years then and married for five, and it was the biggest test of our marriage. There's a high divorce rate among couples with

a child who has additional needs and, knowing the pressure we felt under, I can understand why.

But that wasn't going to be us. As time passed, we vowed that Niamh's syndrome wasn't going to define us. There wasn't a clear moment when we started to smile again, but the fog seemed to lift as summer turned to autumn last year, the same time that both Jamie and I secured places to run in the London Marathon.

Jamie had run it in 2015, and when he was successful in the ballot for 2020, I found myself determined to join him. When I managed to win a place with the charity Unique, which helps families dealing with a rare chromosome disorder, it felt like winning a golden ticket.

Since then, through the dark days of winter, Jamie and I have been on a high. While others might be daunted by the distance and training, especially as we both have full-time jobs – I lead events for the NSPCC and Jamie is a site manager – we just feel excited. It's helped distract us from our worries, yet has our family at the centre of it. Pounding the streets is also a great stress reliever, so we don't take it out on each other. We have to take turns with our evening runs and we rarely train together. But even though we're

spending less time together, our bond is stronger, sustained by common purpose.

For so long we found it hard to talk, but now we communicate better than ever. We're more considerate of each other and, instead of neglecting our relationship, we carve out time, enjoying meals out and occasional nights away. Sharing our marathon excitement with friends and family has also helped.

And we're not the only ones striding out: Niamh took her first wobbly steps this year. She is a way off running a marathon, but she is our constant motivation. Our love for her will push us through every step.'

## JAMIE SAYS:

'I found it hard at first to talk because I didn't want to upset Nikki, but I found solace in running. Sometimes I would be shouting my head off as I put in the

miles. While Nikki turned to counselling and talking to others, running helped me through. And when we both got places in the marathon, it was like it was meant to be. As we run, we'll be thinking of Niamh and the other children like her. Focusing on the marathon has put our relationship at the centre – we are stronger as a result.'

•Nikki and Jamie's marathon fundraising page is at [justgiving.com/fundraising/team-donohoejn](http://justgiving.com/fundraising/team-donohoejn)



Jamie and Nikki with their daughter Niamh







Keith and Helen leave dance classes with big grins on their faces

“We’ve made so many new friends through dancing, it’s been brilliant”

known him to have before. We’re not brilliant by any means, but what we lack in skill we make up for in enthusiasm.

The social side of dance has also been life changing. We’ve made so many new friends, all united by dancing. Three years ago a group of us decided to learn how to do swing jive, which has opened up an even bigger social circle. Now we’ll learn swing one night, ballroom the next, sometimes there’s a dance upstairs in a pub and on a Sunday afternoon we might go to a tea dance.

We go away for weekends, and always pack our dancing shoes no matter where we’re off to. We once went walking in north Wales, and then headed to Blackpool to the Tower Ballroom. We’ve been there three times now and every time it’s a real “pinch yourself” moment.

It would be very easy at our age to just bob along into retirement, but if you

are going to grow together, it is so important to follow a shared passion.

Our lives couldn’t be more different from how they were seven years ago. We’re fitter, we love being together and the sensual dances, such as the rumba, are lovely – and they do make us giggle!

Whatever the dance, we often fall out of our class laughing, and that’s the most attractive thing of all. Dancing is our thing, and we wouldn’t be as close as we are if we hadn’t given it a whirl.’



## ‘Now it’s just us, we’ve discovered a new shared passion’

Since their children left home, Helen Newton, 56, and husband Keith, 62, have seen each other in a new light – and now they’re having a ball.

### HELEN SAYS:

Seven years ago, a friend told us over dinner that she had recently taken up ballroom dancing. I saw the twinkle in Keith’s eye, instantly recalling the time after we’d met nearly 30 years earlier, when he’d seen me do the foxtrot at a wedding. He’d been amazed that I could dance and had said it was something he really wanted to learn.

But then life got in the way. We got married and our children Charlotte, now 33, and Benedict, 29, came along. In the fog of nappies, playgroups and school, while juggling my job in retail, I forgot the ballroom steps I’d learned as a child and Keith forgot his enthusiasm. For almost three decades, dancing was the last thing on our minds.

As the children became adults and were ready to leave home, we noticed it was hard to find the common ground we’d taken for granted when we’d first been together. We both had our own hobbies – Keith is a football fan and likes

gardening, and I love to bake and sew – but there wasn’t much to bring us together as a couple. Travelling between both sets of elderly parents took time and energy and stopped us prioritising our relationship.

But then, seven years ago, after that dinner with our friend, we were inspired: we nervously went along to our first ballroom dance class and stumbled – quite literally when it comes to some of the Latin dances – into a shared passion.

And we loved it right from the start. The first dance we did was the foxtrot. Some of the steps came back to me straight away, while Keith had to learn from scratch. I’ve always been happy to have a go, while he’s a bit more reserved, but he came out of every class with a huge grin on his face.

Since then, we dance whenever we can – even twirling around when we find ourselves in an empty Tesco aisle! Keith’s just as passionate about dance as me and it’s given him a confidence I’ve never

# ‘We might earn less now, but we laugh a lot more’

Gill Sherwin, 46, and husband Will, 55, quit their high-pressure jobs to start a business together.

## GILL SAYS:

My husband Will is my best friend. We work together, parent together and laugh constantly. We never run out of things to say to each other and, through some very tough times, he has been my absolute rock.

But rewind a decade and, though we had married two years earlier, we hardly saw each other. With a job in banking that took me abroad, and Will working weekends managing a chain of bars, we were lucky if we spent two nights a week together.

I'd phone him from India and not know what to say. We were living different lives in clashing time zones and barely

knew what the other was doing. But big salaries allowed us to go on plenty of holidays. Once, in Rhodes, I noticed we were both seeking things to do alone. I'd grab my book and head to the balcony, while Will would go for a swim. This "separateness" began to bother me. I wanted more "us" and less "me".

Around the same time, we moved to the country. But the lovely community there felt closed to us as we had no time to meet people. We also wanted a family, but being apart got in the way of that.

We had reached a crunch point. At first, I was nervous of telling Will how I felt – but it turned out he felt exactly the same. After years of putting in long hours, we wanted to have some fun and

flexibility. Most importantly, we wanted to spend time together again.

When the idea of starting a business together came up, we were both struck that this could be our answer.

We brainstormed lots of ideas. We started talking about a different future, one where we worked together on our own business. I cut down my hours and eventually quit, and Will had contacts in the drinks industry, so, in 2011, we set up Best of British Beer. At first it was a novelty, spending time together visiting brewers, but as the business grew, we were lucky enough to ride the crest of the craft beer craze. Selling bespoke beer packages, we found a receptive market, becoming the first beer company on gift site [notonthehighstreet.com](http://notonthehighstreet.com), as well as in stores such as Selfridges.

Nine years on, we've thriving, in business and in our relationship. Seeing how the other one works, we have huge admiration for each other.

Most importantly, if we hadn't changed our lives we wouldn't have been able to adopt our daughter Isla, 10. We started the adoption process after losing a baby at full term, a couple of years into working together. Without Will, and our rock-solid relationship, I don't know how I would have got through it.

We love waking up together, doing the school run and driving to work as a family unit. We have to stop ourselves talking shop at home, but we enjoy it so much that work is an extension of family life. We are happier now than ever.'

## WILL SAYS:

'When you marry someone, you want to be with them, so while I loved my job, we knew things had to change. The great thing about the work we do now is that it's fun – and that spills over into home life. We get a real buzz from what we do and my admiration for Gill knows no bounds – I was blown away when she sold 1,100 units in seven minutes on QVC! It's great to celebrate successes like that and to be able to look back on them together. Where once we hardly saw each other, now we're inseparable. And we wouldn't have it any other way.'

• [bestofbritishbeer.co.uk](http://bestofbritishbeer.co.uk) □



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After years  
of putting in  
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Working together has  
united Will and Gill