

'I'm very driven & anxious... like my mother'

Pamela Stephenson talks to Victoria Young about being an adrenaline junkie, her love of dancing, and the pain of writing about her childhood in her revealing new memoir



Pamela Stephenson, 62, became famous in the BBC comedy series *Not The Nine O'Clock News* before training as a psychologist and sex therapist. In 2010 she came third in *Strictly Come Dancing* with partner James Jordan. She is married to comedian Billy Connolly and they have three daughters, Daisy, 28, Amy, 26, and Scarlett, 24. Pamela also has two stepchildren, Jamie, 42, and Cara, 38, from Billy's previous marriage.

My relationship with my mother made me terrified of motherhood. I was frightened I'd either be just like her or go too far the other way and be an over-the-top mother. But when I had my first child I was simply overwhelmed with love and adoration. Bonding with my kids felt so natural, but it made me realise my mother probably hadn't felt the same about me.

My mother was very cold and placed very high expectations on me. My anxiety as a child resulted in a facial tick and I suffered from obsessive-compulsive disorder. I couldn't step on cracks in the pavement and had an uncontrollable urge to count things.

My sadness about my childhood can be mitigated, but I'm still grieving for the love other people experienced. I met someone recently who'd grown up in incredible poverty, yet all I could say to them was, "Did you know you were loved?". Of course, not having enough to eat is awful, but love is the only thing that really matters.

Writing the book was horrible, frankly. My plan was to write a light memoir rather than an autobiography, but a lot of stuff started coming out. It was painful; I didn't like revisiting the childhood stuff at all.

I recently went to Zurich to talk to my youngest sister. We haven't had much contact over the years and she told me things I hadn't known about my mother.



Clockwise from left: Pamela's mother and father; Pamela aged 17; in Australia with her sisters

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Performing has always been my saviour. Going to ballet or acting in school plays were some of my happiest childhood moments, so I turned to performing again when I was troubled in later life. It really did save me.

I'm extremely driven. It's a trait I probably got from my mother, who was very determined and anxious, like me. Anxious people often deal with their anxieties by working hard, as it can be easier to focus on study and work than our own worries. Meditation and dancing have also been a fantastic help.

I recently completed a 12-hour dance marathon. At the end, I did press-ups in front of everyone just to prove that not only was I the oldest female entrant to complete the event, but I could do press-ups at the end of it as well.

I find myself asking "why not?" more and more these days. If someone says "You shouldn't be doing that at your age," I ask, "Why not?" Most of the clothes I see that are designed for 60-year-old women are frumpy and I'd much rather wear a sequined miniskirt aimed at women in their thirties. People often ask why my hair is so long and say I'd look chic with it shorter. But why shouldn't I wear my hair long if I prefer it that way?

I discovered she was a typhoid carrier when she was young and was isolated to stop other people catching it. It must have had a big effect on her – the idea that she was contagious and had to reign herself in. My sister also told me my mother had tried to commit suicide when I was 14, which was a big revelation. It made me more forgiving.

I genuinely didn't have any hopes and dreams for my children. When they were growing up I tried to help them forge their own path and to think for themselves. If they came to me with a problem I'd say, "That sounds really difficult, how are you going to handle it?"

I really enjoyed making comedy, it was a lot of fun. But I didn't particularly like the peripheral stuff around it; the celebrity machine, which got in the way of the work. Retraining as a psychologist was a huge undertaking. It took six years and I found it enormously hard. I was spurred on because it was so fascinating, and I discovered a great deal about myself and my family.

The course required me to go through a great deal of therapy. I've tried to explain in the book just how hard it was to sort myself out. The recovery process is a bit like peeling an onion, and I had a lot to recover from.

through my eyes

Lots of people think sex is easy and spontaneous, but it's not. We have to learn how to be sexual. Although sex therapy isn't for everyone, it can help couples find solutions to problems that might otherwise end their relationship.

I'm an adrenaline junkie. If you asked me to go to the wilds of New Guinea and hang out with cannibals, I'd do it. In fact, I'm planning my next shark dive at the moment. I like feeling scared because I know it's going to be thrilling and life-affirming when I overcome that fear.

I think there's such a thing as being too close to your partner. If you always know what each other is thinking and spend all your time together, then you're not really sure where you end and the other person begins. It's bad for your sex life and it's bad for your relationship.

Spending time away from each other is great. Billy will call and say, "Guess what I did yesterday?" and I'll say, "Guess what I did?" It's fun. Then we get back together and catch up properly. Having time apart is definitely a good thing for us. *Pamela's autobiography, The Varnished Untruth (Simon & Schuster), is out now.*



PLASTIC SURGERY & ME

At my age I should be happily moving towards old age, yet what I'm doing is continually railing against it. I'm always setting myself physical challenges and spend lots of time beautifying myself and having fun. One of the ugliest things about me is my refusal to age gracefully. I didn't used to be obsessed with pushing back time and wasn't always thinking "Oh God, I don't want to get old!" But now I'm as vain as vain can be and would sell my soul to the devil to be a babe forever. Thank God for Botox, lipo and the surgeon's knife. However, I must point out that this isn't just about pleasing myself or getting wolf whistles. Since I inflict my image on others through the media, I'm actually being thoughtful. Be grateful, people; I tweak myself as a public service!

PHOTOGRAPH: TREVOR LEIGHTON; HAIR & MAKE-UP: LAURENCE CLOSE AT H&M; CREATIVE STYLING: ARABELLA WEIR AT RED REPRESENTS; DRESS: RONEN CHEN; NECKLACE: DENISE MANNING; RING: JOUBILONDON