

"The Great British Baking Show" doesn't just provide stress relief — it teaches it

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Kim-Joy Hewlett was a finalist for the 2018 series of "The Great British Bake Off" and is a mental-health specialist. Here, she gives a Superhero Biscuit Decorating class in Leeds, England, on November 5, 2019. Photo: Andrew Bengel/Redferns/Getty

At the end of the "Great British Baking Show," contestants were given a simple task. Bake a chocolate cake. Easy enough. Baking in a timed contest with millions of viewers, though, is another matter.

"Nerves still very much jangling," Steph Blackwell said. She was one of the contestants.

"That's fine," said contestant David Atherton after watching a saucepan boil over. "I think I'll start again."

Baking Battle Of The Brain

The baking show is famously soothing for viewers. Contestants, though, experience the worst pressure of their lives.

The finalists are not just star home bakers. They are also masters of mental strength. Finalists say they need just as much focus and flow as baking skills.

"It's 50 percent a battle of your mind," said Kim-Joy. She is a 2018 finalist and mental health expert. Her calm on the show earned her the nickname "Balm to the Nation's Psyche."

Atherton is a health worker. He was often the most levelheaded competitor. "The biggest determining factor is how you cope under pressure," he said.

Atherton works at a hospital. Even at his job, he is known for keeping his cool. He also teaches patients how to reframe stressful situations.

During the show, Atherton repeated to himself, "Being stressed is not going to make it better. It's always going to make it worse." He reminded himself that enjoying the process was more important than winning.

Anxiety In Competition

Recent finalists have spoken about how past anxiety shaped the way they competed. Some speak of their time "in the tent" as a sort of test. The challenges changed how they view their own mental strength.

"I'll always be the nervous person," said 2019 finalist Steph Blackwell. "And I'm proud of what I did manage to achieve with it."

Blackwell said experiences with anxiety and disordered eating had given her a difficult relationship with food. Baking helped her heal. "I really threw myself into an uncomfortable situation," she said. "It gave me a real strength."

Just as the mind orders baking, so can baking order the mind. Cooking methods like French *mise en place* require balance and organization. The phrase roughly means "everything in its place." Practitioners say its methods create focus and calm beyond the kitchen.

Students of the method "organize their desks, their closets, their rooms," said author Dan Charnas. He wrote a book about using *mise en place* in life.

Contestants described a similar connection between the show and life. "I've definitely got more organized since doing 'Bake Off.' It's just helped me chill out," Kim-Joy said.

Much of the change has to do with time management. Kim-Joy stayed cool on the show by keeping detailed lists of timed sections.

Keeping written lists was key for 2017 finalist Steven Carter-Bailey. "Mental strength carried me through," he said.

"Part of the process of 'Bake Off' was healing because it forced me into admitting it," Carter-Bailey said, referring to old struggles with anxiety. "I wasn't ashamed."

Baking Toward Good Mental Health

Some contestants have spoken about mental well-being across one's life.

"Baking really is good for your mental health," Kim-Joy said.

Stress will always appear. The bakers agreed that the ability to channel nerves in a productive way often made the biggest difference on the show.

Blackwell said the show taught her how to deal with the "little hiccups" that go wrong. "Last year," she said, "I just broke down boundaries I never thought were possible."

Carter-Bailey has joined a mental-health awareness campaign. He talks to schoolchildren about social media and anxiety.

He stressed that appearances can deceive. "The people who seem or feel the weakest," he said, "are the strongest."