

# KAREN CLIFTON: *Lucky number seven*

Latin Dance specialist, World Mambo Champion, and *Strictly Come Dancing* star, Karen Clifton is no stranger to high-stakes environments. But even under the spotlight, Karen's sunny outlook continues to shine. As she embarks on a new chapter in her life – and her seventh year on Britain's best-loved Saturday night show – she shares the unique pressures of the series, the key to sustaining a supportive relationship after a split, and the practical mental health lesson passed on by her mum

Writing | Kathryn Wheeler

**Hi Karen! This year will be your seventh series of *Strictly Come Dancing* – we can hardly believe it!**

Lucky number seven. I'm the oldest female – the last one standing!

**To do it for seven years, there must be something special about the show?** Well, I love the fact it's such a beautiful family show – and it's great to have something like that on a Saturday night. You have people of all different ages, different ethnicities, and different backgrounds, and they all connect over this beautiful thing that we call our work.

**How do you deal with the pressure of *Strictly*?** It's knowing how to switch off. Yes, there's a lot of enthusiasm and happiness that comes with it but, behind the scenes, it's pretty intense. There's a lot on the show that you have to carry as an individual. But the best thing that I've learnt to do throughout the years is to just go home and do something that completely relaxes me, such as cooking or spending time with my two dogs.

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**When you first meet your celebrity partner, how do you go about building chemistry?**

It's such a happy show, and I guess everyone is on the same page. The professionals want to give them everything, and as professional dancers, we're dance and acting teachers all in one. Once you get to know each other, you connect right away. It's about being nice and being kind, and understanding that your partner is in a place they're not used to being in. You take total responsibility for making sure they're having a good experience, and that's how you give the best performances – when they trust you.

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**Since the split from your husband and dance partner Kevin Clifton, you've maintained a really supportive relationship. What was the key to that?** Kevin and I have a lot of admiration and respect for each other. At the end of the day, you just have to be grown-ups and we both want each other to be happy. I don't think there's a specific thing that we did, it was just being kind to each other. We're really good friends and working with him, on and outside the show, has always been brilliant. I'm always going to be proud of him, no matter what.

**You're a very active person. Does exercise help your mental health?**

Absolutely, I think it's one of the best things! Sometimes, in these hectic times, you forget what's really important. You have to take care of you first, and for me that's with exercise. I'm not doing it to look a certain way, it's about how I feel – that's something my mom taught me. She was a softball player for the Venezuelan national team, she loved yoga, and running. I saw that all of these things kept her mentally and physically stable, and a happy person. I learnt everything from my mom.

**What's your advice for those who struggle with motivation to exercise?** Don't put pressure on yourself. You've got to find what works for you and give yourself time. Motivation is something you have to practise, it's not just in your body. As long as it works for you, don't worry about what other people are doing.

**How do you wind down?** Well, you know what? It's taken me a really long time to learn how to relax. I always want to be active, but lately I've tried to find more time off. I've been grabbing a book, or listening to a podcast, or meditating – there's this amazing meditation app I use called Headspace, and I have another app called Sleepaid that tracks my sleeping habits. It's just the little things that really help me.

**Do your dogs help with your mental health?** Absolutely. I've had Betsy for two years, and recently got Marley – he's three months old. The best thing is when I come home from a stressful day and they're just there. They put their heads on my lap and breathe with me. It makes me feel like there's nothing wrong, and it's all going to be OK.

It's taken me years to work out what's good for me and what makes me a better person. That's been eye-opening; making sure that I'm OK, and that I give myself value

**And they're rescue dogs?** I'm a big believer in adopting not shopping – there are just so many animals who need a home and want to be loved. Seriously, if I got a bigger house I would probably get 150 of them! I want to become the dog-lady – or the dog-dancer... or have my own dog-dancing school!

**You have such a sunny outlook on life. How do you cultivate that?** I'm 36 years old now, I'm not a young girl any more, and I've been through a lot in my life. What's important for me, now, is being happy. It's taken me a couple of years to work out what's good for me and what makes me a better person. That's been eye-opening; making sure that I'm OK, and that I give myself value.

Sometimes you give yourself away, and forget about what you have to do to be happy. In the past, I've just given myself out, which I love doing and I will continue to do, but sometimes I have to take care of me first. Then I will be able to give out even more!

*Catch Karen on Strictly Come Dancing, Saturday nights at 6.30pm on BBC 1. Follow Karen on Instagram @karencliftonofficial* 



Photography | Chris Mann