

'I leave the house as MRS ANGRY-GRUMPY-PANTS and come back a different person'

With two young children and a demanding job, Sue Wybrow, 40, found she never had a minute to herself. But starting a dance class changed her life for ever – and now she's helping other women find a better work/life balance, too

By my early 30s, my life was on a fixed path, and I thought I knew where I was heading. My job as director of a marketing firm was fulfilling and fun, and I got on well with my colleagues – I even married one of them! We had no children and I worked with my husband, Gavin, so there was no one waiting for me at home. Leaving the office at 10.30pm never bothered me, because it didn't feel like a sacrifice.

Everything seemed to be going to plan – Gavin and I moved into a bigger house in St Albans, and a few months later, in July 2002, I found out I was pregnant. We were so happy and excited, and I couldn't wait to spend time with my baby. Ernie was born the next April, and our first three months together were wonderful. But I was only offered 12 weeks' paid maternity leave – if I wanted to take longer, I'd only receive statutory pay, which wouldn't cover our mortgage. I had a choice: wrench myself away from Ernie to return to work, or risk losing our family home.

So I went back to work. It was horrible – I'd go into the office kitchen and phone a friend in tears, sobbing that I didn't want

to be there. I felt constantly guilty.

When my second son, Frank, was born two years later, I cut back work to three days a week, but my life became even more manic. I'd drop the children at school, race to work, sprint across London for meetings, then back to pick them up in the afternoon. Every minute not spent working I wanted to spend with Frank and Ernie, so I had no time for myself at all. Haircuts became a thing of the past, and my only relaxation was a glass of wine with Gavin when the kids had gone to bed – before working into the early hours.

I longed to have just one hour a week – with no phone, no work and no distractions – to focus on myself and get a bit of exercise, so I decided to try and find a dance class. But there weren't any in my area. When I mentioned it to other mums, they said they'd love to come along, and why didn't I set one up?

It seemed easy enough, and didn't take much time at all – all I had to do was hire the local school's dance studio, and I asked the lady who taught my sons' toddler dance group to take the class. I got 15 mums together and we each paid a fiver to cover the costs. The first



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class, one Tuesday evening in January 2009, was a huge success - we spent 60 minutes dancing our hearts out to Michael Jackson and Kylie. By the end of it we all agreed we felt happier and more relaxed than we had in months, so we arranged to meet the same time next week. Word spread as everyone told their friends, and that April we opened another four classes in St Albans. Soon I had requests from women all over the country, so in September we set up two other classes in Hertfordshire, plus Croydon and Blackpool. What started out as a group of mums getting together for a dance on a Tuesday evening had turned into a small business - and I decided to call it Popdance as that's exactly what we do!

It was great fun, but that winter I was getting more emails about Popdance than I was about my job, and I had to fit it all in between getting the kids to bed and dropping them off at school in the morning. I couldn't cope any more, so I had some tough decisions to make. My husband convinced me not to give up on my new business, because he thought it had the potential to be huge. I realised that if Popdance was going to have a chance, I just had to go for it.

So, I took the most terrifying decision of my life, and handed in my notice. But as I gave my boss my letter of resignation, I felt so relieved. As before, my husband's income wouldn't cover our outgoings, so it was a huge risk. I had no background in dance at all - yet here I was, starting a dance company, in the middle of an economic crisis. But in my gut I knew it was the right thing to do. Finally, I had the chance to be my own boss, to work from home and spend



Step this way: Sue had requests from all over the country to set up Popdance classes. Now the business has become a franchise, so classes are available across the UK, and there are plans to take it abroad as well. LEFT: Popdance is still run by Sue (centre) and her team

savings. But it wasn't enough - I needed a loan. When my Dad offered to lend me £20,000 so that I wouldn't

have to go to a bank, I was completely overwhelmed. I was so touched that my parents were so supportive. I couldn't believe I was 40 and borrowing money from my parents, but I was determined to pay them back - and more, besides. Gavin and I thought we'd make a start by having a car boot sale. We made £70 and, when I handed it to my Dad, he said: 'That only leaves £19,930 then!' As a family, we had to cut back on everything - I went for two years without buying any new clothes, and would often wander around the supermarket worrying that I was in so much debt, I couldn't even afford a bottle of tomato ketchup.

But as the business grew, I became more ambitious and passionate about what we could achieve. At our dance classes across the country, I'd meet working mums on the brink of breakdown - trying to juggle family and work, just like I had been. Newspaper headlines

'We spent 60 minutes dancing our hearts out to Michael Jackson and Kylie'

Friends and family all clubbed together to make the business a success. My husband is a graphic designer, so he worked on our logo, while some colleagues built a great website. I also asked the other mums at school to join the team and help with marketing and accounting. We pooled our skills, and I was determined to make sure everyone worked flexible hours, so they could fit their job around their families, too. The money to pay for venue hire, teachers and

more likely to lose our jobs than men. I realised Popdance could help - not only by giving busy women the chance to dance their troubles away for an hour, but also by giving them the opportunity to become teachers themselves, and be their own boss, with our support. In January, I decided to turn the business into a franchise, so anyone can buy a licence, start up a local class, and work whatever hours they like - and we'll provide the training. That means Popdance classes are available now across the UK, and we have plans to take them abroad, too.

Finally, I've found a way of life that fits me perfectly, and I'm helping other women to do the same. I still go to the same dance class on a Tuesday evening - I leave the house as Mrs Angry-Grumpy-Pants, and come back a completely different person. The feelgood music and endorphins stay with me for the rest of the week, and it makes me feel stronger, and ready to face whatever challenges life throws at me. We hope to start turning a profit this year but, as a family, we're emotionally richer and wiser for having gone through these tougher times. Now, I can pick the kids up from school. If there's a snow-day, we go to the park and sledge, and I don't have to ask anyone's permission. After having only a few months together at the start of their lives, we're making up for it now. And finally, I have time to get a haircut! I go to a friend's salon with my mum, and we have lunch together afterwards - it's a real treat to spend that time with her. I feel optimistic about the future - for myself and other women. We may be in for a difficult few years, but we'll always find a way to make it work, so long as we have self-belief. It's scary starting something new, but we can do it by taking risks and helping