

# picturing the invisible:

**A photographic exhibition of  
men's recovery after concussion**

 University  
of Otago  
OTĀKOU WHAKAIHU WAKA

 Lottery Grants Board  
Te Puna Tahua  
LOTTO FUNDS FOR YOUR COMMUNITY

*“I use the cell phone analogy. Imagine waking up after having it plugged in all night and it’s still got one bar. Yeah, that’s your brain.”*

**This booklet accompanies the in-person and online exhibition of the same name which can be viewed at [www.mensconcussion.nz](http://www.mensconcussion.nz)**

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# Mild traumatic brain injuries (mTBIs),

...also called concussion, make up most of all brain injuries and are a growing public health concern. It is estimated that nearly half of those who experience an mTBI will continue to experience persistent post-concussion symptoms for months, even years after their initial injury.

While mTBIs from a blow, shake or jolt to the head can happen to anyone, at any time and age in the community, home, or workplace, they are also a condition that is highly gendered.

Men are twice as likely to sustain a mTBI compared to women. This may be partly attributed to men's greater participation in high-risk recreational activities, certain occupations, violence-related incidents and motor-vehicle accidents. Evidence also suggests the true burden of mTBI in our communities may be significantly higher than reported, as many people do not seek medical treatment or help for their injuries.

This exhibition presents the untold stories of eleven men navigating life after a mTBI in a way that we do not usually see, through photographs of the things, practices, and relationships that enabled recovery. The men's photographs and captions go beyond a medical view, revealing the hidden struggles, frustrations, and strengths that shape each man's path to recovery. For some, it's their first concussion; for others, it's the latest in a series of injuries, each impacting their families, work, and sense of self. Here we see both the daily battles and the quiet resilience required to cope with symptoms that may not be visible but are deeply felt.

Whilst labelled as a mild injury, the impacts are far from mild, resulting in long-term health consequences such as persistent headaches, poor memory, sleep disturbances and fatigue, putting a strain on social relationships and performance at work. Many of these men faced lasting effects— months or even years of adapting to a new normal.

*These photographs encourage us all – friends, family and workplaces- to consider how we can better understand and support those whose injuries are invisible to the eye.*

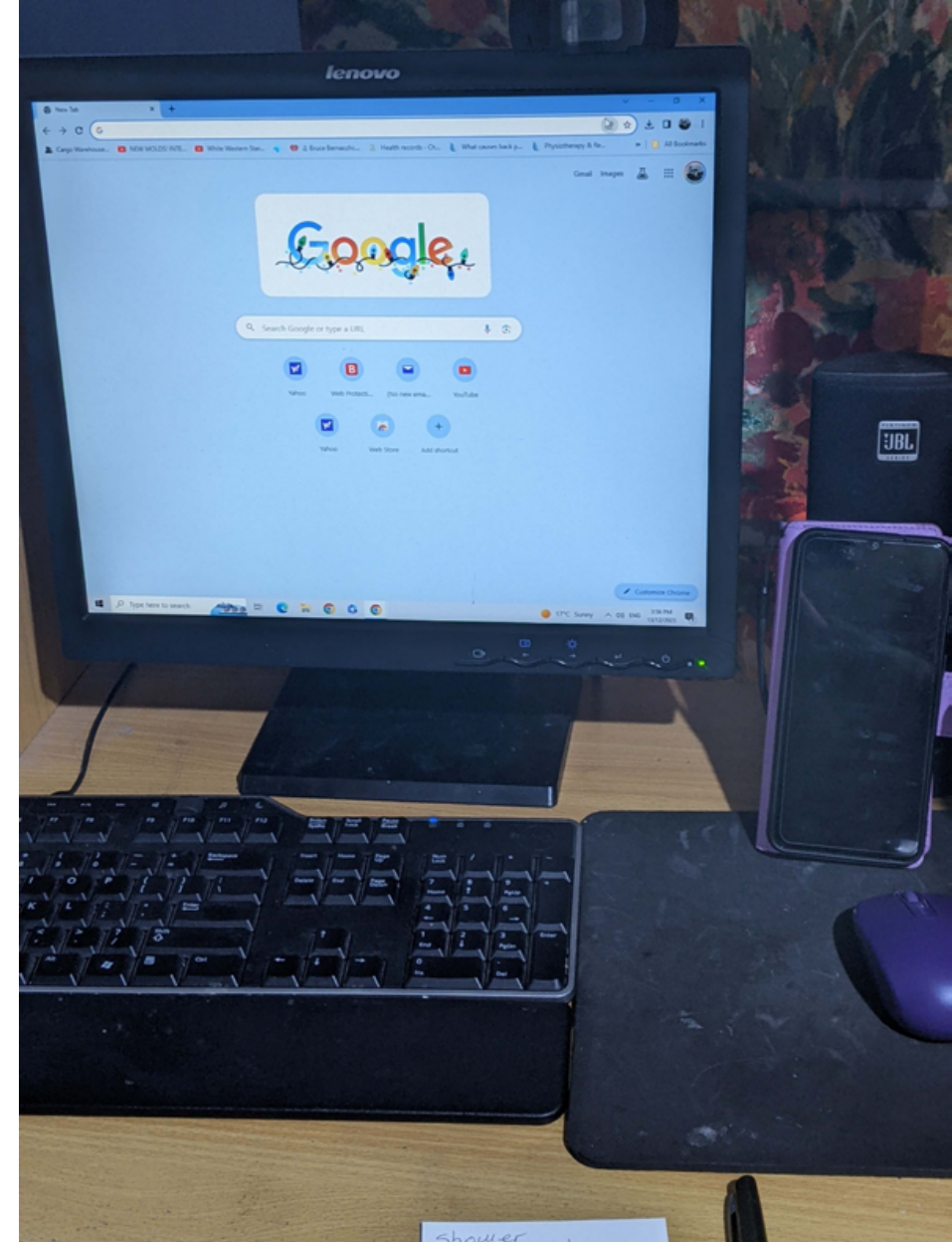


*“That’s a circle of shoes all mixed up showing a muddle, but there’s a pair of jandals pointing outwards, which is the road out of this. And basically, all I can do is wear jandals.”*

*The others are all my running shoes, all mixed up in cycling shoes going nowhere and the ones that are going somewhere is the jandals which is what I can use walking. I mixed them up because it symbolizes the muddledness of the symptoms.”*

***Aged 59. Mountain bike accident***

*“They said there’s nothing wrong.  
They say your brain is like a computer, so  
everything is  
intact, and your brain is all okay and  
everything’s there.  
But it’s the software doesn’t want to work  
properly.”*





*“I still struggle with the noise and the lights and at the beginning I couldn’t handle being in the supermarket. Before I got hit, I could walk through the supermarket and be fine. But now it’s just a different feeling being in there with people, it gets too crowded and it’s definitely different now.*”

*Overwhelming is the word.”*

***Aged 51. Workplace accident***

*“So that’s the sun and it signifies that everything now to me is quite bright or light. Bright things to others are overpowering bright to me. So that’s all a mess and kind of hard to explain. Having a munchkin now I have to do things, and it does wear me out faster and I’m knackered at nighttime.*

*I’ve noticed a lot of the time I’ll go to sleep at the same time as her at night, because I’ve just got nothing more to give.”*

***Aged 41. Multiple concussions.***



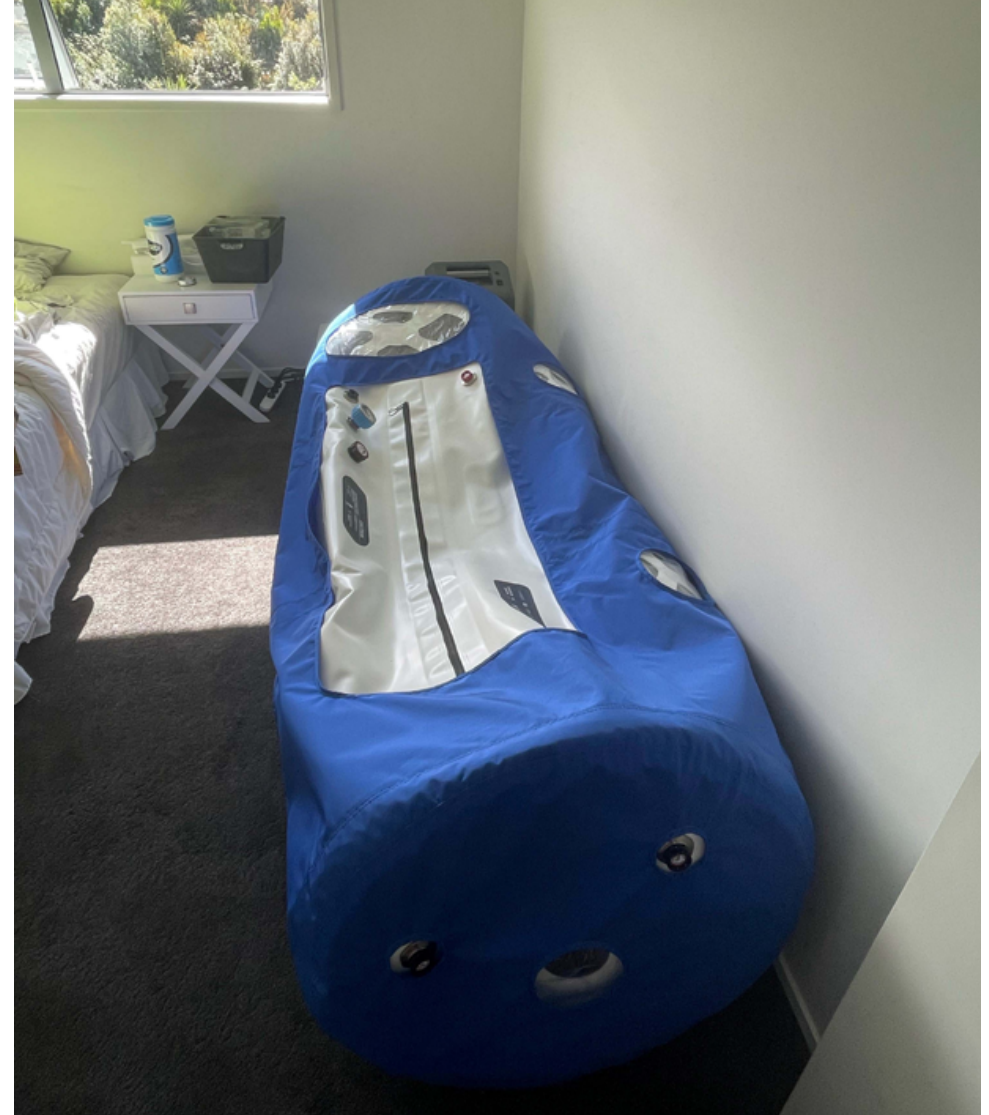


*“We had the traffic light system. Red was snail, orange was turtle and green was rabbit. No-one told us this system, this was just something we learned because we never got any support about how to deal with what was going on.”*

*Aged 51. Workplace accident*

*“There’s not a lot to it. But it really works. I’ll just go in there and fall asleep for an hour pretty much and just breathe in pure oxygen. It has a heap of health benefits that are meant to speed up recovery. If I use it first thing in the morning I can get up and get my daughter ready for school, get her lunch made and be so much more present than I otherwise would be.”*

*Aged 41. Multiple concussions.*





*“If we book a restaurant, everybody around me books somewhere in a corner, just because if I’m sitting in the middle, I find it so hard to be able to concentrate on the people in front of me when there’s so much going on around me. I don’t go to a lot of things that I know I wouldn’t enjoy because they would be too loud. Even if I go to the movies, I have to really want to see the movie and I’ll go with the earplugs.”*

*Aged 41. Multiple concussions.*

*“One of the most important things to do is accept it properly, fully accept that your world and everything in it has now changed.*

*Once you do that, then you can actually let other people in and work with them.”*



*“We work at home quite a lot like lots of people do. I had found it more difficult to work where I used to, which is on our large front room, is that because there’s lots more stimulus? It’s also very bright, brightly lit, I don’t know. But I elected to move the desk, its much quieter and it’s darker actually.*

*It’s easier for me to work there.”*

*Aged 50. Fell off a motorised scooter*

*“Post this bump it’s been much clearer to me that I need to eat healthy, stay in good shape.*

*I’ve been particularly mindful of the fact I’ve got to be careful of the things old men have to be careful about. So you know, I can’t really afford to have head injuries or other things.*

*If you lose it, it’s much harder to get it back when you’re in your 50s.*

*I’m definitely not invincible.”*



*Aged 50. Fell off a motorised scooter*



*“If someone breaks their leg, everyone knows that a leg after three months can be right, maybe six months.”*

*It’s a standard. But when you knock your head, there’s just so many knowns and unknowns. And everyone’s experience, there’s some similarities, but the variability is so much more than for a physical injury.”*

***Aged 59. Mountain bike accident***

*“I don’t fully  
understand what’s  
happening myself.  
I’m navigating a new  
reality. I’m figuring  
it out myself. So it’s  
difficult to explain  
it to you.”*



*“It was the OT from the concussion clinic, she was able to explain to us what had happened with the movement of the brain and disruption of the pathways and that helped a hell of a lot to try and understand what was going on and why it was happening. She was good. To me that was part of the biggest thing having someone explain it to you.”*

***Aged 65. Struck by closing doors. Mountain bike accident***



*“It’s just talking to people that you can relate to.*

*It’s different to talking about it even to your closest friends who really care about you and understand.*

*Talking about it with someone that’s actually going through the same or similar things, it’s just like a different level. You feel understood without having to say much. Everybody is dealing with the same sort of stuff.*

*I find it very positive and uplifting.”*

***Aged 41. Multiple concussions.***

*“That damage zone there is the impact of the helmet on the tree roots that I hit first, somersaulted over my bike.*

*In fact, it took so much impact that I had an abrasion on my forehead. I just assumed that the suspension would have absorbed the impact of a tree root, and I would just have kept on going.*

*I think it would be different story if I hadn't been wearing it. Might not be here. Who knows?”*

***Aged 59. Mountain bike accident***



*“Initially it was a hell of a thing to do, to get back to work. I was taking ginger every single day. That seems to keep the nausea at bay on most situations. But if it’s a really bad day then I will have to resort to ondansetron. The nausea, the old tinnitus in the ears, the whole thing is just hanging there all the time in the background.”*

*Aged 65. Struck by closing doors. Mountain bike accident*





*“I’m a very active person and I find it really hard to sit still. I’m an active relaxer. So I guess it was just giving into it, and I just had to learn to sit. I never sit and not think of anything, do anything, read something, have the radio off. I just had to sit. I did struggle with it. That summed up a lot of my first month, six weeks or so was trying to do as much of that as I could.”*



*“In the afternoons, I’ve got no energy, it’s just really difficult. I get to three o’clock and I’ve just got nothing to do. I’ll start playing a video game and somewhere along the line, beer joined into the party there as well.*

*When I first started doing it, it was a good way of unwinding and forgetting about the world, but it became an unhealthy habit. I’ve tried to cut back to some success and I’m working on not drinking.*

*It just doesn’t feel good for me.”*

*Aged 51. Multiple concussions, no longer able to work*

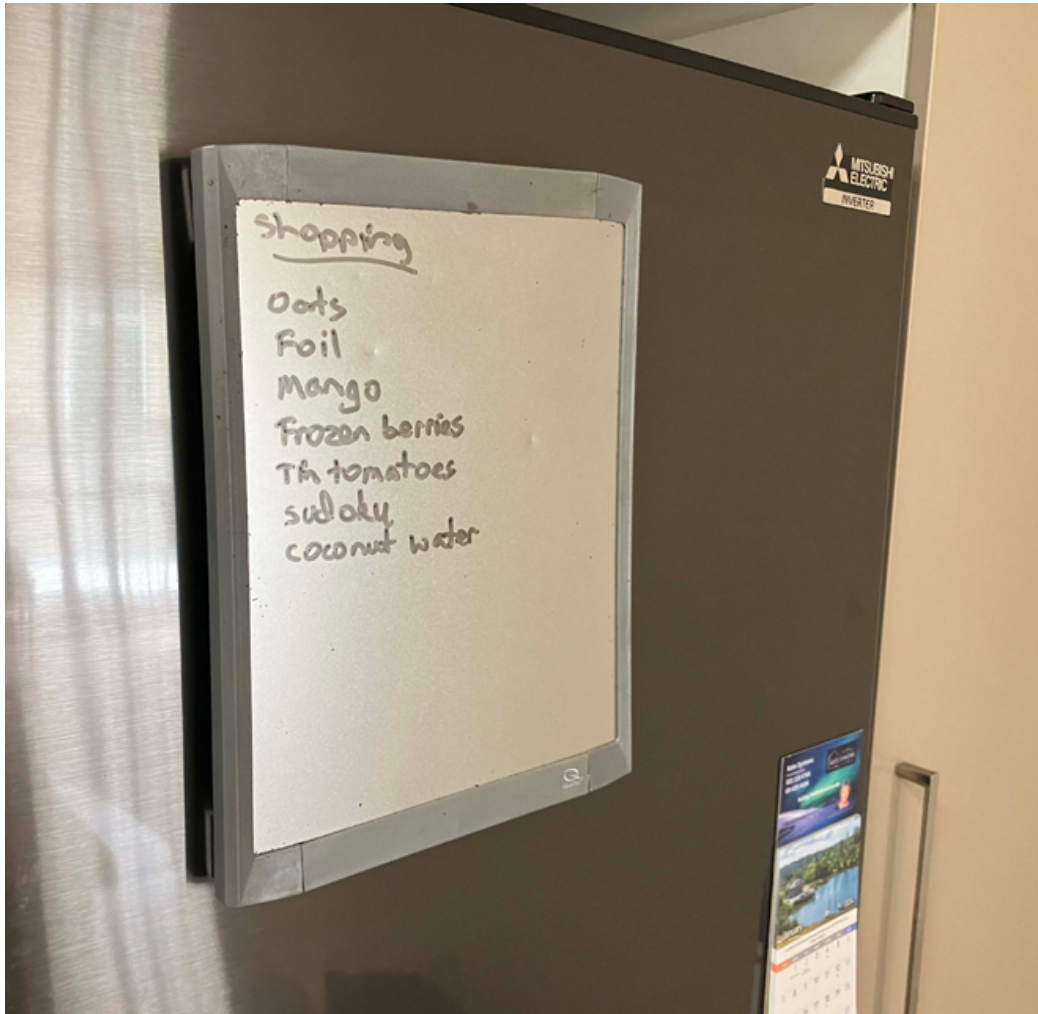
*“This is about taking your opportunities to keep in your routine as best you can. And if it doesn’t fit your routine exactly, don’t worry about it, just try and get a rest.*

*So that was why I pulled the cap down, it’s a bit darker.*

*Earplugs in, so I’m hearing less. If I don’t, I’m going to pay for it later. I didn’t have the discipline initially and then the OT made the difference because he legitimized the fact that I definitely had concussion.”*

***Aged 52. Mountain bike accident,  
followed by a fall at home***





*Aged 51. Multiple concussions, no longer able to work*

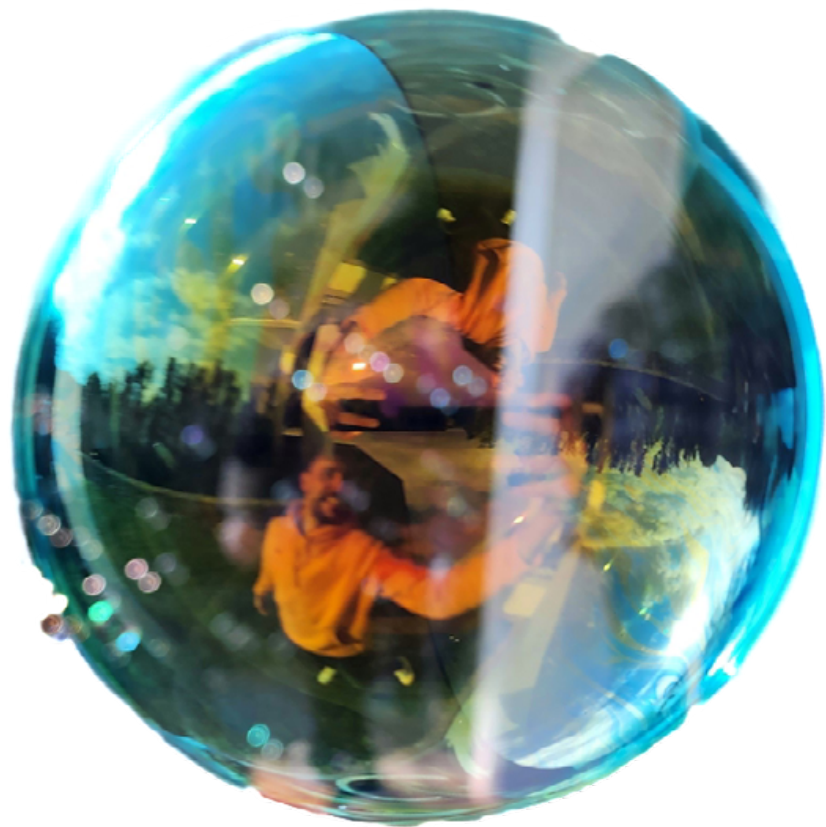
*“Going to do the shopping is hard enough as it is. Having to leave the house, the supermarkets are busy and quite a stressful environment for some people with brain injuries and concussions. So, this just makes the process easier, it takes out that first part of the thinking and the planning. I’ve got a couple of whiteboards; one has good activities and avoid activities.”*

*“I was trying to fight having a sleep in the day because I thought it was a bad thing.*

*I think it was more the OT then reaffirming sleeps important. I don't sleep for more than two hours. But I go to bed. Still do it now. But then it's interesting there's times where I was definitely down, mood wise, and some of it was around missing out, or I should be doing something else. It just got very lonely.”*

*Aged 52. Mountain bike accident, followed by a fall at home*





*“You’re so just wrapped in  
your bubble until something  
big happens like concussion.*

*Then just everything changes.  
The mind being as amazing as  
it is, I’ve never found that going  
back fully to what it was prior.*

*It’s been hard that’s for  
sure. Even to this day I’m  
finding still, literally just...  
words, you just can’t, you  
can’t kind of...*

*it’s been difficult,  
that’s without a doubt.”*

***Aged 34. Go-karting accident***

*“The accident actually brought up a lot of issues with me around substance, especially alcohol. The accident, it sort of initially drove that drinking into overload because I was very low and quite depressed. But then, once you remove the alcohol, you actually see kind of what the problems are. And I think the problem for me was that I was very upset where I was in life.*

*And I sort of used the alcohol to change the way I felt.”*

***Aged 33. Hit on the head by a large metal sculpture***





*“The OT said if we go grocery shopping or there’s bright lights, she said to keep the light out of your eyes, wear the cap inside the store. So many people are wearing them in the store anyway, so I don’t feel too out of place.”*

***Aged 65. Struck by closing doors.  
Mountain bike accident***

## Changes to payments



ACC Reference

Date

April 2024



### Your payment changes

We've extended your payments until 14-Jul-24.

If you are returning to work, please let us know.

*“It’s been a real struggle with ACC but there’s two parts to it. One is extreme gratitude, that we have this in New Zealand. ACC though has some not so good parts, and one of them is that they seem to decline something as default, rather than trying to put the effort in to see whether they should be helping you.*”

*They put the onus on to you to prove that they should help you. But it’s quite like a cookie cutter thing, rather than something that’s bespoke for you.”*

***Aged 51. Multiple concussions, no longer able to work***

*“I’ve deliberately blurred this and it symbolizes the vestibular symptoms I get when I’m overloaded.*

*If I turn my head, then it takes a while for the vision to resolve. It might only be half a second, but it sort of feels like I’m underwater.*

*It’s also dark through the door so the journey onwards is unclear.”*

***Aged 59. Mountain bike accident***





*“What I really wanted to know was: why was I so tired?”*

*Why are my ears blocked?*

*All I did was fall over and hit my head. It can’t be that bad so find whatever this is and fix me.*

*I wanted a plan.*

*And if I’m honest I just thought it would be some medicine and a bit of therapy, and I’d be fine in a couple of weeks.*

*That sounds quite silly when I think about it today, but at that time I still felt pretty good, I just couldn’t understand why I couldn’t function properly like I used to.”*

***Aged 53. Fall in a hotel room***



*“My memory prior to the concussion was phenomenal, especially long-term memory. Whereas now there’s certain things I can kind of remember, and especially if there’s something like a smell, then that brings back some of the stuff. But otherwise, it’s significantly worse.*

*I would say, it’s half, a quarter of what it was prior to that.”*

*Aged 34. Go-karting accident*



*“You just have such a short temper when you’ve had something like a head knock. Your brain just can’t cope with things, so just little things can set you off.”*

*I married my wife being me, I don’t want to become a different person that she didn’t realise I was, or now am, because of concussion. And especially with the kids.*

*I don’t want it where they get older and they’re like, my dad was a terrible rager. But it’s just getting super frustrated with my words.”*

***Aged 34. Go-karting accident***

*“When you’re so tired and fatigued this is definitely one of the things that kind of goes on.*

*Migraines.*

*Everything kind of closes down.*

*Even to this day I still have quite a sore neck every once in a while from the head knock which I believe causes the migraines a lot more as well. I used to get them probably three times a week, I would say. It’s definitely nowhere near as much as that now, but, you know,*

*it’s just I can’t do anything.”*

***Aged 34. Go-karting accident***





*“Last Saturday, we went out on a cycle trail, not on the road, on a cycle trail. That was my first foray onto the road. I just felt like normal. ‘We need to go a bit faster, a bit further’ I said to my wife and she said I wasn’t allowed to do that. She’s quite nervous, so I’m taking her nervousness into account.”*

*Aged 70. Bicycle accident*



*“They said you’ve got a vestibular problem, and I didn’t even know what that word meant. I looked it up afterwards.”*

*That’s why the plank’s there, because one of the issues is that when you go on a tramp, you’ve got to be able to walk across rivers, and that’s where the balance problem is.*

*That symbolizes my problem that I’ve got to kind of work through. I’ve been tramping for over 20 years.”*

***Aged 70. Bicycle accident***

*“This is my brain being custard,  
because of the anxiety. So that’s  
just mud. My brain was custard,  
and I wandered up and down the  
corridor and I said I’m not coping,  
I’m not coping. My brain’s going  
round, my stomach’s going round,  
I’m not coping. My brain was  
addled.  
I hadn’t had a decent night’s sleep  
for months.”*





*“I had various tests done because the ringing in my ears was not getting any better. It’d been 6 or 8 weeks since the accident. At the end of the test she said to me, you have superior canal dehiscence in your ear. I didn’t actually know what that meant at that stage. That’s why I had to have the surgery. I have to say it’s one of my learnings.*”

*Having never been sick in my life, never broken a bone, never spent a night in hospital until now. This was the first accident. You’ve gotta put yourself first and do what you need to do.”*

***Aged 53. Fall in a hotel room***

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