

After the laughter has gone

One step back was all it took to change John's life. One step back to fall down a cellar and hit his head. John was knocked out for a very short time but all he remembers is coming round and not being able to speak or move.

That fall turned John from a cheeky chappy, always ready with a joke and ready to make people laugh, into someone who is very depressed, suffers from anxiety and is very nervous. Physically the fall took its toll as well. Although the blow to the head was classified as a minor brain injury, the effects have been devastating.

Not only has it changed John's life, it has changed my life as well. There has been slow improvement in his condition since his fall 18 months ago but he still has terrible nightmares, walks with a stick, has trouble with his short-term memory and his eye-sight. He has aged so much, but he is only 49.

Our five-year-old granddaughter has also been badly affected by the changes in John. They used to be 'glued' to each other and now she keeps asking why doesn't granddad love her any more, because she can't understand why he is different now.

I have seen my life torn apart by John's fall. I had to give up work to care for him but I have never given up on John. I still love him very much and it's John's good days that keep me going, but they are few and far between. One of the things I find most difficult to cope with is that John no longer feels real emotion. He knows he should feel something, but doesn't really understand why he doesn't. If I could have one wish, it would be that John would smile at me and mean it.

Another area that I find very difficult is that people just do not understand about brain injury. Some of the people in our lives and even some members of our family do not want to see John. Despite feeling exhausted, I carry on. I am one of life's copers and tell myself 'I know it will get better'.

Headway has been a real lifesaver for John and me.



We were referred to Headway from the hospital and Headway has been a part of our lives ever since, helping at all sorts of levels.

Without Headway I don't think John would be here. John goes to the Headway Day Centre, where they are helping him to get back his social skills, his physical fitness; and the peer support helps him feel less isolated. Fitness is a big issue for John, as is driving. After he came out of the Army his job involved driving and until his accident he was physically very fit. Since John's accident he has put on nearly three stone and is unable to drive, and he gets very down about this. Headway has organised neuro-gym for John which is helping him to build up his strength and motivating him to continue with a fitness programme.

Not only is Headway helping John, but they are helping me too. I go to the Chelmsford support group which is for people with brain injury and their carers. Sharing my experiences with others who understand has been so helpful. I've also been on Headway's five day carers' training course. This has been invaluable, not only did I gain a greater understanding about brain injury, but with the help of Headway have learned that I am not alone. I've also learned that I can't do everything for John, I've got to let him start to do things for himself.

John continues to improve but there is still a long way to go and we are taking one day at a time. With the help of Headway, I have seen such improvements in John's life. He still gets down and has huge problems, but I know Headway is always there for us.

Meanwhile, I am not expecting miracles, but for the two of us to enjoy life again would be wonderful. With Headway's support I still believe this might be possible.

Christine Sleeth