

I'm Helena and I'm a Medical English teacher and Registered Nurse in the UK.

I interview English speakers about their health to help you become more familiar with the language used to talk about different medical topics.

My aim is to build your confidence in interactions with your English-speaking patients and healthcare colleagues.

Welcome to English Practice for Healthcare.

I have asked people to speak slower than usual but the best thing about this podcast is the real language you will hear.

Depending on your English level it could be helpful to read whilst you listen and transcripts for each episode can be found on my website www.englishpracticeforhealthcare.com.

The language is probably most suitable for intermediate English learners and above, however a challenge is always good so whatever your level, I hope you will enjoy this opportunity to hear these natural conversations about personal health experiences. Ok, let's get started!

What do you already know about post-concussion syndrome?

What events might leave someone with this condition?

What type of symptoms might a patient with post-concussion syndrome experience?

In this first episode, I speak to Tim, a 36-year-old male, living in Norwich, a city in the UK.

Tim lives with his wife, Jess and their two young children. Tim is a teacher and until 4 years ago his health was generally fine, but in 2019 he sustained a head injury while he was playing Hockey. The verb to sustain means to suffer or experience something, for example, the patient sustained a broken wrist falling off their bike.

In the first half of the episode Tim describes what happened and the symptoms he experienced of 'post-concussion syndrome'.

Listen for what effect Tim tells me these symptoms had on his life and how they made him feel.

Which symptom does Tim tell me had the biggest effect on his mental health?

So, hi Tim, can you just tell me, where are you from?

So, I'm from Norwich, which is in the East of England

And is there a strong accent in Norwich?

There is a Norwich and a Norfolk accent actually umm I don't really have either, but my grandfather had a very strong Norfolk accent, and some people have such strong accents that you would struggle to know what

What they were saying

What they were saying

Yeah and it's farming, a lot of farming around here

There's lots of farming. It's a very agricultural area. It's very rural. It's very flat. Yeah, it's definitely worth visiting good for cycling as well

And is that your main form of exercise, would you say?

I would say. It is, yeah

OK. But before that, you played a lot of hockey

Yeah

Tell us about like your feelings towards hockey. When did you start playing?

So I started playing very young, about six or seven. I played all the way through until I was 18. I was playing a lot of representative stuff, so I was playing for the region's at county and I ended up playing junior international level. So, my hockey or my sport took off more when I left to go to Nottingham, and I played for a team that were uhhh of a higher standard and included players who were a couple of players who had just left to play for England

Mm mm

And probably that's where I started to take my hockey a bit more seriously

And it was in a game of hockey where you sustained a very serious, it's fair to say, head injury. What, what happened?

Yeah, yeah, the injury itself or the incident itself wasn't by any means the most serious injury or accident I've seen on a hockey pitch

Mmm mm

I probably had injuries, which at the time felt worse. But no, I mean, it was serious enough that a hockey ball uh was deflected into my left eye. And the contact, but possibly more, the movement of my head

Right

Caused a concussion, which then caused a minor traumatic brain injury and a post-concussion syndrome.

Mm hmm

And I didn't lose consciousness. I went off because I had a big black eye and it was bleeding. And it did, it looked pretty ugly. But I didn't fracture my um socket around my eye

Right

I had CT scans. It was all fine

Was that straight away?

No, I went actually I went to work on Monday and I went to work on Tuesday

Right

And towards the end of Tuesday one of the I'm I'm a teacher

Mm -hmm

So, one of the fifth periods of the day I was on a conversation um a phone call to a parent

Mm -hmm

And I just couldn't I couldn't concentrate I just I'd felt something I'd never felt in my life. I just could not concentrate I was having the conversation, but it was all really slow and I couldn't process it and I was I remember thinking I'm working so hard

Yeah

To just work out the simplest of things

Uh -huh

That I got off the phone. I turned to one of my colleagues and I said I've got to go home ummm and little did I know that I wouldn't go back to work for six months ummm and

Wow

And when I came home all the symptoms came within that next week

Which were

I guess probably the worst ones would be the fatigue the post-exertion fatigue. So once I came home from work my brain just shut down. I just went to bed I would I remember I used to sleep and sleep; you know 10, 11, 12 hours, and then I would wake up I would go downstairs I would have some cereal and then I would have to go back to bed I would just be completely exhausted, but my it was more my brain as well. Just I was completely like confused or

Right

Working really hard or just couldn't compute anything and I would go to bed for an hour and a half two hours and then I would come back down I would make some lunch. I might walk around the garden and that would be it. I would have to go back up again so sort of the major most debilitating one would be the fatigue that I felt

What did you think at the time? Did you think....

Well, I'd had concussion a few times before

Okay

From playing hockey or a few ummm other other instances not serious, but yeah, I just knew it was concussion

Oh, right

So I went and lay down took it easy felt quite dizzy felt nauseous which is when I realized this was bad

Mm hmm

I was really ummm photosensitive photosensitive

Photosensitivity yeah, you were having photosensitivity

Yeah, so I was, you know, everything was just so bright

Mm hmm

So, I had to wear sunglasses all the time

Right

Ummm I was really noise sensitive. I remember, you know, being upstairs and shouting down at Jess, and being like, just put the cutlery away quietly

Yeah

Like, why are you slamming it? Why are you slamming the doors? And obviously she knew what a state I was in

Yeah

She was doing everything quietly

Right

But I just couldn't

Sounded like crashing in your ears

Everything just sounded so loud. And then going on from the ears, I got tinnitus, which really affected my mental state

Yeah

Really, really, really pushed me towards the edge, actually, some points. Some of my darkest points are when my tinnitus was really bad

Yeah

I was really struggling, and I just, I just didn't know why it happened, where it came from.

Yeah

And it just came on one day, and then it just didn't stop

Right

And it was really loud, and I had all kinds of noises, all times of the day

And what does it sound like uhhhh?

It's like a hissing or a buzzing, yeah. I still get it now, but like now I can't hear it if I'm talking

Yeah

But when we'll stop and because it's in the evening

Mm hmm

I hear it when I go to bed. But at one point, you know, it really, really bothered me. Like, nothing's ever bothered me before

The light sensitivity also was scary, you know? I had, I do still have, like, if I look up now, one of the other um residual things, the head injuries, something called visual snow. It's just like a fuzziness, just like looking at static TV. So, if I look at the sky now, I just see like lots of like fuzzy dots or blurs

Right

And I've seen quite a few opticians, saw an ophthalmologist, had my eyes looked at, absolutely fine

Yeah

Nothing wrong with them at all

So

But it just came on, and I still have it now.

So, can't be explained by anything physiological?

No. I was very anxious and scared at the time. A couple of times I thought like I was gonna go back into hospital or, you know, I might have like a seizure or something like that. Everything everything was so alien to me

Mmm hmm

I was really anxious um yeah

Did you spend some time in hospital?

Only for the scans

Right

Yeah, that was it. I'd never had an MRI scan. I could have done but I was told that nothing, because it's a mild traumatic brain injury, nothing would probably show

Mmm hmm and how does that make you feel then? Like you're obviously having all these symptoms which are very real, but they can't see them they can't show you them on any sort of scan

When I've got energy, I'm so desperate to work out what the hell's going on with me

Mm hmm yeah

Yeah. I was online. I was on the Facebook group, which is amazing by the way

Mm hmm

I was, I bought some books, even though I was struggling to read audio books, podcasts, anything

Yeah. Bit of information

So when I went and saw an ophthalmologist, they, you know, didn't know about concussion

Yeah

Not many people know about concussion

No

Not many people are trained in it. GPs are the same

Yeah

I had a great GP who admitted she knew nothing about it, but worked really hard to find someone who did

We've just heard how Tim experienced a minor traumatic brain injury that resulted in his post-concussion syndrome.

Were any of your ideas about the symptoms post-concussion syndrome can cause mentioned by Tim?

One of the first things he experienced was struggling to concentrate. Another early symptom he had was dizziness and also nausea.

This was followed by post exertion fatigue, and he described how it felt like his brain was shutting down:

So once I came home from work my brain just shut down I just went to bed

He described feeling exhausted, which means to feel extremely tired.

He talked about photosensitivity, noise sensitivity and his tinnitus.

The tinnitus was what affected his mental state the most:

I got tinnitus, which really affected my mental state

Yeah

Really, really, really pushed me towards the edge, actually, some points. Some of my darkest points are when my tinnitus was really bad

Finally, he mentioned having visual snow and seeing fuzzy dots or blurs:

Its just like a fuzziness its like looking at a static TV so if I look at the sky now, I just see like lots of fuzzy dots or blurs

When your vision is fuzzy you can't see things clearly.

Overall, his symptoms made him feel anxious and scared.

You heard me ask Tim about how he felt about the fact his injury couldn't be seen. Often the difficulties caused following brain injury can't be seen by looking at a person or by completing medical tests. For this reason, you might hear brain injury described as 'a hidden disability'. One way Tim coped with this was by looking up as much information he could about head injuries. He mentioned a Facebook group with lots of information, this is called: post-concussion support group.

In addition to this the symptoms impacted on his life by him needing to sleep and rest much more than was normal for him, and he had to take time off work. To take time off means to not go to work.

In this next section Tim tells us more about his experience after his head injury.

Listen for the different health professionals Tim mentions that he worked with.

What advice was he given?

I saw an amazing um psychologist, you know, a fantastic physio after three months who really helped me

And what did the physio recommend?

(great occupational)

Well, the physio identified that I was having vestibular issues with my balance, my eyes and my sight and uh inner ear so did some exercises to improve that but also was just really good at telling me that um I need to get going. I need to get moving. You know, I hadn't got permanent damage head injuries get better.

Right

And, you know, go wasn't go sprinting, but it was trying to get on a bicycle again

Yeah

go for a swim um low stakes low threshold

Yeah

low heart rate it's I guess it's called exposure therapy

Ok

So, you expose your brain again to the activities which they are struggling to deal with

And did that go hand-in-hand with what the OT recommended so OT the occupational therapist who you worked with

We would do mapping so I would map my day

Right

And she would tell me that within the day I should have walks or exercises and you know exercises was walking to begin with

Mm -hmm

And I could not walk to the end of the road to begin with I couldn't track the cars all the lights

Yeah

The noises my brain just shut down and I had to like make it home as quickly as possible but then the end of the road became the park I remember it every day I would do one minute extra and then I got to the end of the park and I got to the end of the park and it was full of trees and the forest and it just made my head feel amazing

Yeah

And I remember one day was a real landmark I went out and I just said I'm just gonna go out

Yeah

If I crash, I'm just it was a nice day I'll just have a crash in the park and I'll just close my eyes

What do you mean when you say crash?

When I say crash it's sort of like a its like a synonym for um your brain shutting down

Mmmm

And your that you you're feeling like you have to rest immediately I have had them out and about and you just have to lie down close your eyes

Right

And they can last they used to last an hour and a half now if I have a crash maybe it's about 45 minutes an hour

So, you went from being able to run round on the hockey field for, how long's a hockey game? I don't know

So, an hour and a quarter yeah

To walking one minute down the road

Yeah

Umm so what sort of impact did that have on your self-esteem

Mmm

Because you know there is we talk a lot about health and you know how it is connected to your self-esteem but until you go through something I don't really think appreciate how closely linked they are

Hugely yeah massively and I think one of the issues is I think with my head injury I get quite irritable

Mmmm

if I'm tired and it's just like I just don't want to talk to anybody

Yeah

I just need to go into a room

Mm mm

And I think that's hard for my partner because you know I could just be cooking and then I just be like yeah fine whatever yeah just go away you know like just leave me alone for a second or and I'm not normally like that

Yeah

So, I think that was quite hard and occasionally it's still for Jess um but I think on the whole she's always has been amazingly supportive and understanding and accepting the fact that it's a long recovery

Yeah, a lot of adapting

Yeah, particularly yeah in the early stages

Yeah

So, I think now we're getting to a stage where there's less adapting and thinking about things like that but you know

Yeah, so you're saying now it's a good thing that you don't talk about it so much in your day-to-day life, but do you think it's something that we need to talk about more society needs to talk about more or

There's much more knowledge of head injuries now than there was even when I had my accident, but I noticed that often it's framed around sport

Mm hmm

And it's often high-level sport and mostly mainstream sports like football

Yeah

American football, rugby and I think there's probably not an acceptance that concussion and head injuries happen a huge amount to just

In day-to-day life

Day-to-day life normal people having falls you know I've made lots of contacts for people who have head injuries, um bicycle accidents, car accidents are probably the most common but falls sometimes there's not an acceptance within society that one thing one event that can happen to two people could have two very different outcomes

Yes

But also, the recovery will look different

Yeah

In everybody but if someone looks fine and presents fine actually what's going on is very different

Where could I as a nurse or other health care professional coming across this person they're telling me similar things to what you're describing where could I send them to get support

Um Headway probably comes to mind first which is the National Charity

Headway

Headway on head injuries so they've got a huge amount of resources and knowledge and they've worked a lot with sport as well to push for concussion substitutes and yeah their website or going to the local headway branch would be yeah would be something I would suggest you really want some something like a holistic look

Yeah

You know, somebody to look at okay what's your mental health like what physiologically is are you struggling with

Yeah

So, for me it was like vestibular, tinnitus, brain fog for instance that's why the concussion clinics although they're very rare are amazing because they're multi-disciplinary

Yeah

So, they sit down with a range of people and they say okay let's have a look at you and they can give you a program based on that

I guess essentially what we're saying is letting the patient uh explain what is their range of symptoms and appreciating that they are all unique depending on on the person and then thinking in uh as in a multi-disciplinary way what expertise can then help this patient but also that you're not going to be able to solve everything all at once so maybe asking what at that time is the most important thing to them to try and get support with

Mmm

You think, yeah

Yeah, I think so because myself at 36 now

Mmmm

Is very different to 26

Mmmm yeah yeah

So, for now my priority is to be well first and foremost a good dad and also to be at work to make sure we can afford the mortgage and I guess be there for Jess as well as a husband if I was 26 that would have been when I was playing Hockey for England that would have been my priority

Yeah, yeah

So, it would have all been about getting back to full fitness to exercising again

Yeah

So, um yeah, no I think your right it's gonna be the priority for that person at that time and that could change even for an individual over a few years

Well thank you so much for talking to me

Its ok

So openly that's so interesting to hear about your experience so really appreciate it

Pleasure

Thank you

Thanks Helena

I am so grateful to Tim for talking so honestly about his experience. I learnt a lot myself about post-concussion syndrome.

What new things did you learn about head injuries? What words and phrases were new to you today?

For example, had you heard the expression to have a crash before? I felt like Tim gave a good description of how that could feel.

Tim mentioned he worked with a physiotherapist, an occupational therapist, his GP, and a psychologist.

He mentioned how he was advised to gradually increase his activity and to do something called mapping. This is like planning your day and all the activities you need to do. It can be helpful for patients with limited energy.

He was also given exercises by a physiotherapist to help improve his balance.

I think one thing we can learn from this conversation with Tim is the professionals you work with will depend on the person and their symptoms. Also, that talking through what things are affecting our patients the most, could be a good way to start. This is where effective communication and asking open questions would be important.

Tim told us how he didn't have permanent damage from his head injury and that he is very gradually recovering. However, not all head injuries will get better in the same way. I have posted a link in the episode description to the website for the UK charity Headway, which Tim mentioned were a huge help to him. Their website is an excellent resource for further information and for some English reading practice on this topic.

Ok, so this is the end of the first episode of English practice for healthcare. Thank you so much for listening if you have any questions at all you can contact me through my website, and I'd love to hear from you about your language learning progress.

There is a link in this episode's description to the website or you can simply email me at helena@englishpracticeforhealthcare.com

If you would like updates on future episodes and more language tips you can sign up to my newsletter on the website, I'm sure at some point soon I'll also join Instagram to keep in touch that way.

And if you like the podcast, please recommend it to anyone you know who is learning English who you think would find it useful. It's a great exercise to talk about what you learnt from the episode with another English learning colleague, in English of course! So happy English Practice and I look forward to speaking to you soon! Thanks again, bye for now, bye!

