

I LOOK THE SAME BUT I'M NOT

Presenters: Ann and John Wood

If anyone would look at me on two consecutive days they would say I look the same. That would have been the case on 22nd October 1991 and 23rd October 1991. However, even though I did look the same on those two days, I was not. There was a huge unseen difference in me. What was this difference? What caused it? What were the effects on me as a person and on my relationships with my family, friends, and fellow workers?

My life up to 22nd October 1991 was filled with being a wife to John, a mother of two boys – one with a disability, and being a part-time teacher in Special Education. I was a “super Mum”, handling family and work. My qualifications included BA with a major in Psychology, and B Ed in Special Education. I was well qualified from study, work and family life to work in the field of Special Education. I was able to advise teachers, students and parents on programs, - academic and behavioural. I thought that I was knowledgeable and could assist others well in this area. At the same time, John was working as a qualified secondary teacher.

23rd October 1991 became a very significant day in my and our lives. I was on my way to work. I had just dropped off our son with a disability at his school. Next I was on my way to drop off our other son at his school, when my whole world changed in an instant. In fact, I didn't know what had happened. I remember an acquaintance saying to me “Ann, you have been in an accident ”. I have recollections of asking how our son was, of seeing a name of a shop, and, from reading my notes, of seeing the dashboard of the car.

The next thing I recall was opening my eyes, seeing John and my son standing near me and realising that I was in hospital. There were people talking to John about the physical things that had happened to me. From that day on, the difficulties that I and my family were dealing with, were enormous. The strange thing is that there was nothing that could be seen that would indicate that I had any difficulties. But I definitely did. Beside severe headaches, tiredness and pain in my neck and ribs, it was as if I was in a daze – the world was operating but I found it difficult to be connected. I had memory, language, organisational, visual and aural difficulties. Three months after the accident, a doctor I consulted who had experience in the field of brain injuries, said to me that she thought I had sustained a mild closed head injury. After testing had been done, this was verified.

Here I was, a trained teacher in the area of Special Education, being on the other side now – having to go through testing and experiencing what it really means in practical terms to have these difficulties. I was absolutely devastated. I knew I wasn't the same. I knew it was very hard for John. I wanted to be me again. I wished I had died in the accident rather than having to go through this experience. Everything was hard for me. I resented very much that my life, as I experienced it, had been taken away from me. I was absolutely mortified to have to go through testing and activities that I had asked students to go through, and realise that I had difficulty with the questions and activities. As the neurosurgeon said in a report “Mrs Wood normally is an intelligent person and as a result has insight into what she lacks”.

I gradually developed strategies to help me and my family cope with my changed capabilities. I was pushed into situations that were very difficult for me to cope with, because of my changed perception of the world. Emotionally they were also difficult to deal with. I went to CRS, did voluntary work and completed a TAFE course. Looking back, I resented being put in these situations because they were very hard and by choice I did not want to be there. Others were directing my life because I was not able to do so. I could not think well or quickly enough to intervene. Through my development and gradual awareness of how I was functioning, I began to realise that some of my experiences were similar to those of our son who had been diagnosed as being autistic. He sensed that I really could understand him. I began to realise what life had always been like for him.

I also realised that because of my experiences, I could help the adults with intellectual disabilities with whom I was now working on a voluntary basis. I began to realise that I had not lost my teaching skills, but that they were being redeveloped as I was working with these adults – at a slower pace initially. I also realised that I had a depth of experience that I could draw on and use to help others with similar difficulties. Through having done voluntary work I found that eventually I could work at a faster pace, with more people and eventually with small groups. I was also able to organise programs again. I became part of the paid work force again. Each step along the way was very difficult for me – but I got to where I am today. I now work in a Special School as a contract teacher. No-one, including neurosurgeons, psychiatrists and psychologists, ever thought that I would get as far as I have.

I would not wish this experience on anyone because it was so difficult and traumatic for me and my family. I can see now though, that because of my personal experience with disability, I can help other people. This is because not only do I have knowledge about disability, I also have an understanding beyond that. This understanding stems from working with our son. More importantly, though, it comes from having experienced myself the practical aspects of living with and operating under visual, aural, memory, language and organisational difficulties that result from a minor closed head injury. I know how these affect you personally and your relations with others. I use my experiences now when working with students, and would now like to think that I can share my and our knowledge and experience, to be of help to students, staff, parents and professionals, who deal with other people who live with these difficulties.

If you would like to know more about any aspect of our experiences – my difficulties, strategies I used, ensuing emotional difficulties and social difficulties and how they affect families and relationships, John and I would be only too happy to share our knowledge and experiences with you.

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