

### ***How Grant came back from a rugby injury and became a mental health ambassador***

It was a weekend in April 2019 and Grant came home from university to play rugby for his local team. He didn't think he'd get much time on the pitch, so he lent a friend his scrum cap. He got subbed on with twenty minutes to go. In the last ten minutes of the game, he got caught in a "stupid tackle".

"We were losing pretty heavily, it wasn't a great game and then I rucked over the ball, handed off to the nine and then a guy picked me up and dump tackled me on my neck and the back of my head and the other guy's shoulder went straight into my temple - it was kind of a two in one."

He didn't realise he had severe concussion and only found out when he went to university rugby training on the Monday. He called the hospital and was told he'd have to wait a year for a brain scan.

However, he saw an expert who told him he'd be unable to play rugby for between six months to a year. This affected both his physical health and mental health.

"You know most boys have a concussion and they come back after a few weeks, but mine knocked me completely."

"I feel that the biggest thing that knocked my mental health was that I put on loads of weight. I lost six stone a few years ago and then I put on pretty much most of it and that just knocked my confidence completely."

It also adjusted his personality: "I felt more aggressive, I would snap at my parents a lot more. But a lot of it has changed now, I'm a lot happier now than I was back then."

Since then, a lot has changed, but the pandemic brought on a new struggle for Grant – anxiety.

"I hadn't really had anxiety until the pandemic hit. My ex-girlfriend took me out for dinner with her family and I just couldn't eat the meal. I was just so scared of catching the virus."

"I couldn't go to the chemist when the Pandemic started. I was having constant panic attacks when I was going down the road to get medicine."

It didn't help that symptoms of his anxiety were similar to Covid-19 symptoms.

"My heart was beating really quickly, and I would get hot, I would get sweats and I would start getting a fever and start coughing. I would start getting Covid symptoms, which weren't actually there. But this just freaked me out completely."

Grant says that speaking about his anxiety and mental health was the best thing he did. He also says apps like Headspace which support people to practice mindfulness and meditation really helped him.

“One of the biggest things that helped me during the pandemic was poetry. I wrote a poem about anxiety and what it feels like. The way I put it was that it was like a demon inside you. You feel like you can’t breathe essentially.”

Throughout this, Grant was working towards finishing his degree and looking forward to his graduation. Sadly because of Covid-19, this went online.

After leaving university, he wasn’t sure what to do next. He signed on for benefits and his Universal Credit coach suggested he joined Street League. Grant wasn’t sure it was the right choice and how he’d fit in.

“If I’m being honest, I felt embarrassed. I thought I would be able to come straight out of university go into work and then the pandemic hit, and I didn’t get a graduation.”

“Meeting David for the first time it was quite embarrassing and a bit demoralising just because it wasn’t what I’d planned.”

His opinion changed when he met David, a Progressions Coordinator in Lanarkshire. After a few weeks of speaking to David one-to-one and getting support and advice on how to manage his anxiety, Grant joined a Street League programme.

“I did Street League and I absolutely loved it. The coaches were great, and it was very interesting to see different people coming from all different backgrounds. I especially liked it because David helped me a lot with my anxiety.”

“David is a great guy, I used to love going to meet him. It was great having chats and stuff. And the course actually opened my eyes to somethings that I’d never actually looked at before. Like how to behave in some situations in other sectors and tackle certain scenarios if I was in another job.”

However, it was still a bit daunting for Grant when he first joined.

“When I first got there, I felt like I had to put on an accent to sound like the kids that were coming up to the classroom. I’m not your typical Glaswegian. I don’t actually live in Glasgow and I stayed in Edinburgh for two years so, I’ve got more of an Edinburgh Uni accent let’s say! So, coming into that environment I was quite scared, but everyone welcomed me.”

David said: “When I first spoke to Grant, he was very quiet and didn’t give much away. As I got to know him and offered what Street League could support him with, he bought into it and loved the idea.”

“During the Academy he was very engaging and participated in daily Zoom Calls. His confidence progressed daily and as restrictions lifted, I was able to meet Grant to support him 1 to 1. After a couple of 1 to 1s, Grant was very relaxed and we discussed many topics such as sport, employment and current affairs. It is brilliant to see how much Grant has progressed - he was a pleasure to work with.”

As well as supporting Grant with his anxiety by suggesting apps and signposting services he could turn to, David also supported him with his fitness, encouraging him when he started doing Coach to 5k.

“He helped me out a lot. Not only the mental health side of it but the getting fit side of it too. When I started working with David I said I want to do something to change my life around. So I’ve lost 17kg and it’s been about six months now. So I feel a lot happier in myself that I’ve done that.”

Grant is now a regular runner and is going to be doing the Edinburgh Half Marathon for SAMH (Scottish Association for Mental Health) at the end of May. Since it has gone virtual, his route will start and end at his rugby club where his accident happened in April 2019.

“The biggest thing that helped me was to talk. There’s a hashtag which is #ItsOkToNotBeOk - that one thing that I really stand for. Especially in mental health. The biggest advice I could give is talk to people, if it’s your mum, your dad, your aunt, your sister, your brother, anyone. Just get it out there. It can be hard but there are services out there like Samaritans and HelpLine that can help you with your mental health.”

“Talk, follow your dreams and set goals to keep you going.”

Grant is now studying a Master’s in Factual Television at Stirling University. He hopes that his graduation will be able to happen in person this time.