

Diary

Craig Newnes, Director of Psychological Therapies, Shropshire

The diary page is a regular opportunity for PPA (Psychology and Psychotherapy Association) members to share thoughts on how the personal and political dimensions of their lives interweave. In December 2003, Craig was involved in a serious car accident.

You buy a car: quite naturally, everyone suddenly seems to have gone for the same model. You have an accident, head injury and broken neck and instantaneously the world is populated with people with similar stories.

AOL saleswoman: 'Oh yes, that happened to my brother. He took three years to feel right again. He still doesn't remember anything about the accident.'

Social work colleague: 'Happened to me when I was eleven. Came off bike. Went into hospital for operations to remove blood clots. Spent years seeing things in 2-D and trying to get the morphine bliss back'.

Car salesman: 'Yeah. Been there. Happened to my dad about 20 years ago. Memory was terrible for years. Much better now; driving and everything.'

Fellow diner: 'Had an op three weeks ago. Bloody anaesthesia still makes me feel drunk.'

More than this, you discover that new experiences alarming to you are commonplace: 'I walk from one room to another and forget what I was about to do.' *Everyone* replies, 'That's normal—happens to me all the time.' The psychologist says, 'Make lists, I couldn't manage without lists.' You discuss this advice with the resultant: 'Well, of course, I make lists every day.' Supermarkets suddenly become similar to Winnicott's depiction of infancy: 'Booming, babbling confusion.' Others take this in their stride: 'I hate supermarkets, all that noise, colour and choice. At least I've got money. How do people on the dole feel?' Even the comment about 2-D, when relayed, provokes empathy: 'Oh yeah. I see things in two dimensions loads of the time. It's like people suddenly become card-board cut-outs of themselves.' How about the way weekends merge with weekdays? 'Yep, I felt like that when I was unemployed.'

The wider picture evaporates. Global warming? Neither here nor there. Weapons of mass destruction? Irrelevant. British politics? *Love Actually* is more interesting. Sport? Who cares (especially about motor racing)? In this new world, environment is *everything*. People close at hand must be kind (they are—thank you all), trains as timetabled, traffic wholly safe and stimulation not too complex. Health professionals must be on time or fear and self-doubt mount. Noise must be controllable (hypersensitive hearing is quite something in conjunction with spinal injury: scraped chairs and certain pitches

of voice send the body into spasm, legs and arms twitching like lightning conductors). Imagine this on a housing estate; cars starting, people shouting, children merely playing: all innocently rendering some neighbours dysfunctional without a thought. Many know this already. It is part of their everyday life. And life, even getting out of bed, is exhausting.

So there you have it. All your new experiences turn out to be commonly understood, some are probably utterly unremarkable to the majority. A lifetime's assumptions about similarities between you and other people are shattered. The whole *idea* of consciousness, let alone shared consciousness, is challenged. One wonders how the world functions at all. If most people are this self-absorbed, scared and downright *aware*, what does this mean for the way we organise existence? And what about those who have had their consciousness (to say nothing of their physical strength, sense of taste, awareness of heat, time and danger, short-term memory, confidence, pain threshold, ability to feel emotions and even speed of movement) fundamentally changed? No doubt, I'll be meeting them soon.