

Cover story

Emotional response

A heart event can be traumatic at any age. **Sarah Kidner** talks to three people who, having experienced one in their younger years, have been on an emotional rollercoaster

Flautist Rehana Browne, 23 (pictured), feels "lucky to be alive" after suffering a **cardiac arrest** while exercising at the gym. "If I had been by myself I wouldn't have survived. Luckily, a doctor was working out next to me and she gave me CPR while staff called an ambulance.

"Not only that, but a man had walked in off the street about a half an hour before who was experiencing chest pains. The gym had called an ambulance for him, but it turned out his condition wasn't serious. This meant I got his ambulance instead and they managed to defibrillate my heart quite quickly," says Rehana, who is from London.

Doctors put Rehana, who was 22 at the time, into a medically induced coma and told her parents there was a high risk she might be brain damaged or disabled. "It's one of the most horrendous traumatic phone calls that a family can receive," says Rehana. "But when I came out of the coma I recognised my parents almost instantly. It was obvious to them that I wasn't brain damaged.

Ever optimistic:
Rehana Browne feels
lucky to be alive



BHF Professor Andrew Steptoe

Professor Andrew Steptoe is BHF Professor of Psychology at University College London (UCL). His research group focuses on understanding the biological processes through which stress and other emotions influence the cardiovascular system, and on how psychological adaptation following heart events and cardiac surgery affect long-term recovery.

Professor Steptoe worked for more than 20 years at St George's Hospital before moving his research group to UCL in 2000 with BHF support.

"I didn't feel fear when I came around at all. I remember thinking this is the state that I'm in, but it is a temporary state and it is going to be OK."

Doctors were unable to find any underlying condition but decided to fit Rehana with an **implantable cardioverter defibrillator (ICD)**^o, which would try to restore the heart to a normal rhythm if she had another cardiac arrest. "Afterwards, I felt so relieved when I heard the cardiologist say it's all gone well. I have never felt anything like it – just pure joy."

This type of outlook isn't unusual in those who have survived a cardiac event, says BHF Professor of Psychology Andrew Steptoe. "People think 'this is my only life and I really have to get on with it.' They find, to some extent, a silver lining in some of these very negative experiences."

Rehana believes her positive outlook helped her to recover. "At first I couldn't walk far, but I'd go out and walk for five minutes and build up, even if it was just a minute extra each day. On days when everything seemed too much I told myself that instead of seeing how far I had to go, I would look back and see how far I had come from when I was in hospital."

Darker days

While Rehana felt optimism, many experience depression and anxiety following a cardiac event; 15 per cent of people who have survived a **heart attack**^o become seriously depressed in the first few weeks, while another 25 per cent experience milder levels of depressive or anxiety symptoms.

Peter Wraxall, 35, was at home in Manchester when he had a heart attack. Peter says: "It was a Saturday. I woke up and I felt out of sorts; like I had really bad flu

and I was burning up, so I got a wet flannel and put it on my head and lay in bed.

"Later on at about 6pm I started to get a pain in my chest. My friend was staying at the time so I shouted to him to call an ambulance."

The cardiologist told Peter, who has suffered from **high blood pressure**^o since the age of 19, that he'd had a heart attack and, after a six-day stay in hospital, he was discharged.

Peter continued to feel unwell and the day after being discharged, he rang his friend Adnan to ask him to sit with him because he was worried about being

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on his own. As Adnan made tea, Peter had a cardiac arrest. Adnan called an ambulance and performed CPR until it arrived.

Peter was admitted to hospital for four weeks and was fitted with an ICD to help prevent further cardiac arrests. Peter was discharged but he continued to feel anxious. "I couldn't sleep in the bedroom where it had happened, so I slept on the sofa for six months," he says. "If I tried to walk past the bedroom, I would have a panic attack."

Peter became increasingly withdrawn and says he found it difficult to talk to friends, or to his mum and dad. "Some people have what we call an avoidant way of coping," says Professor Steptoe. "They don't really want to think about the problem. Some will take that to extremes in terms of not really telling their relatives



Tips to **improve** your wellbeing



- Eat a healthy, balanced diet and try to be active every day.
- Make sure you get plenty of rest.
- Take your medication following the instructions you have been given.
- If you drink alcohol, follow your medical team's advice and keep within recommended limits.
- Spend time in the open air, getting close to nature.
- Keep in touch with family and friends who can provide support and a listening ear, and can help you solve practical problems.
- Ensure you take part in activities that you enjoy, or do something you're good at to boost self-esteem.

about their experiences. This can be very difficult for members of the family.

"You have to be quite flexible in how you support the person; it's a delicate balance between being there for them when, and if, they want to talk and asking too many probing questions."

Eventually, Peter's mum took him to see his GP, who diagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder. He gave Peter medication and referred him to a professional

■ Within a few hours you go from thinking you're absolutely fine to you have got to take this medication every day"

counsellor. "The counselling was absolutely brilliant," says Peter. "It's easier to speak to someone I don't know who isn't going to judge me or get upset."

"I am a lot more positive than I was this time last year. It was still quite new to me then and I know that I was afraid of asking people for help. I am not afraid to ask now."

Peter is now hoping to return to college and continue his studies in social work.

Battling depression

Hull-based Ed Milner, 39, suffered a heart attack while visiting friends in Stockton. This led to depressive-type symptoms, which made him withdrawn.

Recalling the heart attack, he says: "It started with a burning pain in my chest and because we'd eaten



Ed Milner is looking forward to celebrating his 40th birthday this year

Heart Matters

late, I assumed it was heartburn. I got up to walk around but it just got worse and worse and worse.

"My friends were on the top floor of their townhouse and, by the time I got upstairs to ask for some help, the pain had become sharper in my chest and had gone up into my neck and shoulder. My friends called an ambulance, and when the paramedics arrived they did an *ECG*^D and faxed it through to the hospital. They told me that as soon as we got to hospital I'd be having a *stent*^D fitted."

Ed says it came as a shock, particularly as he considered he had a healthy lifestyle. "It all happened so quickly. Within the space of a few hours you go from thinking you're absolutely fine to 'you have got to take this medication every day'."

"The doctors explained what had happened and, in the days that followed, they told me about *cardiac rehabilitation*^D. It then hits home and you think 'I'm saddled with this for life'."

"If I had led an unhealthy lifestyle you'd think that's the reason but I have always been an active walker and went to the gym; I didn't smoke or drink excessively. I wasn't prepared for being off work; I couldn't drive; dealing with daily pills; and then the psychological aspect for someone at the age of 37 to have this."

Period of adjustment

It can be difficult to adjust following a heart event, says Professor Steptoe. "Many people, particularly young people who've had a heart attack, will find themselves suddenly confronted with the idea of their own risk. This requires quite a lot of psychological adjustment."

Months after his heart attack, Ed's friends commented on a change in his mood, saying he was lethargic and 'couldn't be bothered'. It made Ed step back and consider how well he was coping.

"From the point my friends mentioned it, I thought 'Actually you're right'."

Withdrawing is another common reaction, explains Professor Steptoe: "Some people have quite severe psychological reactions to a heart event. In particular, you tend to get quite high levels of depressive symptoms. These might include withdrawing from social situations and feelings of hopelessness."

Understanding people's emotional reactions to a heart event is an essential part of the recovery process, says Professor Steptoe. "People with

depressive symptoms are more likely to have recurrent cardiac problems. There's a lot of concern at the moment as to how that link takes place and what we can do about it."

Psychological and emotional factors

As well as carrying out detailed lab research looking at the biological processes through which psychological factors might influence *coronary heart disease*^D risk, Professor Steptoe and his team conduct clinical studies of people who have had a heart attack or cardiac surgery and look into their emotional experiences.

As for Ed, he says his friends' comments helped him to "draw a line" and embrace a new start: "I tend to look now to the positives. The fact that this has happened to me at a young age means that I have the chance to turn things around."

"I'm going to be 40 this year, as are many of my friends, and I'm looking forward to celebrating." ■

■ Read Rehana's full story at bhf.org.uk/HMrehana.

Support from the BHF

The BHF offers a range of publications, which you can download at bhf.org.uk/HMpublications or order by calling 0870 600 6566, including *Heart attack*, *Primary angioplasty for a heart attack* and *Implantable cardioverter defibrillators (ICDs)*. Our new booklet *Heart to heart* offers support for coping with the emotional effects of a heart event. For details of more booklets and their order codes, see our directory on page 50.

To find out about more than 300 BHF-affiliated Heart Support Groups in England and Wales, go to bhf.org.uk/heartsupport.

You can also call our Heart Matters Helpline on 0300 330 3300 or email heartmatters@bhf.org.uk.

For help with anxiety, visit anxietyuk.org.uk or call 08444 775 774. For help with depression, visit mind.org.uk or call 0300 123 3393.

