

Ty's story

I'd like to thank Nick Rushworth for asking me to deliver the opening address at this incredibly important conference.

I will be sharing with you the story of my son, Ty. Although his is a sad story, it is an important story that deserves attention.

Most people would describe Ty as sensitive, generous, compassionate, a little eccentric with a quirky sense of humour. A boy that struggles a little to make friends, but extremely loyal to those who take the time to get to know him. He is also greatly admired as a pianist. At school he was an average to above average student in most subjects, with a real flare for Mathematics.

Many would also describe Ty as a thrill seeker and a great sportsman like his adored brother – an accomplished basketball player, a keen surfer and skateboarder and a lover of ALL codes of football.

The Concussion

In early April of 2012, Ty was 15 years old and playing Rugby Union for a local club.

It was the start of the season and the team he was playing that day had been at the top of the league the year before. Their players were much bigger and stronger than the boys in Ty's team. They were by no means a rough team, but they were skilled footballers and fierce competitors. Ty was wearing his head gear and shoulder pads – something I constantly nagged him about because the other teams always seemed to be twice Ty's size.

It was 3 or 4 minutes before the end of the game. Ty had the ball and he was running for the try line when one of the bigger, faster opponents knocked him to the ground. Ty appeared to be out cold. The referee stopped the game and his coach ran to his side and immediately called the First Aid Officer over and they were milling around Ty for a few minutes. My instinct, of course, was to race over there, but one of the father's and a good friend of ours encouraged me to wait – he reassured me that if it was serious, they would come and let me know. It wasn't long before Ty stood up and continued to play the last few minutes of the game. He maintained his position and kept running around until the whistle blew.

At the end of the game, I asked Ty if he felt ok and he said he was fine. I asked if he was knocked out and he just laughed and said no. He was eager to go and hang out with his team

mates, so I let him go. The coach and first aid officer didn't seem too concerned either and so I guessed it wasn't as bad as it looked.

About an hour later when we were at home, Ty said he was **tired** and wanted to lie down. I was a little alarmed, because Ty was never tired during the day. I knew that tiredness, headaches, nausea and dilated pupils were warning signs of a concussion that required attention, so I was a little concerned. I encouraged him to sit quietly with some **friends** and watch a movie and afterwards he sparked up and he was back to his normal bubbly self. But later in the day, he said he was tired again and wanted to lay down because he had a **headache**. That really concerned me and so I raced him up to an After Hours Surgery.

The **doctor** who examined Ty announced that it appeared Ty had suffered a concussion or a 'pretty serious brain rattle'. He told us that Ty should not play football for 6-8 weeks. I was quietly thrilled at this news because I knew the season would be almost over by then! I never really liked Ty playing football because although he was tall, he was thin and a little lanky and more often than not, came home with one injury or another – but he loved his football and was so proud to be a part of the team. I asked the doctor if there was anything else we should do but he just encouraged me to keep an eye on him and if I had any concerns over the coming days, I should take him to see his regular doctor. I assumed he was referring to dilated pupils, nausea, fatigue and headaches.

On the way home, I asked Ty if he remembered what happened when he was knocked to the ground and he said "All I remember is that big guy running into me and then I looked up and everyone was staring down at me". A little baffled, I said, "But you got up and started playing again" and he said "I know, but I couldn't see anything mum, I was just **blank**".

So, he DID lose consciousness, I thought to myself.

I kept a close eye on Ty for the next week or so, but he appeared to be fine. He was happy to go to school and he played basketball the following Friday night, went surfing on the weekend and hung out with his friends. I stopped worrying, but I insisted he was not playing football for the next 6 weeks. His coach was surprised, but fully supported this decision and we agreed that Ty could go to the training sessions as long as there was no physical contact.

In a matter of weeks after the concussion, or 'brain rattle', Ty's behaviour started to shift slightly – he was occasionally **irrational** or **reactive** and every now and again there was an **emotional outburst** that seemed to come from nowhere. This change was noticeable because Ty was usually so happy and easy going. I didn't pay too much attention to this because my husband, not long out of university, had just taken up a teaching post for the year in Western

Queensland which meant he had to live away from us till the end of the year. This was a difficult decision for us because we were a close family, but our older son was in Year 12 and Ty had just started at a new school that year and so my husband and I decided it would be too disruptive for us all to go. My husband came home every second weekend and we skyped regularly, but the boys and I missed him terribly. My husband and I figured that Ty was just **acting out** because he was missing his dad. After all, he was a sensitive boy and the hormonal changes of his teenage years were no doubt kicking in.

About a month after Ty's concussion, in late April or early May, I came home from work one afternoon and saw a rope with a noose hanging from our carport beam. I raced inside and found Ty in his room and he told me his brother had gone over to his girlfriend's house. I was baffled as to why the rope was out there and so I asked Ty if he knew who had put it there, but he just shrugged his shoulders and said "I don't know". He didn't seem himself and I asked if he was ok and he said he was fine, but I knew that something wasn't right – I just couldn't put my finger on it though. Then I remembered the local boy who had committed suicide only a few months earlier – Ty and his brother were still quite shaken by this, as was the whole community, because he was a such a well liked boy. My mind raced back to the rope outside and I became scared and confused. I jumped in the car with Ty and we raced over to get his brother so I could talk to them both about the rope. Ty's brother was just as surprised and confused as I was, and so I dropped him back at his girlfriend's place. On the way home in the car, Ty said "Mum, I have to tell you something....it was me". When I asked why, he said "I don't know. I just felt **really, really sad**. I **can't** even **remember** doing it, I just went **blank** and then I saw what I was doing and I ran inside. That's when you came home".

'BLANK' – I remember thinking at the time, 'what an unusual word to use'. Even more unusual though, was the fact that Ty had used that very same word to describe his concussion. Sadly, I missed this incredibly significant connection at the time because all I was focused on was my son's well-being and getting the right help for him.

I took Ty to see a **psychologist** soon after and she referred us on to another psychologist at the local hospital's **Mental Health Clinic**. We had only one consultation and the psychologist spent a long time asking Ty all sorts of questions. She called me soon after, about a day or two later, and said that after a thorough assessment and further consultations with her colleagues, she could not identify any alarming signs of **suicidal tendencies** that indicated Ty was in danger of another attempt and mentioned that 'copycat' behaviour is not uncommon after a suicide happens in a community – I understood what she meant because there had been a documentary about this on the ABC. I was instantly flooded with a sense of relief; I had been told what any mother wants to hear – that her child is ok. I reminded Ty how much we

loved him and how important it was to let me or *someone* know if he was feeling that sad again and he promised he would.

The **erratic behaviour** did continue though. There were sudden **mood swings** and occasional **outbursts of rage** that seemed to have no trigger. On one occasion, it was so upsetting that I called my husband and said, “I don’t know what to do, it’s like he’s not even my son when he’s like that”. I was so confounded because I could not work out the trigger OR the solution for him. I asked if he would like to visit the psychologist again, but he refused to go.

Around this same time, Ty also complained about his bedroom being too bright and said that the **light** coming through the white curtains **hurt his eyes**. He started putting a towel or a sheet over the top of his curtains to darken the room. His room was very bright and I remember thinking that I should buy some darker curtains for him when we had the money.

Over the next few months, Ty’s school work started to slip a little as well. He was easily **distracted** and struggled to complete even the most **simple of tasks** that were once a breeze for him. There was one instance when he had a fairly simple music history assignment to do – all that was required was a brief biography of a famous musician and some chronological details of their musical accomplishments. Ty never had any trouble doing these kind of assignments, but this time he was struggling to get anything down on paper. After a while, I sat with him and was almost spoon feeding him the information he needed – I was getting frustrated because he kept saying to me it was too hard but I knew it wasn’t. I remember snapping at him because I thought he was just being lazy, but then he screamed “You just don’t get it. I can’t do it anymore”. I could tell he was frustrated with himself and me and he was visibly upset. I felt terrible, but I was also confused because it just didn’t make any sense.

About 5 months after the concussion, Ty was getting involved in some **risky behaviour** – nothing too serious, but enough for us to worry about where it could lead to if we didn’t step in. This included sneaking out at night and smoking marijuana. One night, after I caught him doing this, he told me quite honestly that he started smoking dope because it helped him to stop thinking about stuff. I remember feeling a little baffled because apart from his dad being away, he had an idyllic life – he liked his school, he had lots of family and good friends close by, he surfed every weekend and was enjoying his basketball and the football training. Again, we were convinced that the concerning changes in Ty’s behaviour were associated with our disruptive living circumstances and there was no doubt he was really missing his dad. After seeking approval from the school, we asked Ty if he would like to spend the last term at the school where his dad was working. We said how great it would be for him to keep his dad company up there and he would even be in some of his dad’s classes. Ty liked this idea and he really did seem to enjoy it up there, but he continued to struggle with his school work at times. **My husband** recalls feeling baffled one evening because Ty was unable to do some

simple maths he had mastered long ago. Like me, he remembers thinking how strange it was that Ty was unable or *unwilling* to complete the set task. My husband was not too concerned though – he just put this down to Ty adapting to his new school environment. My husband and I had not thought to mention our concerns about Ty’s school work to each other at the time. We were more concerned about his happiness and well being.

Ty had a girlfriend while he was up north and it was lovely to watch his blossoming romance. However, we were told later by the girl’s mother that Ty’s behaviour had been very erratic towards her – one week he would be happy and friendly and the next he would be **withdrawn** and would hardly speak to her. The mother was upset because Ty’s mood swings were so confusing and upsetting for her daughter.

In December – 8 months after Ty’s concussion – my husband’s contract ended and our family was under the one roof again. I was so happy and relieved because things were finally back to normal. One evening, not long after they came home, I gave Ty a big hug in our lounge room and he looked down at me and said, “Mum, I’m **not the same person I used to be**”. I remember feeling so incredibly proud of him at that moment. It had been a tough year for both him and his brother. I thought this was his way of telling me how grown up he was.

A week later, after chatting to the boys about what food they wanted us to buy for Christmas lunch, my husband and I went off to do the final Christmas shop. Not long after we left, Ty walked out of our home with his surfboard under his arm. Four days later, he was found hanging from a tree in the bushland near his favourite surf spot. He had committed suicide.

Shock, despair, horror, grief, confusion, helplessness...this scarcely describes the overwhelming wave of emotions that not only swept through our family but through our whole community. No one could believe that this beautiful, strong, healthy, vibrant boy who had everything to live for, was gone, forever.

It just didn’t make sense to anyone.

Our broken family coped as best we could. My husband and I knew it was futile and destructive to spend our whole life questioning the ‘why’s’ and focusing on the ‘what if’s’. Our older son, who had been so brave and emotionally intelligent throughout this whole ordeal, had become our role model and our sole reason to move forward instead of getting stuck in the past – our mantra had become: it is what it is.

The link

About a year on from Ty's tragic death, I was half heartedly watching a biopic on Michael Hutchence and there was a short interview with a doctor who explained the possible after effects resulting from a head injury that Hutchence had suffered. My mind INSTANTLY flashed back to Ty's concussion because there were some alarmingly clear parallels. At the time though, I was still coming to terms with our tragic loss and everything was just too raw, so I just blocked this out, as quickly as I could. I reminded myself: it is what it is.

Last year however, I was working my way through a series of Ted Talks and I was up to a talk by Jane McGonigal: *The game that can give you 10 extra years of life*. It was an interesting talk, but what struck me was when she briefly spoke about a serious head injury she had suffered and the after effects on her mental health. I felt like I had been hit by a lightening bolt because the behavioural and emotional changes she talked about were chillingly similar to those we had seen in Ty. I was in a state of shock for quite a few days and I kept going back to the talk, again and again just to make sure I was hearing right. I was so conflicted because the agony of losing Ty was only just beginning to ease and the thought of sifting through those memories of that last year of Ty's life was almost too much to bear. However, I felt compelled to research just a little so I could dispel what was surely nothing more than a coincidence.

Although sceptical at first, my analytical nature drove me to read as much as I could – I was shocked at just how much literature there was on concussion and mental illness. I read research papers, journal articles, newspaper stories and documentary scripts. The most powerful of these was a transcript from a 2014 documentary called 'concussion games' on ABC TV's Four Corners, with neurosurgeon, Dr Richard Parkinson. My scepticism began to wane.

It took me a long time to work up the courage to cast my mind back to the time frame between Ty's concussion and the onset of the behavioural changes that had baffled us all those years ago – it was like opening up a wound that had only just begun to heal and I was reluctant to tell my husband, but he had a right to know. Over the next few months, we both started experiencing flashbacks of Ty's final year – we recalled so many little things he had said and done and when we calculated the timing there was no denying the link – EVERY concerning behavioural change had occurred post concussion.

It was like a jigsaw puzzle slowly coming together, piece by painful piece. Each isolated behaviour, when placed together with all the other behaviours created a very clear picture:

The tiredness...

headaches

blank moments or memory loss

irrational and reactive behaviour

emotional outbursts

extreme sadness

suicidal tendencies

erratic behaviour

mood swings

outbursts of rage

sensitivity to light

being distracted

struggling to do simple tasks

risky behaviour

withdrawing from people

feeling different...

These are ALL well-documented signs of post concussion syndrome and Ty exhibited ALL of these signs at one time or another but only AFTER his concussion.

We shared our discovery with our close friend and he recalled that there had been another concussion at a game the year before that we didn't go to. He said it was not as severe as the concussion he witnessed with me in 2012 but it was still a hard knock. We also realise now that it is likely that Ty had other injuries to the head, given his love of sport. He was once hit in the head by a surfboard which required stitches and I'm sure he had countless falls while skateboarding and mountain bike riding. He also played soccer and rugby league as well as rugby union and I'm sure he concealed some of those injuries, knowing my aversion to high contact sports

I cannot substantiate the link between Ty's concussion and the behavioural changes that led to his suicide, but there is no doubt in my mind that the connection was real. Sadly, the evidence stacks up.

Knowing this has IN NO WAY made our loss any easier – in many ways it is much much harder – especially when we consider the inner turmoil and anguish Ty endured, and how

scared, confused and alone he must have felt, especially given that no one around him, including myself, recognised some very clear signs of post-concussion syndrome. It was just so easy to dismiss them as typical hormonal changes in a teenage boy.

The lesson

Well, I did tell you this was a sad story! And I can assure you it's a story I was reluctant to share with ANYONE until Nick encouraged me to speak up.

I also said this was an important story, and this is why. We cannot change our past BUT we can certainly learn from it in order to make a better future for others.

So, here is what I have learned:

It's quite possible that my son might still be here today:

- if only I and my family and friends had been better educated about concussion and the signs and symptoms of post concussion syndrome
- if only Ty had been better educated about concussion and the signs and symptoms of post concussion syndrome
- if only the referee, the coach and the first aid officer had been given appropriate training in treating players who suffer a concussion
- if only the doctor at the AHS had known to say to Ty and me 'if you notice any unusual behaviour changes, Ty might have post concussion syndrome and you should get this checked out – or even if he had just given us a comprehensive information sheet about this'
- if only the psychologist and the other Mental Health Clinic workers had known to ask 'has Ty suffered any concussions or other head injuries?'

Of course NO ONE is to blame for my son's suicide. Ty was loved and cared for enormously during the tumultuous period post concussion – by his family, his friends, his sporting clubs and by the medical professionals who treated him. We know that. But we also know that the connection between concussion and mental health issues is real and this is backed up by substantial evidence.

So NOW we have a choice. We can either ignore the evidence, as I TRIED to do – and like many others still try to do – OR we can take action. Not by shutting down popular contact sports like football, but by treating concussion seriously and by ensuring that post concussion care and treatment is informed by the compelling data and research that we discovered far too late and quite by accident. We owe this to Ty and to our communities.