

Keeping a sense of humour after being diagnosed with epilepsy

NICHOLAS MCBRIDE

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Murray Wilson/ Fairfax NZ.

From left, Val Kirk, Geordie Gordon, John Murphy, Christine McChesney,

An epilepsy diagnosis can mean no more driving, difficulty getting a job and anxiety attacks, but a group in Levin are keeping their sense of humour.

November marks Epilepsy NZ's awareness campaign "Talk About It", encouraging conversations and learning about the condition.

At least 47,000 people in New Zealand have epilepsy, with about six new diagnoses a day.

Epilepsy affects the brain and can result in seizures that vary in time and include vigorous shaking.

For Christine McChesney, Geordie Gordon, Val Kirk and John Murphy, their diagnoses have been life changing.

Murphy, 22, had his first seizure at 18.

"It has pretty much turned my life around.

"It is almost virtually impossible for me to get work. The reality is I'm going to be on the benefit for the rest of my life."

Murphy said he struggled to get work because he could not drive.

McChesney, 49, has lived with epilepsy since she was 7 years old and has suffered a variety of different types of seizure.

The most severe were drop attacks.

"All of a sudden you just faint. You hit the ground and that's it.

"I have probably got a road map [of scars] on the back of my head."

Like a black out, they had no idea happened during the episode.

"You come round, you get up and carry on."

Attacks could be set off by stress or even changes in temperature.

McChesney has suffered burns, after she was making coffee and spilt hot water over herself.

Her epilepsy had also brought on anxiety.

"I was walking into town and I had to turn around. It felt like tunnel vision."

Despite the limitations the condition brings, she said it was important not to let it beat them.

"If you let it rule you, you're not going to get anywhere.

"You've got to have a positive attitude and a good sense of humour."

Gordon said his first seizure was in 2009.

"I went out to the car in the shed and don't know what happened. I was walking around the car. I knew something was wrong. I could not find the door to get in."

He no longer drives and does not shower when no one else is around.

"I don't drive because I don't want to kill anyone."

While many people were understanding and supportive, there was still a stigma.

"It is really hard because you want to be productive and helpful to the community, not just a burden," Gordon said.

Despite what he was going through, he did not always show it.

"You can't tell what someone is going through by looking at them.

"Humour is what gets us through."

- Stuff