EPILEPSY NEW ZEALAND
Kia titiro ki te tangata | See the person

Briony's story



BACK ON THE ROAD TO EMPLOYMENT

Briony Gleeson is a wonderful example of how someone with epilepsy can regain control of their health and their livelihood and return to employment.

Briony, originally from Wodonga, was just 13 when she had her first tonic-clonic seizure. "There was and is, still to this day, no known cause for my epilepsy – it's not in my family at all. I manage it with medication on a day-to-day basis, but unfortunately, I haven't gone for more than eight months without a seizure. What makes my seizures so dangerous is that I don't get an aura and don't feel them coming on. This means I can have them at anytime, anywhere."

Growing up, Briony was surrounded by a wonderful support network of family, friends and her sporting and school communities. Her epilepsy didn't stop Briony from pursuing her passion for basketball, where she represented both her hometown and Country Victoria.

Briony's epilepsy has continued into adulthood and, in 2016, she began having seizures on a weekly basis. This resulted in her being admitted into hospital to undergo tests to determine what was causing this sudden increase in seizure activity.

"My seizures became so bad that I had to leave my job. I was working long hours in a high-pressure environment. My seizures are triggered by stress and lack of sleep; the more seizures I had, the more time I had to take off work. It wasn't sustainable. I had work commitments that I couldn't meet, so I had to leave."

While in hospital, Briony was taken off all anti-epileptic medication to try to induce a seizure. "I

was calm in hospital. It was the perfect environment because there were no stressors and nothing hindering my sleep, so I didn't have a seizure. It was a relief to not be having seizures constantly, but also frustrating because without a seizure occurring while I was in hospital my neurologist didn't have any data to review. As a result, the only change was to my medication."

Following her release from hospital, Briony didn't work for six months while she adapted to the new medication. "During that time, I was lucky enough to be introduced to Epilepsy Foundation Australia via my current employer. They welcomed me with open arms. They asked me if I wanted to do some volunteer work, which they felt would help me adjust to getting back to work. I volunteered my human resources skills and knowledge to the Foundation and I couldn't have asked for a better environment to reintroduce me into the workforce."

"I am now working full time in business administration at a strategic advisory and lobbyist firm. Fortunately, I now manage my seizures and I work for people who understand my condition and everything that it comes with it. They have made returning to full time work as easy as I could have hoped for. I can't thank them enough."

Now 32, Briony's seizures are well-managed by medication, although she still gets the occasional seizure, from which it can take her a day or two to recover.

She says she has been fortunate to have a supportive network. "Even going through high school I was lucky to be surrounded by wonderful family and friends. I consider myself very fortunate to have had continuing support into adult life, not only from my already established support network, but now from my employer and the Epilepsy Foundation."

"Volunteering with the Foundation helped give me the confidence to go back into full time work."

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