

# a brief history of my concussions

I don't look like an athlete or a dancer, although I used to be one. And I'm what my outpatient psychiatrist called high-functioning. I'm very good at some things: public speaking, planning parties, writing poems. But I can't memorize performances, I can't get up too quickly, and I can't go on the Mindbender at West Edmonton Mall four times in a row anymore.

Here's what I know: brain injuries change people. Concussions, or mild traumatic brain injuries, are denoted by any force that shakes your brain up inside your skull. Think of your brain as a gumball. Each time you collide with a soccer ball or sidewalk, it's like you're biting down just a little – the shell of the gumball starts to crack. Sometimes, your brain heals quickly, between seven to ten days. But for some people concussions are life-altering, where a single blow changes your processing and behaviour—the gum chewed up. For years, we thought concussions did not leave marks or evidence on MRIs and scans.<sup>8</sup> I've heard that three or more can lead to a serious condition called post-concussive syndrome. I've had eleven. My gumball is getting a little stringy.



And those are the ones I remember. My primary source material is polluted, tainted by imperfect memory. And although I tell myself that memory loss is common, I still feel the frustration: what hurts? Everything. How did it happen? I don't know. At my first concussion I was happy to skip class. By my sixth, I lost consciousness. Then the migraines. By my eleventh I started losing language. Words and feelings aching together.

Concussions have affected the way I think, move, and sleep. And some of these changes don't go away in two weeks. If you're wondering, my symptoms included but were not limited to:<sup>11</sup>

Dizzy / Confused / Irritable / Can't sleep / Headache / Sleepy / Nervous or anxious / Sleeping poorly / Sick to the stomach  
Dizzy / Confused / Irritable / Can't sleep / Headache / Sleepy / Nervous or anxious / Sleeping poorly / Sick to the stomach  
Can't think / More emotional / Sleeping too much / Pressure in the head / Can't remember  
Can't think / More emotional / Sleeping too much / Pressure in the head / Can't remember  
Feeling foggy / Trouble with balance / Tired or low energy / Sad  
Feeling foggy / Trouble with balance / Tired or low energy / Sad  
Sensitive to light or noise / Blurry vision  
Sensitive to light or noise / Blurry vision

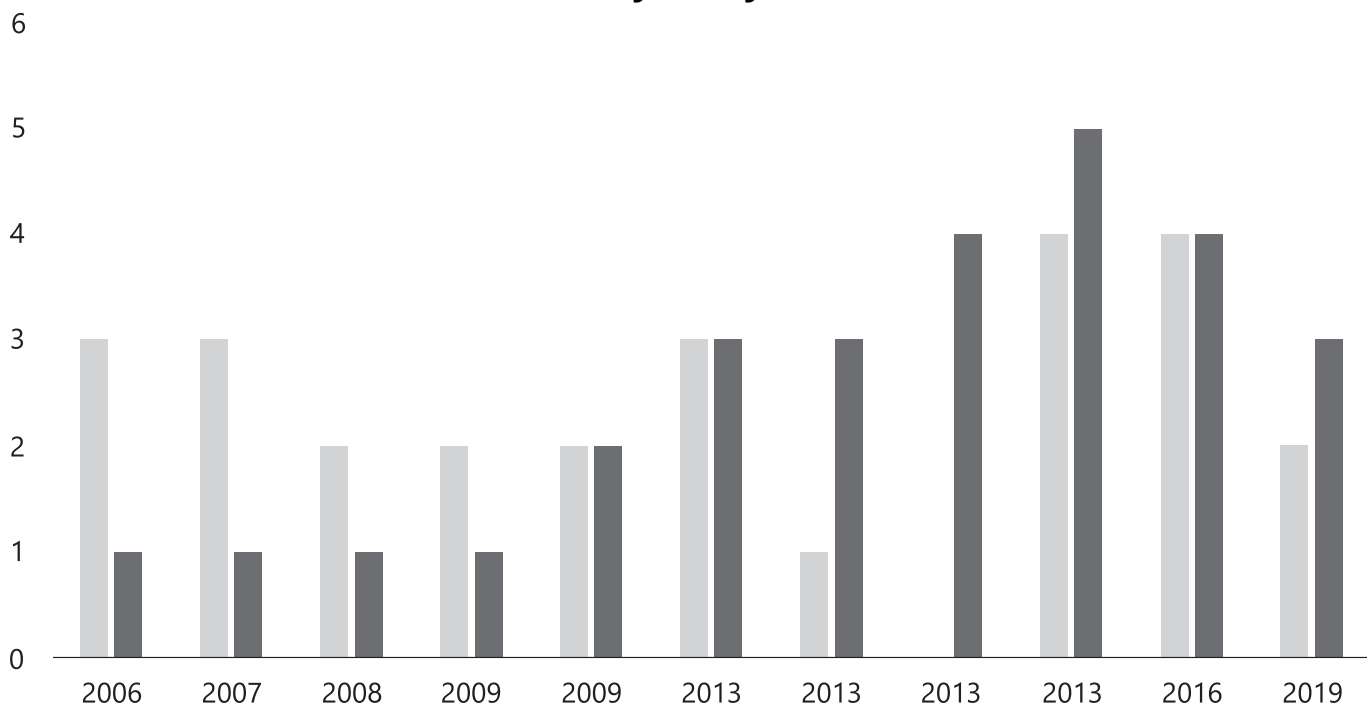
concussions feel like:

- a verbal blindfold
- gauze around the tongue
- aching
- seconds split into seconds and seconds and seconds
- faltering
- viscous spinal fluid
- the need for more time to do less



Sports are the second leading cause of concussion between ages 15 – 24 years old.<sup>10</sup> It's been nearly fifteen years since I first took a ball to the head and literally lost my senses.

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Force Required to Cause Injury Scale



Length of Recovery



- 0 no force/non-injurious force
- 1 moderate contact with a person, object, or surface
- 2 moderate to major contact
- 3 major contact with a person, object, or surface
- 4 major to extreme contact
- 5 extreme contact with a person, object, or surface

- 1 1-3 days to recover
- 2 3-7 days to recover
- 3 7-14 days to recover
- 4 14-28 days to recover
- 5 28+ days to recover

<sup>9</sup> a note: brain tissues taken from dead vets and footballers tells us, basically, that there is scarring, from concussions, on the tissue itself. tighter folds. more protein. tighter squiggles.

*I remember the sound and the smell and the sight – green artificial turf. Blue Adidas. The musk of sweaty knee socks. The sports concussions were the most acceptable. And the lights, whiter than I'd ever seen them, white as the tunnel's end, suddenly whiting out everything else around me. The lights are the most familiar – they have revisited me every injury, since. Some days if I move too quickly from the desk or the car, I get flashes that they're still haunting my body, that I am their chosen house.*

I don't look like an athlete anymore. I have a jaw disorder, I can't remember my own schedule, and I'm a disabled diabetic.

Head into [ ] wall  
Soccer ball to [ ] face  
Knee to [ ] head  
Soccer ball to [ ] head  
Elbow to [ ] head  
Blow to [ ] head  
Collision with [ ] open door  
Collision with [ ] car door  
Soft blow to [ ] head  
Bicycle crash  
Volleyball to [ ] head

I have trouble with cognition, and my migraines leave me crying in a dark room, overwhelmed by light, sound, and smell. I can't think. I can't think. I am meaner and sensitive.

I looked up the cost of epilepsy helmets once, and whether they came in a fashionable variety (they do not). They're also expensive and bulky, and invite too many questions. The science is certain - just don't get hit in the first place.

The folds of my brain will only show trauma when sliced thin. They will have to cut me open. It is "interesting" the research says. I am "interesting".

*A nurse at the University Clinic is convinced my boyfriend is beating me (he isn't) because his fist has connected with my head. It results in a severe impairment for the next three months. The gauzy haze returns. Concussions six through nine, arguments 1 to 100. The doctor prescribes nortriptyline, an out-of-use anti-depressant to combat the screaming migraines that take over my brain every week. I am sick. I fail my courses, and withdraw, unable to access higher-level cognitive functioning. So many words for my brain failing to get to work.*

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Subject Number	Title	Grade
B LAW 444	INT'L BUSINESS	C+
FIN 301	INTRO TO FINANCE	W

# SHELL SHOCK

Concussions are not new. Your war-time ancestors had been fighting my fight with their own bodies. If you close your eyes, you can hear the reverberations through the last 100 years.

*“Shell shock” - psychological disturbance caused by prolonged exposure to active warfare, especially being under bombardment, originating in WW1.<sup>1</sup>*

In 2016, *National Geographic*<sup>5</sup> writes about the unravelling of the mystery of what causes shell shock and it’s seemingly injury-less symptoms. In wartime, military doctors ruled it a weakness of emotions and constitution, often dishonourably discharging it’s sufferers.<sup>2</sup> Symptoms included: **fatigue, tremor, confusion, nightmares and impaired sight and hearing.**<sup>3</sup>

Autopsies of the cerebral cortex have revealed that veterans exposed to denotations today suffer from post-concussive symptoms.

“From the earliest years of the Iraq campaign, military personnel exposed to blast reported symptoms that included **headache, sleeplessness, problems with memory and concentration, mood disorders** such as anger and depression, and impulsiveness.”<sup>5</sup>

# PUNCH DRUNK

Maybe some of the roaring 20s had something to say about concussions too.

*“punch drunk” - stupefied by or as if by a series of heavy blows to the head.<sup>13</sup>*

A condition popularized in the 1920’s for boxers, who suffered from chronic concussions.

In 2002, Dr. Omalu would discover evidence of trauma in autopsied brains, naming the condition Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE).<sup>4</sup>

**memory loss, confusion, impulsive behaviour, bad judgment, depression, aggression, paranoia, dementia.** what could be me.

*Post-concussion treatment, suicide prevention ‘a team sport,’ says lead researcher<sup>12</sup>*

**A REAL KNOCK OUT**

The British Army medics once wrote that “it is demonstrated that ‘shell-shock’ has been a gross and costly misnomer...the war produced no new nervous disorders”<sup>6</sup>

A century later, the NFL would take from the same playbook to argue that “there is no known history of brain trauma inside professional football”.<sup>7</sup> They were wrong.

there are no cures. short-term solutions are rest

long term solutions are ????

where does that leave me? I have a heavy brain, a fragile living thing that is trying so hard to keep itself alive. it is flawed. I have not protected it as well as I could have. on Instagram, I chat with an author who debuted a book of poetry, half written pre-concussion, and half written post-concussion. she told me of a new therapy for people like her (because she does not know she is talking about people like *us*). insurance will cover treatment if you are on government-sanctioned long-term disability. I thought about how I am high-functioning, and about how disability funding is legislated poverty, putting caps on money you earn. without it, the treatment is \$20,000. I didn't ask what it was.

I think if I had military dollars, what I'd do after ending the wars would be to cut open my own brain. the hungry scientists are as eager to get inside it than I am to get out of it.

and when they'd spit me to the sidewalk, to be crushed beneath shoe, I would ask:

are the effects of my concussions

reversible

compounding

decreasing with age

increasing with age

why I'm such an asshole

related to my mood disorder

related to my anxiety

preventable in the future

improved with yoga

passable to my children

part of being disabled

forever?

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