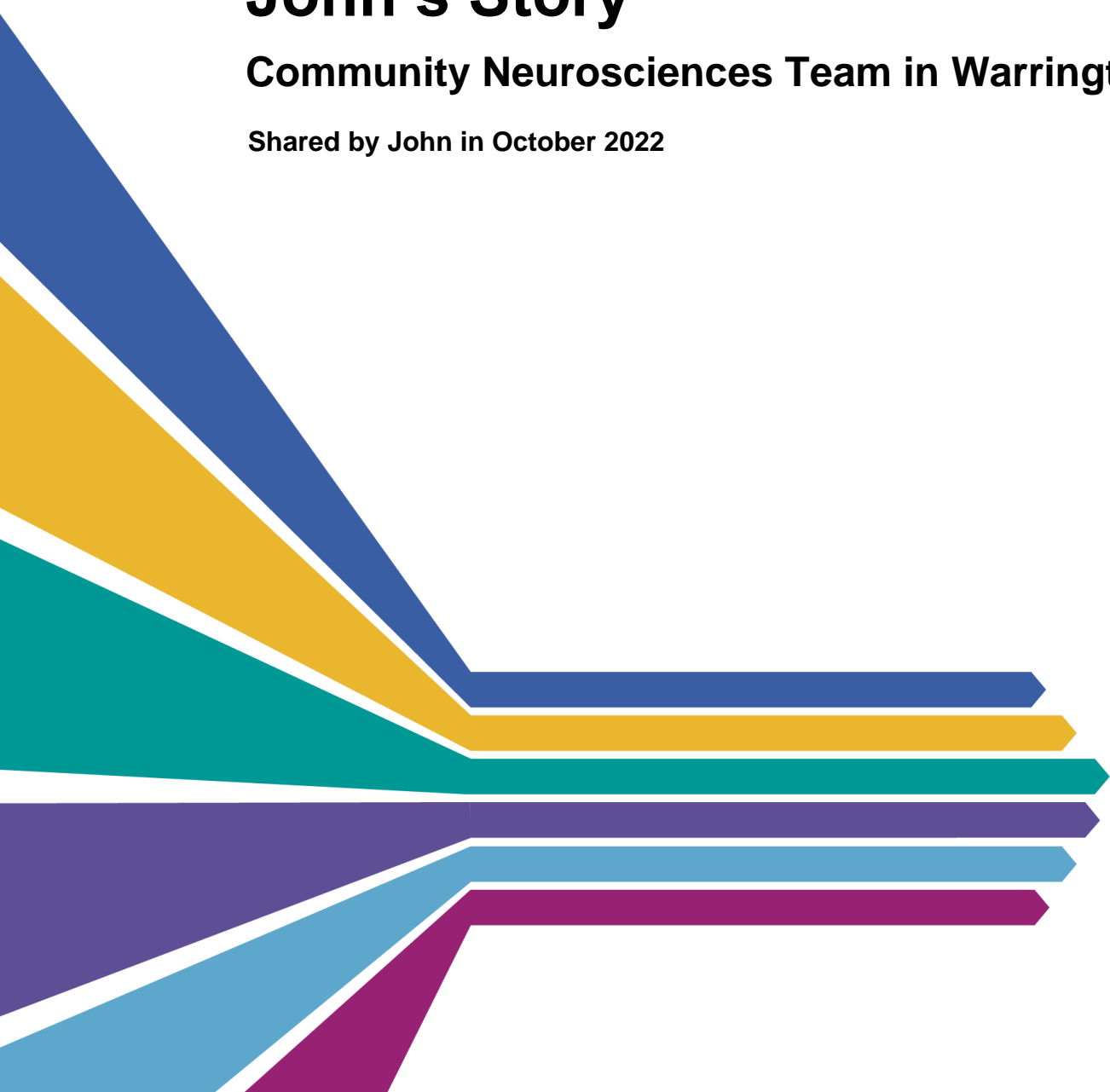


John's Story

Community Neurosciences Team in Warrington

Shared by John in October 2022



John lives with his family in Warrington and, after a diagnosis of RRMS (Relapsing-Remitting Multiple Sclerosis), he struggled with his mental health and his relationships with those most important to him – his wife and children. Discovering ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy) with Dr Lydia Rizopoulos at the Warrington Community Neurosciences Team started John on a life-changing journey of self-discovery.



In November 2006, John was diagnosed with RRMS (Relapsing-Remitting Multiple Sclerosis). Multiple Sclerosis is a lifelong condition that can affect the brain and spinal cord, causing symptoms such as problems with vision, arm or leg movement, sensation or balance. For people with RRMS, they will have periods of new or increasing neurologic symptoms followed by periods of partial or complete recovery.

John had been struggling with his mental health around this diagnosis for many years, particularly with anger and frustration as well as a yearning for his past life. He wanted to improve aspects of his family and social life. He describes himself as having become ‘addicted to work’ and that his dream job became an escape from reality.

During this time, John attended a couple of mental health programmes which he found helpful. He was encouraged to re-start martial arts and going to the gym, activities he had previously enjoyed but which he’d come to believe were impossible to do following his diagnosis. He began trying to open up to his wife and friends and he left his dream job to give himself time away to re-discover who he was.

However, John still described himself as having re-occurring feelings of frustration and lows about his diagnosis as well as a desire to further heal the once close relationship he had with his wife and children. Then, in December 2018, John had his first multiple sclerosis relapse in 10 years. He describes not knowing how to mentally overcome this unexpected relapse, worsened by isolating during lockdown and being unable to do activities that had helped him to cope.

John was referred to the Warrington Community Neurosciences Team by a Physiotherapist at Warrington and Halton hospitals and, in January 2022, John began ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy) with Dr Lydia Rizopoulos, Chartered Psychologist.

“I have found new passion in my life that keeps me in equilibrium. ACT is life changing”

At first, John found it hard not to focus on what was going wrong but, together, he and Dr Rizopoulos began a values exercise – looking at who John truly was and what was important in his life. John credits Dr Rizopoulos for guiding him through this journey of self-discovery and encouraging him to focus on his values, saying that this was key to making the therapy so successful.

Over several months, John and Dr Rizopoulos looked at different techniques he could use, including diffusion techniques to help move on mentally from unhelpful thoughts, ‘choice point’ techniques to help with decision making, and using a ‘Hexaflex’ visual aid to help change thinking and behaviour.

ACT helped John recognise his thoughts, both positive and negative, and to let them pass by rather than struggle with them. It helped him realise how some of the thought patterns he had absorbed as a child were affecting his beliefs around having RRMS. It helped him live a life more in keeping with his values, including having a happier relationship with his children and wife and a better work-life balance. He now enjoys going to the gym and doing martial arts again, and has developed new interests including cooking.

John says that the ‘choice point’ strategy “was one of my favourite strategies, and I use it daily, and it has helped beyond mental wellbeing, helping me choose to adopt a healthier lifestyle and work-life balance, love and commitment.”

Dr Lydia Rizopoulos says “Every so often, as healthcare professionals, we cross paths with patients who truly inspire us; John is definitely one of those people. His courage, drive and strength of character shone through in every therapy session. I’m proud of our work together in therapy and the progress John has achieved, both for his own wellbeing but also the ripple effect this has had on the lives of his wife and daughters.”

After going through ACT, John says “I now have strategies that keep me in a healthy place, regardless of the future.”