Marie finds new life purpose with improved mobility and independence

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Marie Johnson has arrived at a special moment in her life.

Marie is finding new meaning in surviving the road accident that took her fiancé's life and left Marie with life-changing disabilities.

"It feels so good to be useful again after 13 years, and that my opinion and thoughts are wanted and validated," says Marie, who is supported through the NDIS.

Marie is using her own lived experience to help others.

She is participant advisor to South Australian medical and academic experts studying the benefits of exercising underwater for people with brain and spinal injuries.

"I just wish I discovered this a long time ago, it could have changed my life much sooner, so what I am trying to do now is to help give others that opportunity," Marie says.

"If you can turn anything about my accident and the disabilities I have into a positive, it makes living with it all that much easier and better."

Until recently, Marie wasn't sure why she survived the accident that forever changed her life.

"John and I were together for 7 and a half years and we were trying to start a family," Marie says. "He died on impact and I lost my soul mate. I couldn't really understand why I survived."

Not yet 27, Marie spent 2 years in hospital and rehabilitation.

When she returned home, she was not only dealing with the trauma of losing her partner.

Marie had a significant brain injury and major leg and spinal injuries.

She needed a wheelchair to move around and was living with debilitating pain and fatigue.

Marie's disabilities affected her mobility, her memory, and her mental health.

"I needed so many surgeries I lost count," she says. "My pain levels were routinely at 6, 7 and 8. Life was very hard."

For many years, Marie was isolated and struggled to leave her home.

“Both my parents had died before the accident, so I didn’t really have any family to speak of,” Marie says. “I was scared to drive in a car or go out.”

But about 5 years ago, Marie’s life began to change.

Marie joined the NDIS and started receiving supports, including therapies to help improve her mobility.

Marie’s NDIS funding included access to support workers to help her with daily tasks and getting out into her community again.

“I developed a particularly strong bond with my support worker, Lorraine,” Marie says.

“She's like a mum and a best friend and I know I can rely on her and that she’s there for me and will support me in whatever I do. It gives me great peace of mind.”

About 18 months ago, with Lorraine’s support, Marie tried something new – exercising underwater.

Using scuba equipment, Marie could move freely in ways she never could on land.

“It’s an incredible feeling of freedom,” Marie says. “I can basically do the splits and do freestyle underwater, whereas if I fall to the ground in my house, I have to call an ambulance because I can’t get myself back up again.

“Underwater is such a soothing place, physically and emotionally. It gives me a sense of calm I can’t find anywhere else.”

Marie now does immersion therapy twice a week with registered NDIS provider Determined2 at the Adelaide Aquatic Centre. She chooses to fund the therapy through her NDIS plan.

Marie says it’s not just underwater that she feels the benefits.

“This has been the biggest change and improvement for me, it has helped me in so many ways, physically, mentally and socially,” Marie, now 40, says.

“Physically there's a major difference. I can feel the power in my legs. I just feel stronger. I noticed that my lungs functions better overall too.

“I'm doing so much better on multiple levels. My pain is managed now which is hard to believe after so many years.”

For Marie, less pain and improved mobility mean more confidence and independence.

Marie is out in her community and actively enjoying her life again.

With support worker Lorraine by her side, Marie recently travelled to Perth to see her favourite artists in concert.

“It was incredible that I could do that, just fantastic,” Marie says. “I was stuck at home for so long, it’s huge for me to be able to travel and go to things.”

Marie is excited about also pursuing a lifelong goal – studying at university.

“I’m enrolled to study linguistics at Adelaide University next year,” Marie says. “It’s something I’ve been wanting to do for quite a while and I’m really looking forward to it.

“I’m finally in a place physically and mentally where I can do that. So again, the NDIS is there to help me achieve my goal.

“My life has changed dramatically because of the supports I have through the NDIS and that gives me a great sense of security. I’m feeling positive about the future.”

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