



Choosing *to* Thrive

Mikaila Emrich shows courage
on long road back from concussions

BY LYNN HADRALL

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALISHA TOWNSEND

Mikaila Emrich posts beautiful photographs to Instagram that may inspire you to exercise more, eat healthier and stress less. To the images she adds wellness tips and advice. Her account – @myfitmik – tells the story of a strong young woman. It just hints at the challenges she has overcome.

Emrich, of Cambridge, was in a bad car crash as a child. The family vehicle was T-boned; she was a passenger resting her head against the door. The collision ripped the door right off. She seemed fine, except for whiplash. Family members were thankful everyone survived.

But the Grade 3 student wasn't fine. A concussion went undiagnosed. "That was the first one," she says. Sadly it wasn't the last. She suffered five more concussions, ranging from falls in figure skating and a soccer injury to being jostled in a crowd.

"I'm 5'3" so I'm perfect elbow height. That's how I sustained the last one, just a fluke elbow to the back of the head in a crowd. It can be that simple," says Emrich, now 22. "After the first concussion, you become much more susceptible to them."

Her early concussions went undiagnosed at a time when little was known about head injuries.

It wasn't until the third incident that a concussion was eventually identified. Emrich took a ball to the head in the dying minutes of a rep soccer game. There was no head-injury protocol; coaches encouraged her to stay on the field.

"I don't blame them. There was no one who knew about this at that time. There was no research," she says. "So, I continued to play. The next day at school, it was quite scary. I forgot how to add in my math class. My teacher sent me to the office and at that point I couldn't remember my phone number and I also couldn't remember what grade I was in."

Emrich's family rushed the Grade 8 student to McMaster Children's Hospital in Hamilton because of the hospital's expertise with youth and head injuries.

Her parents also pulled her from soccer.

Since that day, Emrich has devised ways to deal with post-concussion syndrome. She focuses on staying physically fit through daily gym sessions, eating a healthy diet and having a positive mental attitude.

It hasn't been easy. But she's a fighter and now she wants to help others.

"It's a physical injury, but it's not something that

Mikaila Emrich in her element: surrounded by cookbooks, her laptop and a healthy spoonful of peanut butter in the kitchen of her family's Cambridge home.



Miss Oktoberfest Mikaila Emrich proudly poses with her supportive parents, Mike and Heide, and brother, Alex.

everything that I know I'm capable of doing in this life. I kept going back to that and I said 'No, I have to try.' ”

Emrich won the competition to become the 49th Miss Oktoberfest. She has used her role to share her story of recovery, a journey that is ongoing. She maintains social media sites to connect with people. She puts healthy living tips on her Instagram site and includes a “brain gain” feature with tips to challenge your mind. Her YouTube channel showcases healthy eating habits and recipes.

Emrich wants more people to understand concussions and the treatment that leads back to a normal life.

“Now, especially, there's so much research coming out about concussions. I remember initially when I had first sustained the first couple, there was absolutely nothing,” she says.

Her mother wishes people had known more when her daughter suffered her first concussion.

“I wish that I could take away all of the concussions and everything, but it's made her who she is and that's actually a really positive thing, who she is,” Heide says.

Robyn Ibey, a sports/orthopedic physiotherapist at the Waterloo Sports Medicine Centre, says Emrich's story is not uncommon.

“There was not the level of awareness then that we have now about how serious this injury was,” Ibey says. “We now know that it is a brain injury and people are better at recognizing the signs and symptoms and seeking medical attention. So I would say that things have improved greatly over the past 10 to 15 years.”

She recalls that it was common a decade ago for someone who had a head injury to be told: you just got your bell rung. Pick yourself up and keep going. That's changing with head-injury protocols for sports teams, and more resources for parents, says Ibey,

who received her doctorate in neuroscience at the University of Waterloo and lectures there. She also worked with the Junior B Stratford Cullitons hockey team for a couple of years.

Ibey understands the challenges in part because she too sustained a concussion that went undiagnosed. It happened while she was dancing on a slippery floor during Oktoberfest.

“A couple years into my PhD, I had a really horrible concussion. I ended up having post-concussion syndrome for four to five years. It delayed me finishing my PhD. So I treated concussions before I had a concussion,” she says.

“The way that I treat and manage concussions has changed a lot because of my own personal experience. I have made a complete recovery, but I think there's something to be said for someone who has experienced the same type of injury.”

Although people typically associate concussions with sports injuries, many occur far from a playing field. It's important to seek medical attention and formulate a recovery plan that goes deeper than the old advice: rest in a dark room and hope that your symptoms go away.

“People are much more proactive with this injury, seeking out different treatment courses. But it's a multi-factorial injury, and it's important to see someone that has knowledge in this area who can identify what course of treatment is needed for the individual,” Ibey says.

Treatment could involve a wide range of specialists such as family doctors, physiotherapists, optometrists, chiropractors, nutritionists and occupational therapists. Ibey recommends online resources such as the Sport Concussion Assessment Tool (SCAT5) at bjsm.bmj.com and the brain injury/concussion section at canchild.ca.

Ibey's advice to anyone with a head injury is to seek immediate medical attention because one of the worst things you can do is continue the activity right after it happens.

Emrich's recovery advice is also clear – do your research and keep a positive attitude.

you can see. If we were to pass on the street, probably no one would have any idea and yet I come home from school and there are parts of it that still need regular maintenance.”

Emrich has adjusted her lifestyle to help recover. She missed a semester of school, gave up on sports such as soccer and figure skating, and found ways to cope – wearing sunglasses indoors, for example. She prepares a lot of her own food and feels eating well is vitally important for her recovery.

“I really did an overhaul of my nutrition because of the entire gut-to-brain relationship; there is a lot of research on specific nutrients affecting cognitive ability and cognitive function.”

With help from the Waterloo Region Small Business Centre, she even ran her own small business one summer. Bare Necessities Baking specialized in paleo muffins.

Noise, light and nearby movement can be a challenge. So it surprised her family when Emrich chose to compete in the Miss Oktoberfest contest last fall.

“At first, when she told us, we really wondered if that was such a good idea,” recalls her mother, Heide. “You know –



Robyn Ibey, a sports/orthopedic physiotherapist at the Waterloo Sports Medicine Centre, is a concussion expert who has experienced the injury first-hand.

loud noise, lots of people, lots of lights. All of that is Oktoberfest, so we were hesitant. But when Mikaila puts her mind to something, she follows her passion and her goals and her dreams and for that I'm really proud.”

Mikaila knew her family was concerned, but she felt the timing was right.

“While my family's concerns were coming from a place of love and care, I knew I had to try; that's how you grow. I didn't want my concussion to hinder me from doing

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Heading to the gym for daily workouts helps Mikaila Emrich deal with post-concussion syndrome.

One of her successful activities has been a daily gratitude journal.

“I write three things that I’m grateful for; it’s funny to look back at them. I was 18 when I started and now I’m 22. It’s crazy because you look back and that’s a lot of things to be grateful for every day. It really adds up.”

Emrich focuses on “intrinsic motivation,” rather than striving to meet goals set by others. If you fall down once, twice or six times, think of it as fuel to get back up. As an example, she points to a personal achievement. There was a time she struggled just to walk through a busy grocery store. But eventually she scaled the heights of Gros Morne mountain in Newfoundland.

“I was physically able to do that and share

that experience with my family. I trained with 30-second increments of walking every day. Sometimes it was me lying in bed for the rest of the day, taking multiple naps because after 30 seconds I was wiped.”

Recovery can be difficult for everyone. Emrich missed two Christmas celebrations and half her family events while struggling physically. “I think it’s fair to say that it’s hard on the whole family when somebody is suffering,” says her mother.

Family love and support helped Emrich recover. She has a strong bond with her brother, Alex, who is attending Fanshawe College in London to follow his passion for music. They grew up participating in Oktoberfest events – she was Miss Transylvania in 2016 and he presided over the dance group. They toured Austria and Germany performing, the experience of a lifetime.

Now they chat online regularly.

“He is younger than me by two years and he’s a huge inspiration for me in terms of that intrinsic motivation. He’s probably one of the wisest people I know. I’m so proud that he is doing something that he really loves and so that is an influence on me.”

Emrich praises the Miss Oktoberfest program for focusing on a community role where “you bring your own value proposition and make the role whatever you are specifically passionate about – and that’s celebrated.”

“We’re approaching the 50th anniversary this year. I’m super excited because it’s a great learning opportunity and the festival’s going through a lot of innovation right now, so it all aligns very nicely and it’s a great way for me to learn.”

This fall her official duties as the reigning Miss Oktoberfest will end. Her work to educate others about concussions will continue. “For the longest time I didn’t know why this happened to me, but I honestly think everything happens for a reason.”

Persevering is important. “When you’re down and you’re face down and it seems difficult, you can either stay down or view it as a chance or an opportunity to just rise up stronger, mentally and physically.”

Emrich’s first Instagram post about her concussion drew responses from 49 people around the world. “People were saying, ‘Wow, I had no idea, but I have gone through this and I’m experiencing the same thing.’” Almost 4,000 people now follow her on Instagram.

This spring, Emrich proudly graduated from the University of Guelph with a degree in marketing. Her future aspirations are broad and might include undertaking a Ted Talk or writing a book. As life has challenged her, she has responded by embracing the challenge and seeking out more. That won’t change.

“I find such joy in consistently challenging my mind. There is literally something to learn every day; life is exciting, and it is great to be curious.”



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