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THE WORLD'S GREATEST NEWSPAPER

NEWs that Noel Edmonds had been diagnosed with repetitive strain injury (RSI), caused by picking up the heavy phone on his TV game show *Deal Or No Deal*, was met with widespread derision. But for the ever-growing number of sufferers, RSI is no laughing matter.

Many are in constant pain, with some unable to do the jobs for which they were trained, or even to work at all. Research by the TUC shows that every day six people leave their jobs because of an RSI-related condition.

Alexander Technique teacher, Claire Rennie, 36, is one such person. Ten years ago, she was an engineer in the automotive industry, when she began to suffer from aches in her neck, shoulder and back. They grew worse after a long day at work.

"At first I ignored the pain," she says. "I had no idea what it was - I was just 25, fit and healthy. But soon it began to grow much worse. I'd get burning sensations in my lower arms and wrists every time I used the computer. And often I'd be at the keyboard for five-hour stretches without a break."

According to the author of *Understanding and Treating RSI*, GP Dr Paul MacLoughlin, RSI is an umbrella term for between 12 and 20 different upper limb disorders. "Sitting at a computer for long hours in a sedentary position is an absurd way of living," he says. "We weren't designed to do that."

Wendy Laurence, of the newly formed charity, RSI Action, says injuries are caused by a combination of factors including prolonged, repetitive, forceful or awkward hand movements; poor posture; cold working environments and stress.

"Some RSI conditions are specific. These are known as RSI type one conditions, and include carpal tunnel syndrome, tenosynovitis and tennis elbow," (the condition with which Noel Edmonds was diagnosed), she says.

"Others are known as RSI type two conditions - often called Diffuse RSI, Cumulative Trauma Disorder or Occupational Overuse Syndrome. These are more difficult to diagnose but are often the result of excessive computer use."

A recent ICM survey shows that 62 per cent of people in the UK use computers, of whom 48 per cent report having some form of computer-related injury. This rises to 70 per cent in the 18-24 age group. In the age groups 18-24 and 45-54, one in four computer users report pain in the wrist, lower arm, elbow or shoulder and one in seven reported tingling fingers.

"Unfortunately these RSI conditions do not often get diagnosed in the early stages," says Wendy. "They can easily be prevented but are difficult to treat in the acute and chronic stages. If they're not treated early they can easily result in long-term chronic conditions and disabilities."

Claire did not receive a diagnosis until she was 29, four years after her symptoms began. "By that time I could not even lift a book or grip my knife and fork, let alone use a

yourhealth

A touching cure for RSI

Claire Rennie had to quit her job as an engineer because of repetitive strain injury. She tells HILARY FREEMAN about the therapy that eased the pain

computer. I was forced to quit work. I felt useless."

Before she was diagnosed, other conditions, such as rheumatoid arthritis, had to be ruled out. "I had several tests and examinations but, of course, all the tests came back negative," she says.

"I was given anti-inflammatory painkillers, which helped, but they weren't treating the cause of the problem, so as soon as they wore off the pain came back. Eventually, my doctor agreed that it must be RSI."

CLAIRE had physiotherapy to try to break down some of the tensions in her neck and shoulders. She also began learning the Alexander Technique, which teaches people to overcome bad postural habits, by using their bodies better and being more aware of unnecessary muscle tension.

In lessons, the teacher uses his or her hands to gently guide people into healthy standing, sitting and walking positions.

"I came out of each session feeling really great and light," she says. "It made a huge difference. But every time I tried to use a computer again, the symptoms came back. So I decided to change careers and retrain as an accredited Alexander Technique teacher."

Today, Claire is pain-free and is even able to use a computer for a few hours a day but warns: "I know that if I went back to my old lifestyle, collapsed over a computer again all day, the

RSI symptoms would come back.

"My advice to anyone who suspects they have RSI is to see their doctor straight away, to let their employer know, and to look for whatever solutions may help them, whether it is conventional medicine, therapeutic massage, physiotherapy, osteopathy or Alexander Technique."

Dr MacLoughlin's advice for preventing RSI:

- 1) Don't do the same activity too intently for a long period of time. Take regular breaks every half hour or so, when you get up or change position and move around.
- 2) Learn some gentle stretching exercises and perform them regularly.
- 3) Listen to your body. If you have aches and pains, there's probably a good reason, so don't ignore them. If you catch RSI early, you have a good chance of recovery.
- 4) If you work at a desk, make sure it is well-designed and that you are sitting in the correct position properly - check with your company's health and safety department.

● For more information see www.RSIAction.org.uk. To find an Alexander Technique teacher near you, see www.stat.org.uk or call 0845 230 7828.

To order *Understanding And Treating RSI* by Dr Paul MacLoughlin (Chelsea Press) at £14.99 with free delivery to UK addresses, phone The Express Bookshop on 0871 434 6091 or send a cheque or PO made payable to Express Newspapers to: RSI Offer, PO Box 200, Falmouth TR11 4WJ, or at www.expressbookshop.com



RECOVERY POSITION:
The Alexander Technique helped Claire Rennie to ease the pain of RSI

Picture: GILES PARK