

Health

The dizziness and sickness was my deepest, darkest secret ...but I can't deceive my listeners any longer

Radio DJ Erika North reveals why she has decided to tell the world about her MS



LIVING A LIE:
Erika has been ill for eight years

Erika North had come to terms with her debilitating dizzy spells. She had grown accustomed to being constantly exhausted and even the prospect of a wheelchair-bound future rarely woke her up in a cold sweat any longer.

It was, instead, a feeling of taking part in a deception that finally forced her to tell her employer and colleagues that she had multiple sclerosis; a nagging sense that, as someone who made a career out of her unflinching honesty and ability

By **Antonia Hoyle**

to bare her soul, she had, in fact, been living a lie.

To her immense relief, their reaction was of support and concern rather than the prejudice or patronising dismissal she had feared. But unfortunately, it was not simply a case of 'coming clean' to them, or indeed, the many friends from whom she had kept her illness for four years.

As a national radio DJ, Erika was also concerned about her million loyal listeners. Whether she was

interviewing Hollywood stars or travelling the world for stories, they had shared her every high and low, and the irony that she was hiding from them the one aspect of her lifestyle that really mattered did not escape her.

So Erika, 35, who presents the breakfast show on classic hits station Gold with fellow DJ James Cannon, has now decided to speak out about her devastating diagnosis, and explain why she is no longer prepared to cover it up.

'I am someone who wears their heart on their sleeve and I talk about

everything that happens to me on air,' she says. 'I'm certainly not a slick, word-perfect presenter and I hope people like me more because I am real.'

'This was my deepest, darkest secret. After I was diagnosed I felt like damaged goods. I was worried people would view me differently. But hiding it made me feel as if I was living a lie. It has taken me this long to accept that I have MS, but now I have, I would rather be honest about what and who I am.'

'There is a tiny part of me that is still scared I will be judged. Maybe

I will lose friends or colleagues. But I hope that more will respect me. I think coming out in the open will be cathartic. I've finally found the confidence to say, 'This is me. Take it or leave it.'

Erika, who became a DJ at 21 after working at Capital Radio as a guest-booker, suffered the symptoms of MS for four years before finally being diagnosed in January 2005.

'For months afterwards I was shocked. It was so out of the blue, even though I had felt there was

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Give yourself a face massage

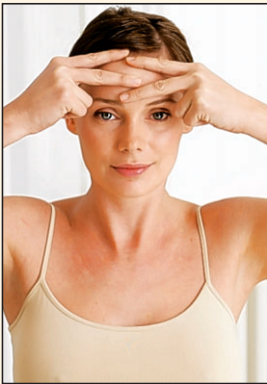
Every technique in this occasional series begins with breathing. When you concentrate on your breath, you can connect with yourself and relax. When you relax, your muscles soften, so it is easier to release muscle tension. Conscious breathing relaxes the mind, so you will be able to feel the benefits of a technique even if you have only five minutes to practise it. This is the perfect exercise if you are feeling less than wide awake after the hectic party season. **BEATA ALEKSANDROWICZ** describes techniques that you can use any time, anywhere, that will help you to release the tension accumulated during the day and leave you looking younger and feeling more confident.

FOREHEAD OPENER

1 There is a connection between your forehead, neck and shoulder muscles, so it is important to release any tension in your upper body before you begin using this technique. While breathing regularly, lift and drop your shoulders three times, and make three gentle, slow circles with your head clockwise and three anticlockwise.

2 Looking ahead, place the sides of both index fingers just above your eyebrows. Gently press them into your forehead, pulling down slightly. At the same time resist the movement with your eyebrows, arching them upward. Release and repeat three times.

3 Place your right hand on your forehead close to your hairline. Press into



your forehead and slightly stretch it upward. Maintain this movement as you tilt your head downward, until you feel a pleasant stretch in your forehead. Release, and repeat three times.

4 Create a V-shape with the index and middle fingers of both your hands. Place them across your forehead, as shown above. On your out-breath press your fingers into your forehead and gently pull them apart to stretch out the muscles under your skin. Release, and repeat three times.

● Extracted from *Quick & Easy Face Massage*, by Beata Aleksandrowicz © 2008, published by Duncan Baird Publishers, London. Photography copyright: Julia Selmes / Duncan Baird Publishers 2008.

...And the knew what

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something seriously wrong. I felt isolated and depressed and, in the beginning, I thought I'd end up in a wheelchair.

'But I've realised having MS isn't the end of the world. It's not a death sentence. Without meaning to sound twee, I'm a happier person now than I was before I had it because I don't take life for granted any more.'

An only child from Hillingdon in Middlesex, she first felt the symptoms of MS eight years ago when she was co-presenting a breakfast show with Jono Coleman on London station Heart.

'I started having dizzy spells, as if I was drunk,' she recalls. 'I'd have to hold on to the wall in the shower, or fall when there was nothing to trip over. I'd tell my doctor, but by the time I arrived for my appointment I felt fine. Then it would happen again, a few months later.'

Her GP said she had an ear infection and referred her to an ear, nose and throat clinic, where she was told she had hay fever. 'Because they didn't seem worried, I wasn't,' she says simply.

But by 2004 the gap between her dizzy spells was getting shorter, and the consequences ranged from frightening to funny. On one occasion, she recalls, she fell ill going down a spiral staircase at a Tube station. 'I was violently sick at the bottom,' she says. 'People were asking me if I was pregnant.'

On another, she was travelling in a taxi from an appearance on GMTV with her Heart co-presenter at the time, Greg Burns, to their Central London studios, when she felt so ill from its movement she had to get out of the vehicle two miles before their destination. 'He had to hold me up on the pavement,' she says.

At work, Erika gained a reputation for being clumsy. She says: 'It became a part of my personality. Within minutes of going skiing I fell over and broke my wrist. Nobody was remotely surprised when I came back with it in plaster.'

'I grew increasingly frustrated that my doctor couldn't find any reason for my behaviour. I felt as if I was going mad.'

So she went to a private specialist for a second opinion. It was only then that it was suggested she should have an MRI scan to rule out MS, a brain disorder that affects the ability of nerve cells to communicate with each other.

When the results came back positive she refused to believe them. 'I laughed when the doctor told me,' she says. 'One of my friends has MS. I'd seen him lose the use of his hands and feet. I knew how damaging the illness could be and was convinced I didn't have it.'

Yet further tests to analyse her body's nervous system confirmed the MS, which can



PHILIP IDE / SCIENCE PHOTO LIBRARY

progress from tingling and numbness in the limbs to blindness, hearing impairment and paralysis.

It is a non-hereditary condition that affects 85,000 people in Britain, and twice as many women as men. Drugs are available to reduce the frequency of the attacks and most sufferers live as long as anyone else, but there is no cure.

A staunch pragmatist, Erika was determined to tackle the shocking news with a cool head, so she called the MS Society that evening for advice and support. 'An old lady answered the phone and said, "Don't worry, dear, not everyone ends up in a wheelchair nowadays."'

'I'm sure that she didn't mean to upset me, and the society

has been great ever since, but it was the worst thing she could have said. That's when it hit me. I hung up in floods of tears.'

To compound her misery, she had been made redundant from Heart two weeks earlier. 'Obviously, that paled into insignificance next to the MS but it meant that I was looking for work,' she says. 'I knew that if I was an employer, I would choose a healthy employee over an ill one. It is a competitive industry and I was too nervous and paranoid to admit any weakness.'

Within a couple of months, she had been offered the morning slot on Gold, co-presenting with Tony Blackburn. Yet as her professional life resumed momentum, she spiralled into depression.

'Every time I got a headache or lost sensation in my hand, I was convinced it was the beginning of the end,' she says. 'When the page of the book I was reading grew fuzzy I thought I was going blind. My parents were brilliantly supportive and I put on a brave

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stars who never I was suffering



FRIEND OF THE STARS: Erika with interviewee David Beckham, left, and with Sir Paul McCartney and her former co-presenter Jono Coleman, above

face at work but really I just wanted to hide away.'

Erika grew increasingly tired. 'I was constantly missing friends' birthday parties and dinners out because I was so exhausted,' she says. 'I became known as unreliable. Some days I couldn't get out of bed. I didn't know how much this was due to getting up at 4am to go to work, and how much was the MS.'

'At work, I was still teased for being clumsy but I couldn't laugh at myself any more. I don't think anyone suspected. People were more concerned about themselves.'

She concedes, however, that hers is not an ideal working environment in which to fall ill. 'As a freelance employee on a temporary contract, which most DJs are, I'm not entitled to sick pay,' she says. 'So I'll always make sure I'm there. I have had only one day off sick in the past year.'

Erika, who, through her line of work, has flirted with Jack Nicholson and in real life dated former Big Brother contestant Nick Bateman, made a conscious decision to remain single.

'I didn't want to be a burden on anyone else and I wasn't sure how to tell those I was attracted to,' she says. 'I would have felt too vulnerable.'

Eventually, she confided in Tony Blackburn. 'We were spending so much time together that it felt dishonest not to,' she says. 'He was warm and almost fatherly in his concern. I knew he wouldn't tell anyone.'

But unfortunately, others weren't quite as empathetic. 'One of my non-media friends acted as if I had told her I had a cold,' she says. 'She couldn't understand why I was traumatised. I was hurt that she wouldn't take the time to listen. Others looked awkward and changed the subject. Their reaction confirmed my belief that it was too much of a risk to speak out.'

Erika was referred to a neurologist at Charing Cross Hospital where brain scans have shown that she has approximately 18 lesions on her brain that are affecting her balance. For the past three years she has been inject-

ing Avonex, a beta interferon drug. It works by reducing both inflammation and the body's autoimmune reaction that is responsible for the destruction of myelin, so reducing the amount of attacks she suffers. Side effects include crippling flu-like symptoms, from which she sometimes suffered for 36 hours afterwards.

Hospital visits were explained away to colleagues as dental appointments. 'I felt I was constantly deceiving people,' she says. 'And I missed out on the fun stuff. I had to turn down invitations to film premieres and showbusiness parties. When Gordon Ramsay - whom I had interviewed on our show - invited me to the opening of his Claridge's restaurant I was heartbroken to be too ill to go.'

Nevertheless, she was determined to honour her work commitments which have, over the years, included meeting celebrities from the Blairs to the Beckhams, and broadcasting live from the Sydney Olympics.

'Before I was due to interview Tom Jones recently I had a very bad dizzy spell,' she says. 'But I came in anyway. I knew I couldn't miss out. I didn't tell any celebrities I interviewed about my illness, although I was often introduced by my colleagues as the clumsy one.'

'The confidence that has helped in my career is also helping me cope with my illness.'

Which is why, last summer, she finally found the courage to tell her boss at Gold, based in London's Leicester Square, about her illness. 'I was fed up with having to hide the niggly aspects of my illness, such as the injecting,' she says. 'To my great relief, he didn't treat me any differently afterwards.'

The Avonex was so successful that, earlier this year, she had gone six months without suffering anything other than the side effects of the drug. But in August her beloved father Eric died of a brain tumour. The stress triggered a crippling relapse.

'Although seeing what happened to Dad was a brutal reminder there were less kind illnesses, I suddenly felt

dizzy all the time,' she says.

Last October, she read about a new drug, alemtuzumab. It is an antibody treatment that temporarily shuts down the immune system, meaning it can no longer attack the nervous system.

It is not without its controversy. After one man in early clinical trials in America died of internal bleeding, its development was temporarily suspended. It can cause thyroid problems and leaves users vulnerable to infection. Yet a recent Cambridge University trial showed it can halt and even repair the damage of MS.

Erika has put herself forward for a three-year UK trial, to begin next month. 'If it could halt my symptoms it would be like winning the Lottery,' she says.

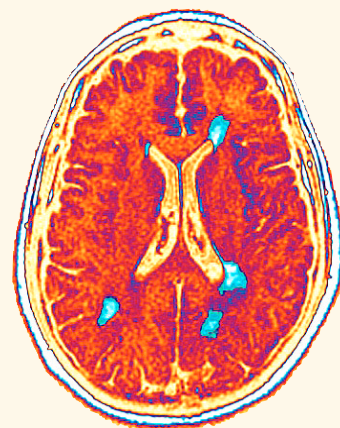
'I had to stop injecting Avonex two weeks ago in preparation, which has petrified me. I keep waiting for my symptoms to worsen. The drug has been tested by only a few people before but if I don't try it I will always wonder what could have happened. I want my life back. It would be brilliant to be able to go out with friends again and drink until 3am.'

'I try to eat a healthy, balanced diet and take care of my health but I would rather have five years of being able to treat myself than ten years of being boring. I've been lucky so far that my MS hasn't progressed further, and it is very rarely now that I wake up in a cold sweat in the middle of the night wondering what the future holds.'

Instead, Erika is determined to make the most of every minute. 'The uncertainty is quite stressful. But before, I used to worry about the most stupid things, such as my hair or fluffing my lines on air,' she says. 'How ridiculous. None of that matters. Now I don't waste time worrying and I'm much more understanding of other people's weaknesses. Most importantly, I've realised that MS sufferers can still enjoy life.'

● www.mssociety.org.uk
www.mygoldmusic.co.uk

MS: facts you may not know



DAMAGE: Highlighted in blue, an MRI scan reveals MS lesions

Multiple sclerosis is an autoimmune condition that attacks the central nervous system which is made up of the brain and spinal cord. While the brain controls bodily functions such as movement and thought, the spinal cord relays messages from the brain to the rest of the body, controlling both conscious and unconscious actions.

The nerve fibres of the central nervous system are surrounded by myelin, a protective sheath that helps these messages move quickly between the brain and the rest of the body.

In MS, the immune system attacks myelin, stripping it off the nerve fibres, either partially or completely, leaving scars known as lesions or plaques. The signals are then disrupted between brain and body, causing unpredictable symptoms. These include nerve pain, muscle spasms, speech difficulties, severe fatigue, loss of balance, movement and sight, depression, incontinence and sexual dysfunction.

● The word sclerosis comes from the Greek 'skleros' meaning hard, referring to the plaques around the nerves.

'Multiple' refers to the many different areas of the central nervous system that may have damaged myelin.

● MS is the most common disabling neurological disease among young adults, affecting more than 85,000 people in the UK.

● The cause of MS has yet to be identified.

● MS is usually diagnosed in those aged between 20 and 40.

● An MRI scan confirms the diagnosis in 90 per cent of MS cases.

● Women are almost twice as likely to develop it as men.

● Life expectancy is near normal but there is no cure.

● MS affects sufferers in different ways and varies between benign and relapsing / remitting MS where, attacks are rare with long remission periods and progressive MS, where there is no remission.

● Research shows that 65 per cent of those with relapsing / remitting MS develop the progressive form within 15 years of diagnosis.

● Modifying drugs - brand names Avonex, Betaferon, Copaxone and Rebif - can reduce the number and severity of MS relapses.