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When Will Elrick broke his back and injured his head in a vehicle accident 23 years ago, he impressed everyone including himself with how quickly he recovered from his injuries.

What he hadn't counted on was the hidden impact of the traumatic brain injury, which left him confused and in "a mental storm" for the next 13 years.

These days the 47 year old from Woombah on New South Wales' north coast is finally at peace with himself. He is studying at Southern Cross University (SCU) for his Honours degree in regenerative agriculture and also works there as a casual tutor.

Will credits much of his recovery to the support he now gets through his NDIS plan and from his Local Area Coordinator, Libby, from Social Futures. But it's been a long road to get to where he is now.

"That's why I really want to share my experience," Will says. "After recovering physically from the accident it looked like I was doing fine on the outside, but on the inside I was lost and confused. The brain injury turned out to be far more impactful than anything else I experienced."

Will's accident left him in a coma for six weeks and, as well as a broken back, he had a shattered pelvis and had to have his right leg amputated at the hip. Even so, he was out of hospital within three months.

"They thought I'd be in there for a lot longer, maybe four or five times as long," he says. "I regained my speech pretty quickly and because I was a fit young man, my body healed fast and I just wanted to be back out there living my life.

"But with hindsight, it's clear that because my physical injuries were so severe everyone was focused on that and no one really paid much attention to my brain injury. I was confused and overwhelmed all the time but didn't know how to communicate that to people because outwardly I seemed so normal."

To compensate, over the next few years Will took on enormous physical challenges, such as walking the Inca Trail in South America, the Kokoda Trail in Papua New Guinea and the 900km Camino de Santiago in Spain – all on crutches. He also climbed numerous mountains including the 8150m Mt Cho Oyu in Tibet in 2007, narrowly surviving a deadly snow storm near the summit which forced him to turn back.

"The reason I did all these things was because when I could focus on just one thing, life was good," he says. "That enabled me to have a reason for living."

But the storm raging inside his head refused to let up, leading to a severe breakdown and self-harm attempts. In 2010 Will moved to Albury for a life change and enrolled for a Diploma in Organic Agriculture at the local TAFE, which gave him a new focus in life.

After finishing his diploma Will started a Bachelor of Ecological Agriculture degree at Charles Sturt University, which he completed two years ago. Will's current Honours studies at SCU are supported by a university tutor and, off campus, by a personal mentor funded out of his NDIS plan.

"That has been absolutely life-changing, because I can call my mentor for help at any time if I'm feeling stressed or anxious or not understanding things," he says.

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