



what I do

MaryBeth Williams, 39, is a speech/language therapist. She lives in Hamilton

I get up at about half six. I have the usual shower and breakfast, check my emails.

I've usually got together what I need for that day the night before. So if I've got children booked in I might have various collections of toys or games. If it's adults we might be doing some cooking, so I'll have all that prepared.

I might have clients in Rotorua or Tauranga or Waitomo, they're all over the show. I've always enjoyed driving. I listen to stories on tapes in the car – novels, autobiographies, whatever's in the library that takes my fancy.

Most speech therapists work in a health or an education setting, whereas I work in the community with a mix of clients: they could have had a traumatic brain injury, or an illness like a brain tumour or Parkinson's. They might be children who have a developmental difficulty.

All children make speech/sound errors. But there are ages at which you'd expect them to have corrected themselves – it's when that moment's passed that we get concerned.

I do most of my therapy with children through play. If they're having a lot of trouble with "tr" we might play with trucks and trains and railway tracks, so that they hear and have the opportunity to say that sound 10 or 20 times within a few minutes.

With injuries and illnesses, I see people who've been in hospital and often some kind of rehabilitation centre. Then they've gone home and that's when I pick them up. The first time I visit it's often with an occupational therapist and it's just a "How are you getting on? What are you finding tricky?" discussion. And then we put a plan together. It might be that they don't like to go to the supermarket, so we'll go with them. Or we might go out for coffee because they're finding it difficult to

go out with friends. We'll go out and sort of practise different strategies that might help.

Language-wise it could be that they can't find the word they want to say; they'll want a drink and they'll ask for something semi-related, like a cup. We explain that the brain is a bit like a filing cabinet and after an injury you need to sort out the files again. Sometimes we do rote activities – listing how many animals you can think of; animals on a farm, animals in a zoo. You're trying to reprogramme all those pathways and if they can't be reprogrammed you're building new ones. It's roadworks.

Being able to use language

appropriately can also be a challenge, especially for people who've had a head injury. They need to learn to stay on topic, that a conversation is a two-way thing and they can't just talk about themselves; they need to listen and then respond. It's also picking up that when someone says, "Oh well, okay then" that they've had enough and you need to stop talking now. It's all to do with your frontal lobe – that front part of your brain that has to do with inhibition.

Sometimes a person's personality will change after a brain injury. They might become more talkative. And families can find that – well, fantastic – but also a bit different because

Dad wasn't like that before. I've heard people say they might call noise control.

I've had a brain illness myself. I had a brain tumour when I was 16; and then when I was 19 and at university I had a funny stroke. Medically they say the two weren't linked but logically they say, well, it sort of makes sense.

I was fortunate that the tumour was at the back of my brain so it didn't affect the speech side of things, which is on the left side, right above your ear.

Mum said that when I had my stroke I was quite slurry but I just recovered spontaneously – I didn't have to have speech therapy. I think it's useful as a health professional to have been in the health system yourself though – on the other side of the fence.

I like the flexibility of working for myself. If I want to go the beach for the weekend I can organise my schedule around that – or I can help look after a friend's sick children. The downside is the isolation – I miss having workmates.

I live in a little house quite near the river. Often when I get home I'll go for a walk or a ride down by the water, just to unwind. I try to have two or three hours of downtime. Sometimes I'll go round to a friend's house or to the gym. And then I'll check my emails again. I might do some paperwork or write reports.

Why did I move to Hamilton from Auckland? I was just ready for a change. I used to be a primary school teacher and I'd done my training here so it was semi-familiar. I think poor old Hamilton gets a bit of a bad rap. It's got everything you need. It's just like Auckland, only smaller, which is nice.

AS TOLD TO EMILY SIMPSON