

By **ANDREA THOMPSON**

BARRY WAINWRIGHT'S earliest memories are of feeling like a social outcast. Looking back, he sees his childhood and teenage years as a catalogue of humiliating and deeply confusing episodes that left him sure he was different from everyone around him.

'I found it impossible to make friends and felt totally removed from the rest of my family,' says Barry, 54. 'Interacting with other children was impossible, because I'd recognise them one day and then not the next.'

'On one occasion, aged seven, I remember spending lunchtime chatting with a boy in my class. We asked each other questions about our families and hobbies and played football together. But later the same day when he came up to me and began talking, I had no idea who he was or why he knew so much about me.'

'Another time, my own mother approached me in the street and I failed to recognise her despite her talking to me for five minutes.'

Though Barry told no one about his problem, his parents felt there was something wrong. Psychiatrists and psychologists presumed he was mentally impaired or mildly autistic. But Barry shocked everyone by scoring highly on IQ tests. Eventually, medics deemed him normal, noting him as 'above-average intelligence but bored and disruptive'.

So, with no diagnosis, Barry felt he'd no choice but to 'muddle through' life. He finished school, got married, became a chemical engineer and went on to have seven children, now aged between 12 and 35.

It was only by chance, three years ago, that he discovered the source of his problems.

Barry suffers from prosopagnosia, a condition also known as face blindness — where patients cannot recognise the faces of others, even those very close to them. It's estimated as many as 1.5 million Britons might suffer from the condition, although there are many different degrees, and many people do not realise they are sufferers.

THE condition can be present from birth, as in Barry's case, or brought on by head injury — in both cases it leads to an interruption to the brain's normal processing of data that allows facial recognition.

This means sufferers are able to conduct a normal conversation with somebody, but will fail to recognise that same person's face minutes later. They spend life relying on other 'clues' such as clothes, voice pitch, mannerisms and whether or not somebody wears glasses to recognise them.

After leaving school, Barry opted for a solitary job in a lab to avoid having to interact with new people. So daunting were social situations that he avoided them altogether. Even watching a film was a challenge — if a character changed their outfit between one scene and another, Barry would be lost.

Somehow, he went on to lead a relatively normal life. But like most people who live with the condition, he developed a series of complex and exhaustive coping strategies to get through each day.

'I learned to identify people depending on context. For instance, there were certain places I'd expect to bump into certain people. I memorised what shoes people wore and who wore which type of glasses. If someone spoke to

me at work, I'd think: "Dave wears brown brogues — this must be him." Then I'd let him talk for a few moments and pick up clues from his conversation. It was harder with women, as they changed their shoes more often.'

'Fortunately, people often wore name badges if we were on site at a factory, so I muddled through.'

But it was his first close relationship with his future wife, Margaret, now 53, that made Barry realise just how different he was.

'We met when I was 19 and I fell in love with her lively personality. I was such an introverted loner, she probably thought I was really rude. I remember after we'd been dating a few weeks, I bumped into her in the street. She started talking to me, but I just looked at her blankly and then carried on walking because I didn't recognise her.'

'She was really upset. But she was the first person who truly accepted that I couldn't help it.' After leaving college, the couple got married and moved in together. But living alongside someone so close only made

Barry more aware of his condition. 'Margaret would say casually to me when we were out: "There's Peter from your work." At first I'd nod and pretend I'd recognised him, too. But I had to admit I couldn't recognise faces at all.'

'She often looked at me with disbelief. But slowly she realised the extent of my condition. She loved me and encouraged me to socialise more. She came to be my eyes for recognising people.'

'When we had children, she dressed them in particular colours and they had specific hairstyles. As their personalities developed, I learned to know which was which by their mannerisms.'

'And Margaret learned to do things which might sound silly, but were vital for me. For instance, she learned to always wear a red jumper if we were shopping, so I wouldn't lose her in a crowd.'

But then, three years ago, he learned he wasn't alone. 'I was driving to work when I heard a radio programme about face blindness. I remember pulling over and shout-

ing at the radio: "That's me." It was such a relief. After spending my life trying to cover up my condition, I finally had a name for it. Although I had developed ways of dealing with it, I could now talk about it without feeling like a social misfit.'

Through his research, Barry discovered leading neuroscientist Professor Brad Duchaine — an authority on face blindness at University College London.

Professor Duchaine put him through a series of tests to confirm what he suspected was face blindness. He was made to look at the faces of famous and normal people before looking away.

Then he had to look at the same pictures again and identify them. Each person had their hair and accessories removed, so he couldn't rely on any clues.

Barry failed to recognise anybody. Incredibly, when shown his own photograph among a line-up of other men in their 50s, he couldn't even spot his own face and doesn't recognise his reflection. Yet, like others with prosopagnosia, he



Picture: LOTUS ADVERT



Picture: BEN LISTER

Difficult: Face-blind Barry can't recognise his own reflection

scored highly on a similar test using pictures and inanimate objects.

Prof Duchaine says that in 50 per cent of cases, face blindness is inherited, but nobody has identified the specific genes that cause it.

'The first reported case was in 1976, but it wasn't until the late Nineties that we realised it wasn't as rare as previously thought. We were aware of acquired prosopagnosia which can happen as a result of a specific injury to the head, a stroke or brain damage. But developmental prosopagnosia is still something we know little about.'

HE ADDS: 'This is where there is a problem with face recognition from birth, but it's not clear what causes it or if damage to the foetus during pregnancy or birth is to blame.'

'If, during this time, there is a period when a baby is deprived of oxygen, it can have significant effects on brain development. Barry suffers from developmental prosopagnosia because he has no recollection of a brain injury or any memory of facial recognition.'

Professor Duchaine says the part of the brain that recognises faces is thought to be different from that which recognises objects.

When there is a problem with one system, it's not unusual for another part of the brain to become over-developed to compensate.

In Barry's case, he scored badly on face recognition but above average on recognising different styles of spectacles because he'd come to rely on them to identify people.

There is no cure for Barry's condition and no way to suppress the symptoms. None of Barry's family has the condition.

Sufferers cope using their own system of memorising shoes, hairstyles and mannerisms. But this is not a foolproof system and Barry's life is still a catalogue of embarrassing moments, the most heartbreaking of which occur with his family.

'If Margaret forgets to wear her red jumper when we go to the supermarket, I can spend ages in the aisles wondering which woman is my wife. I often pass one of my children on the street without recognising them.'

But Barry has learned to accept his condition. He says: 'I have much to be grateful for. I have a loving wife, family and stable career.'

'I always opt to use the phone rather than have face-to-face conversations where I'm forced to refer to everyone I meet as mate, dear or love. It's the only way I'm able to cope.'

■ www.faceblind.org

HEALTH BOOK OF THE WEEK MENTAL HEALTH PROBLEMS

AUTHOR and former BBC journalist Carole Stone is patron of the mental health charities SANE and Triumph Over Phobia. Here, she reviews The Meaning Of Madness by Dr Neel Burton, Acheron Press, £14.99.

AS A child, my elder brother, Roger, had been a difficult, tormented boy unable to make friends. But in his early 20s he began to behave in a really bizarre way, saying he was 'the one', and thinking everybody was talking about him. From then on, he was in and out of mental hospitals. My mother watched her son go 'mad'

before her eyes. Somehow, an illness of the mind is different from an illness of the body and, as the author of this book points out, it's much more difficult to diagnose — you can do it only from observing the symptoms. It took a long time before Roger was confirmed as suffering from paranoid schizophrenia. In this book, psychiatrist Burton gives his thoughts on what we call 'madness'. He puts forward the idea that schizophrenia is inevitable in some people, and suggests: 'It's the price we pay for being human.' I found

this book hard to get into: the first chapter, on personality, is dense, full of technical language. However, I found later chapters easier to grasp. I thought Dr Burton explained well how, during a panic attack, symptoms are sometimes so severe the person begins to fear they are having a heart attack, losing control, even 'going crazy'. Neel Burton is tough going; but if you are interested in mental health, his is a thorough book. And if it corrects some misconceptions about mental illness, it can only be applauded.



JUICY CURE

SORE THROAT: Blend 1 pear, 2 carrots, 1cm slice of lemon with its peel and tin of fresh ginger. Serve over ice. Pears have a cooling and soothing effect. Carrots have infection-fighting properties.

■ **TAKEN** from *Slim For Life* by Jason Vale. To order a copy (p&p free), call 0845 155 0720.

