

'If only I'd been a better mum'

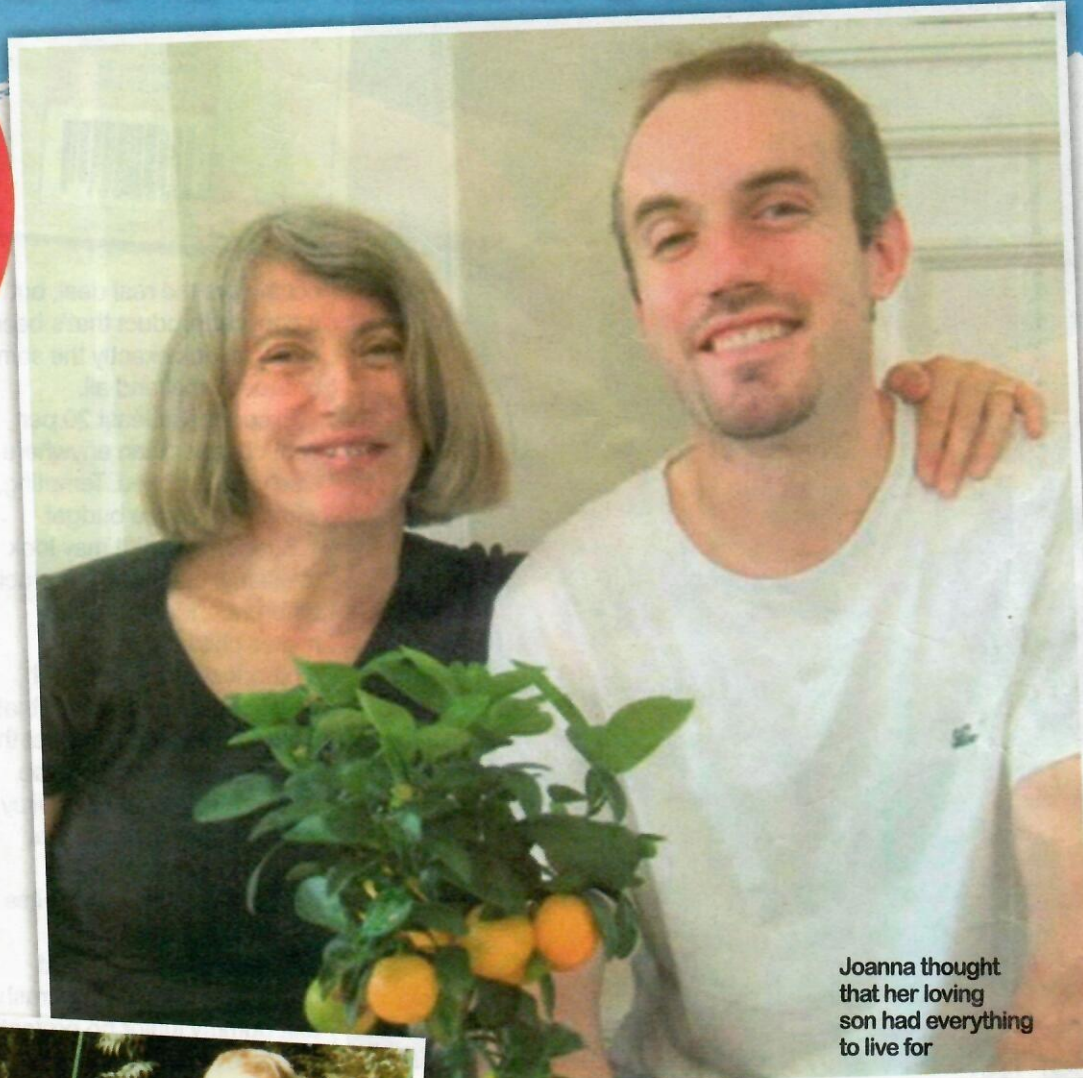
No one could have known a childhood accident would have dire consequences years later. But Joanna Lane still blames herself for her son's suicide...

22/1/13

Ask me how I feel about my son's death and I couldn't answer you, except in tears. It's been four years since Chris killed himself and it's still so hard to talk about. But I must tell his story – so another mum doesn't go through this pain.

Chris was my first born, a friendly little boy who liked Lego, climbing trees and building things. Looking at family photos and seeing him so full of life, I find it hard to believe he's gone.

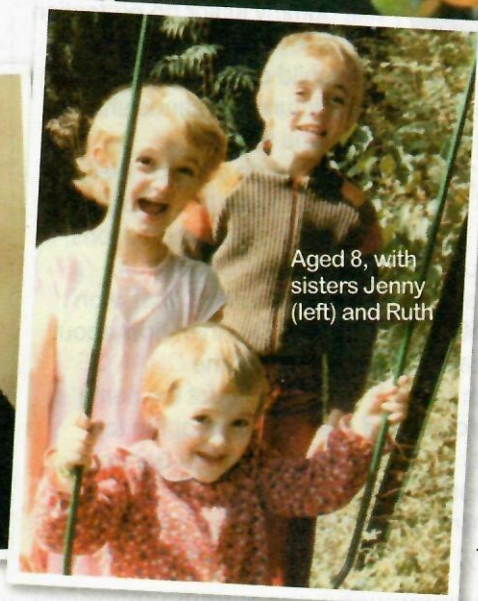
Chris was only 31 when he took his life. Our cheeky bundle



Joanna thought that her loving son had everything to live for



Five years old, before the accident that would change his life for ever



Aged 8, with sisters Jenny (left) and Ruth

of energy had grown into a handsome young man, with seemingly everything to live for. He had a loving family and a good job as a computer programmer.

The whole family – me, his dad John and sisters Ruth and Jenny – were grief-stricken. Chris hadn't seemed depressed or on the edge. We were a normal family, with no health problems. The only out-of-the-ordinary thing that had

ever happened was an accident Chris had had at the age of seven.

John and I had taken the kids out to a children's farm, and I had my eye on the girls when Chris ran off to the playground. Soon, a stranger ran over in a panic, telling us he'd fallen from a tree. I knew it was more serious than his usual bumps and grazes. By sheer luck, a nurse had been nearby and called for help before clearing blood from his

WORDS LYNNIE WALLIS, ANNA KINGSLEY *NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED

Why did Chris kill himself?



Clinging to life in hospital after his accident

Chris' mum believes the head injury he suffered as a boy affected him throughout his life, causing suicidal thoughts



The happy face masked hidden pain as an adult

include impotence, suicidal thoughts, depression – and an inability to feel the cold. Chris never wore a coat; even in the coldest weather he'd go out with a T-shirt on. It all suddenly made sense to me.

I spoke to an expert who agreed Chris probably had PTHP. He told me symptoms can be very subtle and may not surface for years.

I couldn't help but think if only Chris had been diagnosed and put on hormone therapy he'd still be alive today. Rationally, I know it's not my fault, but I wish that I'd been a more observant mother. Chris could have got the treatment he needed.

These 'what ifs' plague my every waking hour, but I have two other children, and a grandchild. I can't afford to fall apart. Instead, I have tried to channel my grief into raising awareness of PTHP, with the invaluable support of John.

I've lobbied my MP, I got PTHP written into an episode of *Holby City* last year and I'm going to tackle the drug companies to see if they'll do more to publicise the condition.

I've spoken to four people who attempted suicide before being diagnosed with PTHP – but there must be more slipping through the net. I'd like to see all head-injury patients get screened for it. If more people are diagnosed I'll start to feel Chris' death wasn't in vain. Maybe then, the ache in my heart will begin to ease.

airways. She probably saved his life. I went in the ambulance with Chris, and John followed with the girls.

Chris was taken to the specialist head-injury wing of a London hospital, where the doctors told us he had fractured his skull and was in a coma.

They explained that the fracture was actually good because it released the pressure on Chris' brain, and we were encouraged to talk and sing to help him come round. When he awoke, five days later, his first words were: 'Can you all stop singing those stupid songs?' He was back. The relief was immense. From that moment, he went from strength to strength.

He had some paralysis in his face but physiotherapy quickly cured that. His memory was mostly unaffected, and the doctors said there were no signs of long-term damage. We all put the accident behind us and looked to the future. It's only now that I can see there were some subtle signs that all was not well.

Chris was top of his class at primary school but when he went on to secondary school he struggled to cope.

Then, during his A-levels he went missing, and we were frantic. Two days later, he returned, saying he'd gone to a youth hostel to escape the pressure. Later, despite doing well at university, he failed to finish his degree

in structural engineering. Still, he got a good job in a building society and met a girl he liked. He seemed happy.

Looking back, though, I recall Chris once telling me he felt different inside from the jokey front he presented. I wish now I'd taken that more seriously.

Chris split up with his girlfriend four years later, but didn't seem particularly heartbroken. It wasn't until after Chris's death that I discovered how deceptive appearances could be.

I was in the middle of the devastating task of sorting through his things when I found letters he'd written to his ex,

Kate*. In them, he talked about being impotent and depressed. My heart was pounding as I read. How could I not have realised what was going on?

I talked to Kate, who told me they'd never been able to have a good sex life and that Chris had even had counselling.

My mind was racing. Could his sexual problems and depression have led to his suicide?

My sister, Caroline, said she'd read about depression being linked to head injuries and she offered to do some more research.

Caroline found studies which estimated that a third of those who survive a serious brain injury are left with damage to their pituitary gland, a tiny gland attached to the brain that controls metabolism, stress and various hormones including testosterone.

Not much is known about the condition post traumatic hypopituitarism (PTHP), but the more Caroline found out, the more we were convinced Chris had been a sufferer. Symptoms

It's only now that I can see there were some subtle signs that all was not well

What you need to know about PTHP

1 135,000 people suffer traumatic brain injury each year, of which an estimated 30 per cent will have sustained pituitary gland damage.

2 Symptoms include depression, tiredness, impotence, infertility and loss of libido. Problems can occur immediately or decades later.

3 Hormone replacement therapy is an effective treatment for PTHP.



For more info, see The Pituitary Foundation www.pituitary.org.uk and brain injury association Headway www.headway.org.uk