

“My eyes are so  
**WOBBLY**  
THAT TRYING TO  
read an autocue  
**IS POINTLESS**”

TV quiz show host, Richard Osman, reveals why nystagmus has helped make him a star... and a 'weird crush' for fans.

**R**ichard Osman has been called the guru of the TV quiz show. For the past 20 years, it has been impossible to turn on the television without seeing something he dreamt up, wrote or produced. From the satirical *Have I Got News For You* and *Whose Line Is It Anyway* to crowd-pleasers such as *Total Wipeout*, *Million Pound Drop* and *Deal Or No Deal*, he's been involved in them all.

For the past 17 years, the 6ft 7in Osman has worked for TV company, Endemol, of *Big Brother* fame, which he has helped shape into the biggest production company in the world. Now aged 47, Osman has moved in front of the camera, co-hosting more than 600 episodes of the BBC teatime hit quiz show, *Pointless*, with his friend, Alexander Armstrong. It attracts a stalwart three million viewers daily and has won him an army of female admirers who crowned the bespectacled, toothy Osman their top 'Weird Crush' of 2011.

### Living with nystagmus

With such a pedigree in TV, it might seem strange that Osman once sent a tweet saying he was extremely nervous about hosting *Have I Got News For You* for the first time. When the show went on air, a die-hard fan noticed Osman shaking slightly at the start and asked if he'd been drunk.

He hadn't, and nor was he nervous. Osman has nystagmus, an eye condition that dramatically reduces his vision. He was born with it and there is no cure.

It meant that when filming *Have I Got News For You*, he had little chance of being able to read the autocue, just a few feet away.

"I also find looking directly at the camera pretty difficult," he explains.

What viewers were actually witnessing was a neurological battle. One part of Osman's brain was telling his eyes to look at the camera. The other was then allowing them to slip sideways.

Each slip and correction causes the eyes to flicker. What is so astonishing about nystagmus is that this happens at lightning speed. Within a fraction of a second, the battle starts again, over and over.

When Osman tried to look at the camera, the effort he put into trying to move his eyes back to the front led his head to appear as if it was subtly shaking.

"Staring at a fixed point when your eyes are constantly moving can make you feel nauseous and you want to look away," he adds. "I prefer my head and body to be off-centre, like in *Pointless*."

Strangely, people with nystagmus cannot see their eyes flicker, and Osman has never noticed it in either a mirror or when he sees himself on screen. Put simply, sufferers cannot

see this level of detail.

Given the effects that nystagmus has, Osman's success in a visual medium would seem all the more impressive. But he counters this argument, saying it has played to his advantage.

"I don't think I'd have the career I have now if I didn't have poor eyesight. When I am editing a TV programme, there is no point asking me about a certain camera angle or the lighting. I can't really see it. I want to talk about the feel of the show

"I've found that while everyone else is thinking about what the set looks like, I am thinking 'hold on, that joke did not work or that relationship between those two people is not where it should be', and that is all I am focusing on, which is a useful skill."

Nystagmus affects one in 1,000 people in this country. Experts still don't understand what triggers it. The result is eyes that relentlessly move to and fro, or up and down and, in rare cases, round and round. It means the eyes have less time to focus on what is in front of them because they quickly slip sideways.

Anything more than a few feet away is rather blurry and detail is lost. It also makes it hard to see a small, fast-moving object – such as a ball – as it whizzes past. Many also struggle to spot the tiny visual clues we give in expressions, from a twinkle in the eye to a



Richard Osman (left), with his *Pointless* co-star, Alexander Armstrong

momentary frown.

Incredibly, however, those born with nystagmus do not see the world as constantly shaking. The brain manages to 'edit' the bit when the eyes slip sideways and translate the remainder into the same, still world that the rest of us live in.

### Family support

Osman grew up in Sussex with his mother Brenda, 77, who also has nystagmus, and his older brother Mat, bassist of the rock band Suede, who does not.

His mother was instrumental in making him believe he could do whatever he chose in life. She allowed him to sit close to the television because she understood it allowed him to see detail that he would miss in everyday life. He was instantly enthralled, and this love affair with TV has never stopped.

She also never told him that his childhood dream of becoming a policeman would be impossible with his poor eyesight. The reality of what she felt was, of course, hidden from the young Richard.

"Nystagmus was never brought up in terms of what you can and cannot do," he says. "My mum never, ever made a big deal of it. It was only when I first had kids, when I had a daughter 20 years ago, that I remember my mum saying, after all the excitement had died down, 'Have you noticed anything about her eyes?' I said, 'No. Nothing at all,' and there was this look of relief on her face.

"I thought, you've been keeping that bottled up for 32 years and you've never told me you thought it was a big deal. What a wonderful mum you've been that you have been upset about this for so long and you have never, ever shown it to me, to not make it an issue for me and it worked."

Osman was never bullied at school over his poor eyesight and refused to be 'that kid who sits at the front'. He learnt to sit back and just listen. Despite having no extra time in exams to compensate for his eyesight, he won a place reading Politics and Sociology at Trinity College, Cambridge.



*"Nystagmus was never brought up in terms of what you can and cannot do. My mum never, ever made a big deal of it"*

After graduating, he immediately moved into researching and then writing for TV.

"I don't think people realise what an important medium TV is, especially for anyone who has something that restricts their life," he says. "It's why I absolutely love TV so much, because of what it can bring to people."

Osman is separated and has two children, a daughter aged 20 and a son aged 18. He says his visual impairment has also made him kinder, which has, in turn, made him popular on *Pointless*.

"I hope that all my life I have been on the side of the underdog, because I always slightly feel like one," he says. "I always knew the world was going on a bit without me. I know lots of people feel like that, either because of physical limitations or emotionally. And that is what I love about being on *Pointless*, loving that wonderful feeling of Britishness and kindness and underdogness that you get in people. A lot of that comes through having what is supposed to be a disability but is maybe an ability."

It can also offer him unique comedy moments.

"I was in a hotel in New York recently and at the end of a long corridor was this amazing piece of modern art. As I walked towards it, I

thought, 'wow, I'm absolutely going to find out who that is by as it's gorgeous, red and white swirls'. It was beautiful. But when I was a few feet away, I realised it was a fire hose curled up on the wall!"

Osman admits that being visually impaired can also be lonely; he loves sport but cannot play ball games. At school, he could never see the cricket ball as it hurtled towards him, so he quickly realised his limitations, sticking to close-up sports, such as pool and darts.

He watches Fulham FC but cannot make out the players or the ball, until they are right in front of him. When he tells people he has nystagmus, they rarely understand why stronger glasses won't help. The trademark dark, square glasses he wears simply correct short sightedness but do nothing for the flicker.

And like most sufferers, he cannot drive because his eyes are unable to gauge a busy road fast enough. He reads slowly too, finding it tricky to scan words across a page.

He also worries about blanking people, both colleagues and fans. He says he cannot recognise faces of friends just across the street and walks past oblivious. He can spot his daughter from a little further away because he recognises the way she walks and her long black hair.

But Osman, as usual, is positive.

"I can see the huge benefits it has brought me. I'm probably a nicer person for having it, I know that is true. I'm better at my job. It has genuinely brought me many, many things, this lack of being able to see what is going on."

Given all that, would he have it cured? The speed of his reply says it all.

"In a heartbeat."

★ Credit: Victoria Fletcher/Mail on Sunday/Solo Syndication

The Nystagmus Network will hold its annual Open Day on September 29, 2018. For information, visit <http://nystagmusnetwork.org/open-day/>.