

VWEEKEND

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I felt
dizzy
and my
vision
went
dark

Model Stella Klim has
revealed the emotional toll
of regular epileptic seizures -
and how her famous parents
have supported her

JACKIE EPSTEIN



USMAN KHAWAJA
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A MODEL OF RESILIENCE

Last year while competing on *The Amazing Race Australia*, Stella Klim's idyllic life changed. She felt suddenly dizzy and her vision went 'dark'. Soon after, the model daughter of famous folks Michael and Lindy discovered she had epilepsy. Now she has a new and unexpected role in support of the 67,000 Victorians also with the condition

Learning of a life-changing health condition while filming a TV show would throw most people for a loop.

Not Stella Klim.

Since birth, Stella's has been anything but ordinary as the eldest child of celebrity parents – Olympic swimmer dad Michael and model mum Lindy.

But falling ill while competing on *The Amazing Race Australia*, alongside her mum, in Sri Lanka last year was still a scary moment.

The Melbourne model endured a dramatic collapse during a challenge and told producers she felt "really dizzy", her vision went "dark" and she "couldn't see anything".

Despite a presumption she was suffering from heat stroke, it was soon properly diagnosed as epilepsy – a medical condition that affects the brain's ability to function and can cause recurring seizures.

Lindy said at the time that it was a shock, but



she could not have been more proud of how Stella managed the condition, which led to their exit from the show in March.

"We were so miffed because they were saying at the time that she had heatstroke. We were thinking, how could that be? We've lived in the tropics for forever. How has she gotten heatstroke?" Lindy says.

"To find out Stella was actually quite unwell, and there was an underlying medical condition, it was a bit of a shock – but also a blessing in disguise that we didn't continue."

Stella had five seizures in relatively quick succession after her TV experience.

They ranged from four to five minutes, and the 20-year-old would forget everything as she blacked out.

"At the moment, my epilepsy is fairly stable," Stella says.

"We've recently increased my medication, and it seems to be working well. The adjustment period has been challenging, but I'm slowly starting to feel like we're heading in the right direction."

"I'm working closely with my medical team to manage my epilepsy, and I'm also learning what I can do outside of medication to be more in tune with my body."

"Sleep is extremely important, so I really prioritise rest and getting enough shut-eye. It's about finding a healthy balance where I can still work, enjoy a social life with my friends, and look after myself."

Last month alone, Stella had another four seizures – including one on the day we were due to catch up for this VWeekend cover story.

"Two happened while I was alone in Sydney – one in an Uber and another outside the airport, before I had another at the hospital," she says.

"Since then, I've been taking things very slowly and focusing on healing and recovering. I'm also working through different tests and strategies with my medical team to understand what works best for me."

Stella is taking on a new role as an ambassador for Walk for Epilepsy – an October





Model Stella Klim, the new ambassador for Walk for Epilepsy, (top) at seven months old with her famous father, Olympic swimmer Michael; and (opposite page) undergoing tests for her seizures, and with her model mum Lindy. Main picture: David Caird



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fundraiser in which participants are encouraged to walk, run or ride in support of the Epilepsy Foundation.

“I didn’t know a single thing about epilepsy,” she admits.

“Now, it’s the first thing I think about every morning.

“I think it’s really important for me to raise awareness because I felt so alone when I was first diagnosed.

“I want other people who are beginning their journey with epilepsy to know they’re not alone. Everything felt overwhelming at first, and hearing other people’s stories really helped me.

“My confidence and mental health have definitely been affected as I’ve managed the fear and anxiety around having a seizure when I’m alone. I’m also conscious of the responsibility my friends and family can feel if something happens while I’m with them.

“Speaking openly about epilepsy and raising awareness helps build confidence among the people around me, and hopefully helps the general public feel more informed too.”

About 270,000 Australians – 67,000 of them in Victoria – are living with epilepsy, according to the Epilepsy Foundation.

But one in 25 Australians will be diagnosed with the condition at some point in their life.

It is the world’s most common serious brain disorder and can develop at any age, with known causes including head trauma, central nervous system infections, tumours, strokes, and inherited, developmental or genetic conditions. One in 200 children lives with epilepsy.

Since her diagnosis, Stella has listened to her body and focused on taking care of herself.

She has shared much of her experience on social media with her followers, including after >



the recent seizure when she was on the way to Sydney Airport.

Of that incident in July, she says: "I don't remember much of the car ride ... I had no idea where I was."

Once inside the airport, Stella called Lindy while staff called an ambulance. She had another seizure at the front of the airport, and then a bigger one in hospital.

"It is very scary," she says.

"I get pretty bad anxiety now. I've got a cyst on the side of my head that they're also doing every test under the sun on, to see if that might be pushing on something. What is bothering me the most is my memory, it is really starting to affect everything."

"I'm just trying to find that middle ground of also understanding that it's OK that this is the situation that I'm in, because for a while I was quite embarrassed about it."

Stella says the support of her friends, family and boyfriend Munro Montell have helped her deal with all the emotions.

"My family has been amazing throughout

this journey," she says. "With so many changes happening so quickly, having them there for support has meant everything."

"And of course, my partner, Munro, was there for my very first seizure and has been there for the majority of them ever since. He handles every situation so calmly and has really learnt what works best for me during my recovery."

"I honestly don't think I could have gotten through this without him."

Stella made her modelling debut at age 16 when she was signed with a Bali-based creative agency.

Though the lookalike of her esteemed model mum Lindy, she has worked hard to create her own community and identity.

With the backing of the ODD talent agency, she has become a regular fixture on the social scene and a well-rounded model who has garnered millions of views on Gen Z platforms Instagram and TikTok.

"Mum has taught me how to pose and hold



Stella Klim in modelling mode (left); with partner Munro Montell; and with father Michael (top) at the Logies in 2016 and (below) at a swimming event in Sydney. Pictures: David Caird, Instagram, Jason Edwards



myself in certain environments, but in terms of influencer stuff, I'm definitely helping Mum," Stella says.

Her dual Olympic gold medallist dad has had his own serious health battle – Michael, 49, was diagnosed with chronic inflammatory demyelinating polyneuropathy, for which there is no cure, in 2020. The rare nerve disorder causes him chronic pain, and threatens his ability to walk and move.

Of his daughter, Michael posted on social media last year that he "couldn't be prouder to see Stella happy and thriving, chasing her own path, soaking it all up and absolutely shining".

Stella and her three siblings grew up on the Indonesian island with their Balinese princess mum. They moved between her parents, who separated in 2016, but after a stint in Queensland she now feels settled in Melbourne.

"I've been really lucky to work with clients who are flexible and compassionate about my epilepsy," Stella says.

"Having people in my corner who understand that my health needs to be a priority has made a huge difference."

"I'm living full-time in Melbourne and I'm so happy to finally be back here. I still love going back to Bali for quick holidays and to see friends, but I don't see myself moving back permanently. At the moment, I'm really enjoying doing things that make me feel positive and motivated."

"Fashion is such a big part of who I am, so being able to design, have fun with my stylist Paul (Versace) and get creative has really helped bring my motivation back."

"I also love little adventures with my partner, whether it's a walk or hike, a day trip or anything beachy. Having that time to switch off and reset has been such a good way to recharge."

Stella is sure to be in high demand as party season gets into full swing – and she's confident her health will hold up.

"I'm already so excited for the Spring Racing Carnival and have all my planning under way," she says.

"I always love this time of year. It's so much fun experimenting with different looks and getting everyone together."

"It's also my partner's first time going to the races this year, so I'm very excited to have him as my date." ■

walkforepilepsy.org.au