

A STROKE OF BAD LUCK: MY EXPERIENCE OF RECOVERY

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Prior to having my stroke, whenever I heard of someone who had a stroke, I always thought to myself, "OK. They'll be incapacitated for a while, then proceed on with their lives." Of course, I have come to realize that it's a lot more than that!

When I had my stroke, I had no idea what was happening. For ten days, I was in intensive care. It was a terrible feeling having to lie flat on my back and not being able to move. I know I just wanted to dangle my feet off the side of the bed. I remember one day I tried climbing over the rails of the bed and the nurse yelled at me, "Where are you going!" My response was, "Just to the bathroom over there!"

There were always crazy things going through my head like thinking about things I had to do that day, like run errands. Of course, I didn't realize the extent of my condition. There were also crazy ideas about how to make a quick money making scheme work. Also, there was what I would call my song of the day where an old song would come to mind and I would be humming it in my head all day.

When it finally came time to start rehab, I was lying in bed when my rehab doctor came up to me and said, "This is the hardest thing you'll have to do." At the time, I didn't realize how right she was.

One of the first things I remember trying to do was standing from my wheelchair between the parallel bars. What an effort! Somehow I got up but not to the satisfaction of the therapists because they kept yelling, "Stand up straight, butt in, stand up straight!" Well, as far as I was concerned, I was doing just that. Obviously, I wasn't doing it properly. I would only be able to stand for a few seconds, then I would have to sit down. I was finally able to build a little strength to try walking between the parallel bars. The therapist got me up saying, "OK, here we go!" Come on feet! Why are you not cooperating? After a long while, I was able to shuffle one foot, then the other, but not without a major effort. Of course, this went on for some time. I was on the rehab floor for six weeks making minute improvements each day.

I was so glad when I was finally able to come home, but of course, nothing was the same. I certainly was not able to get around like before. If I had to go to the bathroom, I would say, "OK. Where's my wife?" I couldn't do it myself. You become so humbled, having to rely on someone else for even the basic needs.

So you're home. Now what? Go to bed early because there's work tomorrow? Wrong. Those days are over. Although I still had therapy three times a week, one hour for Occupational Therapy and one hour for Physical Therapy, to my surprise, it was like a

full day of work because when I got home I would be so tired. After a few months of outpatient therapy, I was still far from normal. I was still unable to drive and I still needed help in the kitchen.

While I was in the intensive care unit in the hospital after my stroke, I had an idea that I would be going through a life style change, but I had no idea how it would affect my family. I have three teenagers still in high school, a long way from being self-sufficient. I soon realized I would not be able to provide for my family as I had prior to my stroke. Of course, this really bothered me. My wife, who I call my pillar, said not to worry about it but just concentrate on getting better. I still think I could not have come this far if it wasn't for my wife's support.

My relationship with my thirteen year old son had changed prior to my stroke. He always wanted to play catch with me. At the time, I was working a lot of overtime, so I would be too tired or have yard work to do when I got home. After I got home following my stroke, of course I had plenty of time, but because of my condition, I could no longer play catch. I felt so bad. I did apologize to my son for not spending more time with him, but what good are apologies to a thirteen year old boy when his father is no longer physically able to be a father to him as he should be?

I also have two teenage daughters. How much can I contribute to their upbringing? Of course, the brunt of raising three teenagers and caring for me was left to my wife. She has done a wonderful job. That is why I call her my pillar. She has not only been there physically for me, but she has also been there when I needed my spirits lifted. Yes, I try to keep a positive attitude, but it's not always easy. I am not one to feel sorry for myself or ask, "Why me?" I get down when I reminisce about being very active with my passion, which is golf, or when I was playing softball or bowling, and I realize I no longer will be at that level again. Also, when I realize I no longer will be able to work at what I have been doing all of my life. After moving from job to job for a few years, I had finally found one I really enjoyed and that paid well. My plans had been to work a few more years until my kids finished college and then maybe retire. Of course, the best plans go awry when you have a stroke. I try to maintain my sense of humor. I realize I am lucky. There are people worse off than me. I do thank God for every day.

So I've come to realize a stroke recovery is a long, slow process. That's not even taking into account if there are any complications like a seizure I had which set me back quite a lot. But you have to keep going and try to keep a positive attitude.