

MY EXPERIENCE OF RECOVERY

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Recovery is a long term process. It sounds simple, but it's really complex and really long. I'm not talking about days, weeks or even months, but years. Now three years after a right ischemic stroke that paralyzed my left side, I'm gaining some perspective on time and how long, "long" really is. People had told me recovery required lots of patience and lots of time. I guess the best thing I've learned in all this time is to enjoy each day, to really live in it. Then, the recovery process will move along slowly for some of the days and fast for the years.

I've been fortunate to sleep well and wake ready to face each day. It really helps if I have something to look forward to, like a favorite food, a good looking outfit to wear, or a visit with friends. Small things mean a lot, but major milestones in recovery are part of this as well, like my first steps, the ability to pull my pants up, to get dressed or get in bed without falling. At first, it was hardest to hold my head up. By three in the afternoon, I was just pooped - too tired to continue, but not really sleepy. Tylenol after lunch and dinner came to the rescue so I'd be up playing cards at 7 PM. That kept me going for weeks. I was so surprised that I could make it through a full day without sagging in the middle. It was a big step forward – one that I rarely think about anymore. My other big struggle is balance. It's so much better, but not yet good enough to stand for more than 10-20 minutes. I can stay centered when I wake up or sit up, and even better, I can stand on my foot extended rather than on one side of the foot. I credit water therapy sessions in a heated pool for this part of my recovery. The muscles respond and relax so I can walk across the pool without support and even kick or lift my legs in ways that don't work out of the water when the muscles are cramped and tight. The hour in the pool is so relaxing that I feel good all day and sleep easily to awake refreshed.

Improved balance from standing flat footed has helped me dress faster and stand reliably without falling. I haven't fallen in two years now that I think about it. Not falling was a goal for so long and it too is now in the past. None of this came quickly or magically, but so slowly I hardly noticed improvement was occurring at the time. Maybe it takes so long so that we can use hindsight to appreciate progress. I promised my kids there would be no more "What do we do with Mom now?" phone calls. The stroke has reversed my role with my children from supporter to supported. Thankfully, my eldest, a daughter in California, stepped up to the plate to take care of me as her responsibility and to coerce her younger brother in Chicago to implement the plans she hatches for Mom. I want independence so that I can release these adult children to care for my two grandsons, not me. I don't need or require that every wish be fulfilled.

Reviewing my recovery and progress sounds so easy and the achievements so simple, that they're hardly worth writing about. But as I look back, not falling,

holding up my head and flatly standing on my foot were milestones. Each enabled several other achievements that occurred so naturally. I have forgotten how quickly and easily progress makes its inroads into daily living. Not falling means no broken bones or other setbacks. It also means you are able to try new and old activities and gain confidence to repeat or try others without falling.

So, recovery is a long term process. I discussed the word long and its interpretation, but failed to emphasize the process as a continuing, ongoing activity without a specific ending. It just keeps going, like the Energizer Bunny! It is so important to enjoy each day and do something you find pleasurable, even if just briefly. For example, it was good for me to get outside for a bit or have something to read to keep me occupied for all the hours I was just waiting for others to help me. You don't need to make every minute count, but you can fill waiting time with exercises for the mind and body to pass time. I was able to play most mind games and do puzzles to keep busy. This writing exercise is a similar activity that I may even list someday as an accomplishment or step toward recovery. We'll see.