

# **THE ARRIVAL OF A STROKE: FROM CONFUSION TO SELF ACCEPTANCE**

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A life-altering event is about to happen. It lies undetected, and as you turn the corner, it hits you smack dab in the face. Suddenly you realize there will be no turning back to all you have known. You have fallen victim to a stroke.

Yesterday, your mild headache had not warranted the simple taking of an aspirin. Your symptoms so non-descript, you chose a nap to wait for a more definite indication. Today, while still not quite yourself, you ask yourself, "Do I have a sore throat, cold or fever?" Your answer to this list is a resounding, "No!" Your slight headache remains your only clue.

After you dropped the glass, you walk to the bathroom and exclaim, "Wasn't that strange?" You try shaking it off, by beginning a normal routine, but while brushing your teeth, you fall, hitting the floor. Unable to get up, you realize you need to get to a hospital. Whatever is happening is no phase of hypochondria. Everything at best becomes surreal.

You get to the hospital unsure of how long it has been, what is going on, or what the fuss is all about. The hospital staff's pace picks up. You get a CAT scan, a shot, and an ultrasound. Your left side hurts worse than anything you have ever known. While you are confused at times, you try to figure out how or when someone hurt you, even if it was only an accident.

You realize your left side is truly paralyzed. Guarding your secret, you think you are hiding yourself, like a one year old does, when playing peek-a-boo. You have not said anything. Maybe they can not tell? Can anyone? It is a new experience. You have become different and unfamiliar, even to yourself.

You try to make demands, ask questions, but people do not understand what you are saying. Your speech still sounds quite clear to you, but people all around cannot understand you. What is up with that? You search for an answer, nevertheless, there isn't one. You want it all to stop, but it keeps right on going.

The hospital staff attempt to guess, what they can do for you. With no way to communicate, their guesses are not close enough, causing you to cry like a baby in frustration. Did they ask you again, "How you are today? Do you need anything?" Unsure, you want to answer, "Why yes! A whole new left side, please."

Your everyday tasks are not earth shattering news, but they are all you hold on to. Dreams of bathing and eating your favorite foods are mingled with the wish to be with your therapists, who you hope are the answer to bringing back your life. Your family members offer their views on your nursing home options. You hear them conversing, after all there is nothing wrong with your ears. They act as if you are not there. You become angry. All you want is to go home.

Your body has become a vessel for fear, a fear you can neither understand nor defend. It grasps hold of you like an old friend and will not let go. This stranger brings its companions and you discover that together they have robbed you of your ability to communicate, have control, stand, get dressed, or get to a washroom. A stroke is all of this these things and more.

You have lost your perspective on many things. Once able to master an exercise regime, now all of your effort goes to mastering a walk to the lavatory. You are excited to make this walk (hoping things will soon turn back to normal then) but your visitors are less than thrilled. Each day evolves slowly and you cannot wait for it to end, temporarily stopping the overwhelming abyss. The experience of a stroke recovery is unlike anything you have ever known or is it? Relief is not in a pill you long to take. You have not had surgery. There is no medicine to ease your pain.

As the weeks turn into months and years begin to pass, you are still processing your stroke's effect. The date it happened is quite clear, but how it has affected you is like a drawer thrown upside down. Through the passing of time, you have managed to work out some situations, but you are still inexperienced. Your mind does not have access to your past experience to help you. It lies just outside your reach. The new you has acquired new chores, one of which is being your own, personal interpreter of your stroke effects to others. There is much to interpret with fewer resources to do so.

You falter under the weight, no longer able to remember what you used to be. Your memories seem like someone else's photo album. You can see them but you are not connected to them. In your new reality, they hinder you and you find it easier to let them go. You begin to reinvent yourself, by giving yourself permission to be who you have become. You are not a product of someone's fantasy or what others expect of you. You are changed.

One day you realize that giving yourself patience means freedom and empowerment and in that moment, you realize your lack of compassion for the "others," namely your friends and family. They did not ask for this to happen to you, nor did they ask to be burdened with your recovery. They do not have to deal with you as much as you deal with yourself and they have been able to walk away from you. They just have not known what to do. There is nothing there to help all of you. You are not sent home with the proverbial manual or reference book.

They do not understand how it is, how it has been, or how it continues to be. It is a one day at a time world out there for you. With hope, you believe that your story will help in educating others in stroke recovery. People who knew you before your stroke act as if

you are less of a person. The new ones struggle with not knowing how you are different. You are only one who knows and you are only at the beginning of acquiring the vocabulary you need to tell them of the many ways you need accommodation.

For me, the goal was to get in to college. I did not know if I would make it. I still do not know how to tell them “how” to modify their tests, expectations or behavior. I pose this question in my defense: if a “normal” person has a hard time diagnosing and making things convenient for me, how am I supposed to do it for myself? Does this paint a clearer picture of the dilemma of proper accommodations?

People who have survived strokes are individuals as much as they were before, and everyone’s stroke has affected them differently. What does it really mean to survive a stroke? There will always be need for education, awareness and all-round acceptance of persons with stroke. My motto has become, “To be whatever I think I can be.” I have the right to set my own goals and realize my limitations, in the same way others do.