

MY LIFE AFTER A STROKE

I am still trying to put my life back together after a stroke. This wasn't supposed to happen to me. I'm in my mid fifties and was very active at work. Okay, a little overweight, but nothing clogging up my blood. It all started with a fall on black ice on the first day of the New Year, 2004. Both knees were damaged, one requiring surgery. My regular doctor, Dr. Lopin, discovered a problem with my heart and ordered more tests. I got a call from the chief of cardiology, Dr. Yakovlevitch, that same night. He wanted me in his office the next day. The heart had a trauma injury, which tore the mitral valve. It was hanging by a thread. I needed open heart surgery to repair it. The operation, by Dr. Verrier, was a success! Until the doctors discovered the stroke.

Apparently, the machine filtering the blood let a clot through. Now, the doctors and nurses were fighting to keep me alive for the next four or five days. I have a large extended family. They kept the waiting room filled while I was in intensive care. They rotated in shifts to make sure I had my back rubbed, my throat wet and their voices to soothe me. They continued this when I was out of intensive care and in the cardiac unit. My husband, Jerry, stayed with me day and night in the cardiac unit to look after my needs. I had no feeling in my right arm, no vision in my right eye and little sensation in my left fingers and arm. I could only say two words. I could not write anything! My identity was gone! I was devastated! This is how I arrived in the rehab center at the hospital.

My self-esteem was gone. I felt sorry for myself. Why wouldn't they just let me crawl into a hole and die? But, my family wouldn't let me. They were determined to get my self confidence back. The rehab center gave me the time I needed to work on my depression. My family was confined to visitor hours. I had the opportunity to work on how I wanted to deal with my new way of life.

Rehab staff's goal at Northwest Hospital was to help me function so that I could go home with my family's assistance. They had two issues to deal with. One was the physical restrictions from the open-heart surgery. Second was assessing the extent of the stroke. The staff of physical therapists, occupational therapists and speech therapists then coordinated a treatment plan. I was taught basic skills for every day living, from getting in and out of bed, dressing, showering, eating, etc. I had to have help with everything, even walking. They had to make sure I learned how to be safe and not damage anything from the surgery.

Communication took on a whole new meaning. My social skills, like taking turns while conversing, didn't exist anymore. I now seemed "bossy" because I tended to dominate conversations. Just trying to talk, or actively listen, was exhausting. My words kept coming out wrong. I couldn't even state what the topic was that I was trying to talk about.

I had to learn to tell time again, learn to count, learn to print, all the very basics. I could read, even though my cognitive skills were slow. I had been in the middle of a good novel and just had to see how it ended. This became my personal "training" challenge. I was NOT going to let anybody do my reading for me!

My husband's devotion to me was amazing. He constantly came up with new ideas to stimulate my mind. One of them was his visual aide, in the form of an ever-changing picture wall. It was fabulous! He used the computer to enlarge pictures of our home, garden, pond, kids, pets, trip's and gatherings. He taped these 8 x 10's to cover the walls. With his and my children's help, Adam and Stephanie, my attitude gradually changed. I *could* fight to regain control of my life. I just had to learn the new set of rules to live by.

Eventually, I got to go home. I had in-home visits from the speech therapist and the occupation therapist, as well as nurses. My speech therapist, Jan Regier, was exceptional. She challenged me to go beyond what I thought I was capable of. She made me learn how to think, again. Write a thought down, check carefully

how I phrased it, rewrite it, and then check it again. She taught me how to speak this way.

My heart was still an issue during this time. The heart beat had a condition called, irregular-irregular. It was like running a marathon 24 hours a day. I needed to be in a regulated cardio exercise class. As my health improved, I progressed to the out-patient rehab at Northwest Hospital for speech therapy and occupational therapy.

My speech therapist, Kara Beringer, also did much more than just work on my speech. She also helped modify my behavior and try to see a different perspective in thinking. I've now moved on to the Speech and Hearing Clinic at the University of Washington that is under the direction of Nancy Alarcon. I have weekly Aphasia Group meetings as well as individual lessons with graduate student clinicians, Rebecca, Chaitee, Shanna & Abbie.

The challenge is constant for me to improve. My confidence has gradually come back. My family has continued to support me. I'm grateful for the hard work and help from everyone at the UW Speech and Hearing Clinic and everyone who has helped me during my recovery.