

Speaking from Experience

Stroke in Midlife USA

Transcript for Chapter 2 of 9: Physical impact

Dave –

It occurred in the area of my motor cortex on the right side of my brain and that's the part of my brain that controls the motor function on the left side of my body. So the most significant effect was that the left side of my body was more or less paralyzed. Paralyzed, not meaning it was frozen, which was what I pictured. It would move if someone else would move it. I just couldn't give any instructions to make the muscles do anything on my left side.

Cynthia –

They were thrilled that I wasn't completely paralyzed from the neck down. Instead I was hemiplegic; just paralyzed completely on the left side. Like, it didn't exist. So, in an instant I lost my function completely on the left side of my body.

Carmel –

When I realized I was paralyzed on the left side, I have to admit that I said a prayer of thanks. That was because I was so severely right-side dominant and it had not affected my right side and I know that's a crazy thing to say, I said a prayer of thanks, but I can't imagine what would have happened if it had hit my right side.

Trish –

Right side was... arm and hand weak, weak, weak, weak.

Colin & Caroline –

The stroke was caused by a blockage so it wasn't a bleeding stroke and the general symptoms are very quick loss of movement, which is exactly what happened. It took approximately 5 minutes from me being absolutely fine to having lost all... the whole of one side. And the loss of hot and cold and pain on the right side is very typical of Wallenberg's as well. Vertigo is not always there but I had the vertigo with it. You don't lose any cognitive or speech, thank goodness. I'm very thankful for that part. I was expecting at least a couple of weeks of respite. It was not to be.

Sachi –

I woke up the following day, I guess. And my husband was talking to me and I understood everything he said, but I tried to answer back, but I couldn't. I couldn't make any sense of what I was trying to say.

Dave –

You suddenly realize how much we take for granted what these amazing bodies that we have do. I mean, what it takes simply to take a step. It's an amazing number of muscles that have to do something for one step to happen. It's, I don't know, hundreds of thousands of individual muscles have to get certain instructions to cause a step to happen. And you...we all take that for granted because we learned how to do it when we were little kids. And when we were little kids it was tricky, but we learned it and once we learned it we never had to think about it again, you just do it naturally. And fixing myself a meal became a big objective. How could I do this?

Cynthia –

A lot of life had been pretty simple. Making dinner, ya know, putting dinner on the table, keeping the household going had been fairly simple. Now all of a sudden it was a completely different dynamic. And I'd have the plate in my hand and say, "Dinner's ready" and drop it because this hand couldn't feel and the minute I took my eyes off of it it landed on the floor. That didn't happen before. That was not...so then cleaning up...so everything has a layer of complication that it never had before.

Colin & Caroline –

Because my left hand will occasionally do involuntary movements... for instance, let's say if I'm slicing a lemon, I will get a carving fork, hold the carving fork on the end of the lemon and slice it against that, just in case my fingers do something strange. The other thing I learnt very early on which is not so much of a problem now, was the first time

that Colin had...when they let me out of full-time live-in rehab, I was doing full-time rehab but I came home at the end of the day...Colin had a meeting and he had one of the therapists drop me off at home and he said to me would I be able to feed the dogs and I said, "Oh yes, no problem." It hadn't occurred to me I had to actually hold the can opener to open the can and these poor dogs were looking at me like I was the meanest person because I just simply couldn't get into this can to feed them. So we very quick learned that going to get an electric can opener was necessary if I was going to feed the dogs.

Carmel –

I collected a number of items that I knew I could use in the kitchen one-handed. I have a whole collection of these things and it expanded past kitchen items. I expanded it to something...a hair dryer that I found. I use a brush and a comb so you can style your hair at the same time with just one hand. And then I found something for folding laundry that you can do with one hand.

Cynthia –

I think...ya know, I've broken several bones because I've been trying to be so normal... heading out there. I'm learning to be more cautious, but again I go back to the kind of personality I have because I just think if I want to do it I should be able to do it. And so...for me gardening was a huge thing that I loved, and I was outside a lot, gardening and making pots and planting things. So several of my falls have been related to doing things I love. Now I still haven't stopped doing them. I've just learned to slow down.

Colin & Caroline –

Once you've had a stroke, things that previously you wouldn't even think about it suddenly become high-risk activities. If it involves the stairs or steps, or something that's hot, for someone who's got a right hand that doesn't feel heat. All of these things you need to start to include them in to how do you set up life.