

Weathering A Sudden Storm Of A Stroke

[A stroke survivor struggling with his own speech difficulty he shares (not edited or polished) with his fellow stroke survivors on their own journey].

Jim Burns

The Lord granted me an awesome privilege – a brain. A brain is such a wonderful gift. It only takes one *stroke* to make you realize such an awesome brain you have. We take it for granted that the brain routinely performs mental acts every day, and even waking hours of our lives.

We usually think strokes are for other people. We think that stroke usually affects older people or those of ill health. However, strokes can affect many people. Simply, a stroke is what happens when blood can't reach the brain. It can be a result of a blood clot, blocking of arteries, causing hemorrhaging, and lack of crucial nutrients and oxygen that can't reach to the brain.

There are about 700,000 Americans having strokes each year, having permanent damages and about 150,000 of them die as a result. There are about 5.7 million stroke survivors in the United States today, many of whom have suffered from permanent disabilities caused by stroke.

Stroke warning signs can be experiencing sudden numbness or weaknesses in the face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body; confusing; and trouble speaking or understanding language. Some people have trouble seeing, or walking, experiencing dizziness, or having a loss of balance. Another sign is a severe headache with no known cause. When I entered the ER the doctor asked me to do the 1 – 10 pain scale. I told him it went off the scale – the most excruciating pain I've ever had.

Non-stroke people simply take for granted the processes of our brains. The brain just does its thing. Our brain has been doing what it is doing for years almost automatically, second by second, minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day for our entire life-time.

Cognitive scientists recognize the marvelous processes of the human brain. An example: Speaking the word, "word" is a complex process. A non-stroke person can simply read the word "word." You simply read it. However, there are several processes that require recognizing various shaped letters, compared images that are stored in memories of printed letters, which are located someplace in the galactic mass of your brain cells. The organizational process of the human brain takes tremendous work to say or read the word "word." That is an awesome privilege God has given us, just to say the word, "word."

The speaking activity centers in the hemispheres of the brain have processes revolving around reading silently or reading aloud. There are complex mental tasks in the interaction of a number of parts of the human brain are beyond our imagination. The brain does all its multi-tasking jobs just keeping on keeping on. The studies of cognitive

scientists are seemingly finding new information almost daily of the tremendous processes of the human brain.

Just imagine your brain. It is about ten billion neurons in the cortex of your brain alone (a hundred billion if you include the interior of the brain). Imagine them connected to hundreds of others by anywhere from 1,000 to 10,000 synapses or relay points. These things are happening day and night every single day of your entire life automatically.

If you are a recovering stroke victim you might liken your experience to watching the moment of the brain being constructed again. It is kind of like a mental process assembled of our raw materials of the brain, an experience much like an infant or child. A stroke victim is like being re-constructing the brain. The reconstruction of the brain takes great patience, considerable ingenuity, and willingness to engage in various activities that are serious and profoundly difficult. Re-constructing the speech of the brain, you may require working with simple stories, organizational exercises, simply learning the numbers, learning sequences and all important studies they might seem to be like elementary.

A stroke recovery victim is probably one of the most challenging feats you'll ever have to brave. My brain disabilities, processes and my speech difficulty challenged me to one of the greatest degree of my life. Rehabilitation is one of the strongest and most courageous activities I have ever encountered.

One of the greatest obstacles a stroke survivor faces can be depression. My stroke brought on depression. I had never been in such a dark place in my life, after having my stroke. Jill Provost, *Set Your Mind on Stroke Recovery*, says: "with 40 to 50 percent of patient survivors from the first year after their episode, depression saps their motivation for rehab and prevents their appreciation and celebrating their achievements. Depression can also isolate them from their friends and activities that would keep them from staying engaged and working at their goals." In other words it can sabotage our own survival and progress.

I would welcome you to visit your doctor if you need prescription to help you with depression. I had never had an anti-depressive until I had my stroke. It was my rehab therapist who told me how important it was for my recovery to watch my depression. My therapist reminded me that it was not embarrassed to have an anti-depressive. A prescription is just a prescription. If you had a headache you'd probably never think about taking a Tylenol. An anti-depressive can help you getting through some of those most difficult times.

A stroke survivor can be stressed from the loss of identity. We may have been a fixer or a rescuer; one who has spent a life-time for others. We may be one of those special personalities that need to be in control, obsessive, highly motivated, action oriented, risk-taking, and a strong need to be needed. We may suddenly realize we are the needy, and no longer able to give need to others. We may suddenly realize that we are unable to do our job, and that another is now doing our job. We may realize that we don't have to be

needed anymore. Now we are suddenly the needy. We have to take on the child-parent role reversal, being our child having to care for us. I had my daughter to drive me everywhere. I had her order my meals and even count out change for me. My strong fixer, rescuer role flip-flopped from one having to do for others, to dependent on someone else caring for me. My identity of sixty-nine years was suddenly changed as a result of my stroke.

Stroke survivors are likely to feel rejected. There can be nothing harder than rejection to the hurt of your heart. One of the most painful wounds you can feel is rejection – whether real or imagined. When the stroke survivor is not able to share his/her tasks, they might likely to feel rejection. Rejection means to cast aside, cast off, and cast away-to be thrown away as having of no worth, like an old shoe, or an old rickety piece of furniture, or an old scrap of gum wrapper. We may overhear others whisper that we are unable to do our job any more. A stroke survivor can even be unwelcomed in the social group because they don't belong anymore. In the stroke survivor's mind they might feel no longer worthy, and they may seem to be useless.

Often times the seen of rejection can sabotage us. The darkness of rejection can discolor our perspective of others and great damage to our relationships. As a stroke victim we can feel the pain of rejection, real or imagined, we can feel unloved and unaccepted. It is important to deal with the pain of rejection, especially those imagined feelings that can be so detrimental to us.

You will always be something in your heart that you've always been in your heart. A person can take his/her job, but you can't take the heart of that job out of your heart. When a person who has been an educator, a physician, a minister, a mechanic, or whatever a person does in his/her life, he may lose his skill, but he cannot lose his heart. You are yourself, no matter what happens to you, you are still you. As my therapist tells me over and over and over again to be patient – you are in there.

My speech therapist, such a strength and support, gave me over and over again to be patient, slowly, slowly, patient. Take it one step at a time. You're doing good, just keep slowing down. And my friend, Chaplain Nick, kept encouraging me to "Pace yourself."

Stroke rehabilitation is not a one-stop process or a quick fix. There are times when I thought about the time I was a multi-tasking, life-learning, constantly practicing, and doing individual that I was now unable to do. I thought about my multi-disciplined individual – a preacher, teacher, chaplain, and administrator –for almost forty five years, but I am not able to do those things again. When I left many of my rehab sessions, I often felt like a little child. Sometimes it really cut me to the core knowing that I could not do those things anymore. However, my therapist encouraged me to keep on keeping on the exercises.

My stroke has lost a small percentage of my neurons and whatever functions were associated with those brain cells. What's done is done. No matter how I remember them, there are some lost abilities that the stroke has robbed me.

However, I am working at it, regaining some abilities by reassigning new neurons. Studies show that those who exercise regularly will be reassigned those neurons. My therapist I have assigned daily homework projects every week. The therapist pushes me, while slowly enough to keep me going at a right pace for me.

I am reminded of my fire chief keeping me learning, learning and practicing. He pushed me just enough to keep me doing the best job possible. The rehabilitation therapist does just like my old chief did for me. I am learning, learning, learning, and practicing, practicing while I am assigning new neurons. One of the first techniques the therapist used was repetition. The therapist asked me the song, "Happy Birthday to You." Too my surprised, I followed the therapist to the song of "Happy Birthday." The therapist asked if my wife liked to sing. I told her my wife, Susan, loved to sing. She recommended that we sang every day together. Another therapist shared that I should do some of my Power Point teaching classes as exercises. The Power Point was a great conditioning for me as well. I cannot appreciate the encouragement my therapists pushed me toward my exercising. It was vital to my recovery.

As a care-giver for more than forty years with people struggling through critical incidents, crises, disaster stress, loss and grief, I have seen many people survived through support groups. I believe support groups are a valuable resource for personal struggles, including stroke survivors.

I suggest you join a stroke support group. A support group provides a safe-place to share, where you can cope with your depression and isolation; where you can hear others share their rejections, grief and pain. You can share your others in the group who will help them as we mutually join together with our own journey.

Complete recovery is not going to happen. I discovered that my speedily and complete recovery was not going to happen. I certainly want to encourage you to recover, and to have a positive attitude whatever you can do to bring about recovery. However, I want to share with love and compassion that it is not going to be speedily and a complete recovery. It is going to take time, to take exercising, and patiently working at it one day at a time.

Walking out of rehab door is not the end of your recovery road. I had one of those good days, about two days when I could talk a blue streak. I said to my therapist, "OK, I guess I'm ready for my graduation, right?" Well, I will never forget that sweet face turned into a stern brow and said, "We don't graduate you from here!" Well, she used an opportunity to teach me. "Oh, yes, Jim, you can be at a plateau." "Sure you think you feel cured." "Then there, are like you, who have several bad days and decide to give up." "There are some who believe they're not getting any better so they'll just stop their exercising."

When a stroke victim decides to stop his exercise, whether he doesn't believe it getting better, there is usually a downward spiral after he stops his treatment. Kind of like the

saying, “If you don’t use it, you will lose it.” Many times simply one gives up on the difficulty of speaking, and they just simply stop communicating altogether.

Don’t stop your exercising. The only way you’re going to be really miserable as a stroke victim is to sit down in your recliner and do absolutely nothing.

A hobby can help. Find something that gives you some satisfaction, no matter how crude or unskilled it may be. Practice it.

Find a group of people who like to do the things you like to do. New relationships can carry you far in adjusting weathering the emotional storms and helping you to work out the post-stroke process. It really doesn’t matter what you do, just do something.

My friend, keep on exercising, and exercising some more.

©Jim Burns, Revised 20101105 (1 year anniversary of my stroke)

About the Author

James “Jim” Burns discusses weathering the storms of life from a background of many years as a retired minister and public safety chaplain. Jim has worked with people going through some terrible storms in their lives, as well as weathering many difficult storms in his own life. Jim recently became a stroke survivor himself, and working through his own difficulties and seeking to share his fellow survivors through their own journey.

As a public safety chaplain he has ministered to individuals having the absolute worst days of their lives – all kinds of crisis and disaster, survivors of homicide, suicide, terrorist threats, victims of violence and abuse, and first responders in the fire service and law enforcement that see more disaster and death in a single day than most people can only imagine in a lifetime.

As a pastor he has spent countless hours with people working their way through anxiety, anger, resentment, hopelessness, doubt, temptation, prejudice, misunderstanding, shame, serious illness, death and grief. He was a facilitator for an area-wide Grief Support Group for a number of years, and taught many seminars in grief and mourning, survivors of violent death and suicide, caring for the terminally ill, through adjusting to loss.

Jim includes ministerial/pastoral training (BBS, ThM, DMin, PhD), critical incident stress management (CISM) training, pastoral crisis intervention (PCI I & II) training, basic (16 hrs) and advanced fire chaplain (130+ hrs.) training, 14 certifications through FEMA, and a Certified Master Level Instructor of FFC.

Among numerous awards and leadership over the years are:

- Liberty and Justice Award of Merit*, National Assoc. of Chiefs of Police, 1986
- Outstanding Community Service Award*, KNOE, 1987
- Letter of Appreciation for Devotion to Department*, Chief, SCTFD, 2004
- Appreciation for Outstanding services to Katrina/Rita*, Red Cross, NLA, 2005
- Commendation for Hurricane Relief*, Federation of Fire Chaplains, 2006
- Commendation for Distinguished Leadership and Service*, IFCC, 2008
- Founders Award*, Federation of Fire Chaplains, 2009
- Commendation for Distinguished Service*, Federation of Fire Chaplains, 2010

Jim is married to Susan (Elmore) Burns, MA, MEd, HFA, Area Supervisor, Gulf Coast Teaching Family Services, Alexandria area; has two sons, three step-daughters, seven grandchildren, a dog and a cat.