

Recovery Helps

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Recovering from a stroke is like taking a long journey, with many stops along the way. With stroke, you are not able to get from here to there (recovered) as quickly as you would like (or as completely as you would like). It is a slow, long process with many little steps and time spent on frustrating plateaus. All of us heal differently. All of us heal at different speeds. But, the happy truth is that all of us do keep healing.

In this section you will find information about some of the things I have found to be helpful in the healing process. These are things that I have either learned from sources beyond my formal therapies, or things that I have self-discovered.

I am not a doctor, nor do I play one on television. With that in mind, use sound judgment in sorting through this material. Apply what is useful to your situation and discard what is not. If you have any questions at all regarding something, check with the physician overseeing your care to get answers.

With that caveat in place, follow the links on this page to learn more of what I have done (and am doing) to make progress in the restoration of my health.

Keep healing!
Dave

ICU PSYCHOSIS

I write these words here, because I don't know where else to place them. I hope someone reading this document with a loved one in the early days of recovery will find them to be of some help in understanding the situation their loved one is encountering in the hospital's ICU.

When I came out of sedation and entered my new life in a hospital ICU, I suffered what is termed "ICU psychosis." The best I can explain, this type of psychosis is the result of a sudden, dramatic change in one's health and the mental stress that is thus imposed.

ICU is a strange new world, indeed. One's senses are overloaded by a myriad of strange machinery in ICU. It is also a place where time passes in a gray fashion, where the only way of marking time's progress is by a wall clock and television programming. There is a major disconnect from life beyond the ICU's walls, and therefore a certain amount of unreality enters one's mind.

ICU psychosis manifested itself a number of times during my 3 week stay in neurological ICU. At first, I did not want to give in to my need for sleep, lest I would never open my eyes again. So long as my eyes were open, I reasoned that I would remain alive. I remember a nurse trying to convince me that I was "not dying," and it was ok for me to sleep. Inside, I knew she was right. Yet, despite my fatigue I could not and would not sleep. Finally, medication stopped the fight, allowing me needed rest.

One night, late at night, a code red was called. When that code is called in ICU all sorts of noise ensues and from my vantage point, I was able to see panels of lights begin to blaze and blink with warning. The loss of control over your own life, makes each episode of a danger code one in which you wonder if you are the patient who's vital signs plunged and are responsible for the commotion on the floor. You mentally breathe a sigh of relief as the nurses and doctors race past your cubicle, on their way to a cubicle occupied by someone else.

On that late night, when the code was called, sadly a man had died in the ICU. Later I would learn that he had been involved in a motorcycle accident. After the death, the man was wheeled past my cubicle. As I observed him passing by, I noted that he was a young man who wore a beard just like mine. An igloo cooler was on the gurney beside him. It was obvious that this man would become an organ donor, offering hope to a family beyond the ICU. As I lay there, trying to process the information with my limitations, I began to wonder if in fact that man was me. I wondered if I were watching the end of my life. Again, when nurses came in to attend to me, I learned that my mind was playing a game with me.

After I had been in ICU for some time, I wanted to have control over my life again. The severity of the situation was pushed aside, as in my mind I planned and plotted on how to regain my life. I reasoned with myself, that I would just go home and begin to

rebuild my body by riding my wife's exercise bike (even though I was still totally paralyzed). As I think back, how foolishly my mind was attempting to cope with the extreme losses imposed by the stroke.

I write this so that caregivers and family members of those whose stroke has imposed such sudden and desperate changes, might understand the extreme stress may in fact lead to a certain disconnect with reality on the part of their loved one. Understanding this, patiently deal with your loved one, gently nudging back to a cognizance of reality while at the same time not being upset over things being said that may not be rooted in reality, but merely in the moment.



Nutrition

The inactivity of the stroke found me piling on weight as soon as I was able to eat "real" food when my ability to swallow returned. In December of 1999 I took a look in the mirror and decided to try to change the man who looked back at me. I began by following a restricted carbohydrate/high protein diet for six months. The "diet", authored by the Drs. Eade and detailed in their book "Protein Power", enabled me to lose 55 lbs. The new way of eating also impressed my primary care doctor in several ways. Not only did my weight and blood pressure improve, but my cholesterol and triglyceride levels fell to a much healthier level.



Eating that way forever would be very difficult, however. So as time has passed, I have retained some of my discipline from the diet phase and have chosen to follow a more normal eating pattern (including complex "unprocessed" carbohydrates) but eating small portions six times daily. I also make sure to take in 1 gram of protein / pound of bodyweight every day. I limit my carbohydrates to breakfast and lunch, trying to totally limit carbohydrates after 3pm (especially those that are highly glycemc).

My food choices now stay away from highly processed foods, emphasizing natural things like vegetables (yup I actually like them now!). When you remove so much of the chemicals and sugars from your diet, it is amazing to see how foods you never would have chosen before become something looked forward to. I also choose foods that are low in saturated fats. Fast-food finds me at Subway, instead of with a burger or slice of pizza in my paw. When I do "splurge" and eat my old junk for a meal, I feel crummy the next day. When you place your body into a healthy mode for a period of time, you discover how taxing much of the current processed foods really are on the body.

This healthier way of eating has preserved the positive changes caused by my initial dieting. In addition to continued the weight loss, I have recomposed my body in a leaner fashion, feel better and have better stamina.

The changes I have made have now lasted two years. It is important to think of the changes as lifestyle changes and not as merely a diet. Exercise coupled with good nutrition, is something proactive you can do to help your health. You can control this part of your life, if you want to. But... you have to want to.

I have now lost about 70 pounds and have shrunk from a size 42 waist to a size 34. XL shirts have been replaced by M)ediums. Having to purchase new clothes has been a delight. Woohoo! Am I done? No! I keep trying to see how much more "control" over my body I can gain.

Supplements



I have done extensive reading on stroke. In my research, there are some substances that may help the body prevent recurrence of stroke. Here are the supplements I am currently using: **WHEY PROTEIN POWDER:** Whey powders are an easy way to make sure that you are taking in sufficient protein, so that your bodyfat will decrease. Becoming leaner is a way to stave off many different health concerns caused by carrying too much weight.

MULTI-VITAMIN: This vitamin contains the important B-series vitamins (touted as a stroke preventatives because of their importance in the body's production and use of blood), in addition to other healthy vitamins. Be sure to choose a multi-vitamin without Vitamin K if you are on blood thinning medication. I currently use a multi called "The Bridge" that is sold by Dave's Power store (www.davespowerstore.com).

EFA: Essential fatty acids are found in fish oil and flaxseed oil. Recent studies have shown that healthy amounts of this "good fat" will reduce plaque buildup in the arteries. This supplement can be consumed either by eating cold water fish frequently or in tablet form.

Supplementation of EFA was recommended by my M.D. The whole grain bread i eat, "Health Max" by Natural Ovens (a Wisconsin Company), contains additional flaxseed.

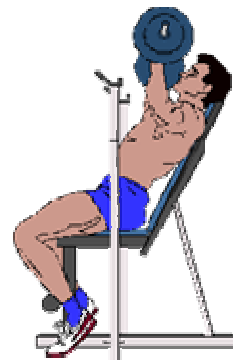
FOLIC ACID: Studies have shown a link between this and a reduced risk of stroke. You can get this either by a supplement tablet or by drinking a large glass of orange juice daily.

CREATINE: I have used this supplement on and off, after reading research from scientist's studying MS. I found that some studies are using this substance to help with neurological damage. Since stroke is similar to MS in that there is a signal loss between the brain and muscles, I tried creatine supplementation. I have found improvement in strength and coordination when using this natural substance.

GINKGO BILBOA: This herb helps increase blood flow to the brain. A study cited by the American Neurological Association's NEUROVISTA emagazine reported that in the brains of lab mice, this herb has been shown to limit the damage caused by stroke. I take this in the hope that should I fall prey to a recurrent stroke, some of the damage may be lessened. Again, while phasing this in people using blood thinners should regularly have their INR checked, as this herb does have mild blood thinning qualities.

Weight-Training

I joined the hospital's community fitness program in August of 1999 and began working out with weights and walking a treadmill. At first the weights I used were very light and the treadmill moved oh-so-slowly. Those days have given way to a normal gait on the treadmill and normal (for a 43 year old man) or above weights.



As time has passed I have come to enjoy this weekly endeavor and now haunt a fitness/weight room five days each week. Most of the other sports and recreational activities I enjoyed prior to stroke were taken away by the loss of balance and coordination, in that they are dependant upon speed. Weight-training, however, is

not a speed sport. At the same time, weight-training by its very nature allows you to track your improvement, offering feelings of accomplishment.

The regular exercise has built up my stamina and muscle strength.



I follow this schedule:

MONDAY: Chest, Abs

TUESDAY: Back

WEDNESDAY: Legs, Abs

THURSDAY: Biceps and Triceps

FRIDAY: Shoulders, Abs

I also include 20 - 40 minutes of cardio on
MON WED and FRI

I use 3 types of lifts for each muscle being exercised and will do 4 sets of 8-10 repetitions (following a warm-up set of light weight).

More and more medical research is coming out with findings of how weight training betters health in a variety of ways. In fact, some doctors now suggest that if you only have time for one form of exercise, resistance training with weights has advantages that even outweighs cardiovascular exercise!

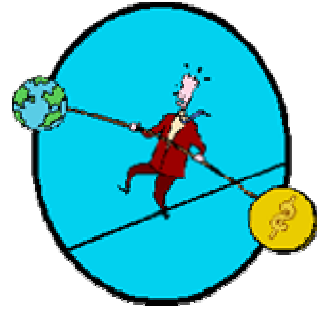
If you have never trained with weights, there is great information in MUSCLE & FITNESS magazine on how to safely lift for the various muscles groups. If you are unsure of doing this by yourself, many hospitals now feature fitness programs as extensions of their formal rehabilitation programs. These fitness programs are usually run in the hospital gym by physical therapists and incorporate the use of weight-training machines and cardiovascular exercise.

I can't stress how important exercise is after stroke, physically and emotionally too. Physical exercise sends signals of wellness bouncing through the brain. I encourage you to find time to incorporate exercise (within your ability) in your daily schedule. I make time by arriving at the gym by 6am, so that I am done on my way by 7:30am. The benefits are incredible!

Be sure to consult with your physician before beginning any exercise program!

Regaining Your Balance

Immediately after the stroke, my sense of balance was severely compromised. In fact, at first I was strapped into a contraption called a "Cadillac Chair" and was able to tolerate only minutes in an upright, seated position. As my vertigo improved, the therapists had me challenge my balance by many exercises, including walking while hanging onto to parallel bars in the hospital gym, shifting weight from side to side in order to catch a large ball, weight bearing on my hands from a kneeling position, etc. At first, even these simple, silly endeavors were extremely frustrating and difficult.



When I left the hospital, my therapy continued as an out-patient at a rehabilitation gym. There the therapists continued to push the healing process, teaching my brain and body to walk a balance beam (somewhat) and to navigate stairs. Also they prescribed many stretching and strengthening exercises as homework, to bolster muscle strength and coordination. (The many weeks of motion deprivation when I was in the hospital had caused significant muscle atrophy.)

All of these activities served to challenge the brain to reconnect to muscles and nerves, regaining a sense of equilibrium. I am a firm believer that the body heals most when it can be placed in positions requiring it to re-learn the abilities that were stolen by the stroke. The more challenges you give the brain to reprogram itself, the greater the chance that you will heal.

In addition to these formal "therapist" prescribed forms of helping to regain balance, I found...

Hunting

Balance problems improved significantly as I attempted to follow my longtime hobby of hunting. It was a personal goal to defy the doctor's prediction of not being in the woods for the 1999 hunting season. Through hard work and God's blessing I was in the woods for the opener on September 18th of that year.

It was unbelievably difficult to navigate the uneven ground of the woods at first (and truth be told, I did fall several times), but that challenge allowed my brain to relearn balance - not perfectly - but much better. Even if hunting is not something you would like to do, I would suggest a walk through the woods (if you are able safely to do it or helped by a friend) can yield great benefits. Not only does this offer an opportunity for healing by tremendously challenging your balance, but it is a wonderful thing emotionally - offering a far better therapy setting than the sterile environment of a medical gym.

Snowmobile for Balance

Another way that I challenged my balance during the Wisconsin winter was to ride a snowmobile. Snowmobiles are not as tippy as bicycles but they do require a sense of balance to control. The brain must constantly be working the micro-muscles of the body, seeking to stay balanced on such a machine.

Interestingly, I have read that in England horseback riding (a similar type of balance exercise in many ways) is being used as a therapy for stroke victims. Riding a bike, or a tricycle, anything that challenges the sense of balance (while being enjoyable) could be helpful.

(Note in 2006: My balance has recovered so well that I am able to ride a motorcycle now... 10,000+ miles last season!)

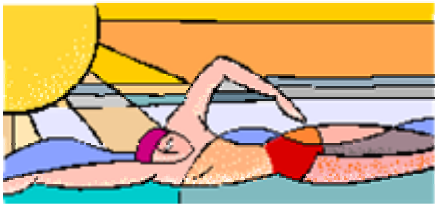
Mirrors

One of the most common side-effects of stroke, is that survivors struggle with an abnormal "drop" in their feet as they walk. This makes one's balance even more challenging!

Walking a treadmill (it can be set at a safe speed for your ability) while watching yourself in a mirror helps the brain relearn what a correct walk looks like. The visual feedback of a mirror is being used to help stroke victims with "neglect" (failure to use weakened appendages) to recognize the neglect and correct it.

Interestingly, weightlifters have long recognized the importance of mirrors in helping them keep correct form as they lift weights. By looking into a mirror, a better mind/muscle connection is forged. This is evidenced by the many mirrors found on weight-training gym walls (and you thought it was just vanity!). Mirrors help us to learn (and relearn) movement.

Pool Therapy



I have always enjoyed the water. My mother accused me of being a water bug more than once in my youth. So when the physical therapist recommended pool therapy in the months following my stroke, that sounded really good to me.

Pool therapy served to remind me of how weak I had gotten (especially the muscles of my lower back from being confined to a bed for so long). It is amazing how relatively little time need pass before the body is significantly impacted by illness.

On my first visits to the pool I did my best impression of a rock. The pool did prove to be a wonderful environment to challenge balance. It was a place where there wasn't any fear of falling and being hurt. It had the wonderful effect of being an environment where one could feel closer to "normal." In addition to the mental pick-me-up aspect of the pool, there is the resistance of the water to strengthen muscles and an aerobic component as well.

I enjoyed the time in the pool, it was good for my spirits. Look for everyday ways you can incorporate therapy strategies to challenge the healing process and lift your spirits.

Massage Therapy

During the summer following my stroke, I began a series of massage therapy sessions. Massage helped to relieve some of the muscle spasticity that is especially present on my left-side.



I believe the touch stimulating the body's nerves served to relieve some of the numbness that was a result of the stroke. I also believe that "touch" helped to "wake up" some slumbering nerves. After the series of massage appointments I found some of the numbness retreating.

I was able to find therapists who were competent in deep muscle massage, with additional training in neurological massage. I would suggest that those seeking relief from stroke's damage find similarly trained massage therapists.

Lability

One of the most difficult aspects of stroke is the emotional lability. Being prone to laugh and cry easily, sometimes inappropriately, is very frustrating.



I don't know of any way to "cure" this other than time. A stroke is like throwing a big rock into the pond of emotion. At first, the stroke creates huge waves of emotion. As time passes, the waves change to ripples and return more toward normal.

For a time, the doctors had prescribed medication to help with this issue. As healing has progressed, I was able to wean my way off all medications for emotions. I look forward to the disturbed emotions continuing to be less of a struggle as the days go forward.

While I haven't discovered a cure, I have found things that help. Exercise helps a great deal. The release of serotonin within the brain, after exercise, promotes feelings of wellness. I also know that being well-rested helps control emotions. Proper nutrition can also

help. These are basic things you can do to keep your body balanced, so that you can better fight the waves of emotion. Finally, quiet meditation on God's Word creates a peace of soul that is helpful for dealing with emotion and life in general.