

"How Do You Recover?"

Life after a stroke is often never the same again, but Sharad Kumar says he is blessed with another chance at appreciating and valuing the things he took for granted earlier.

I was a regular person, with a job, a family, a life. I took these for granted, but I took health seriously, exercising and eating right. Life though, doesn't often go according to plan – not my plan, at least.

THE STROKE

That Wednesday morning lacked the usual hectic routine since my boss was on holiday. I got ready and left the house to board a bus. I was on the mobile phone for the hour-and-a-half long journey to Whitefield convention centre, in Bengaluru. There, I met a good friend and chatted with him, then spoke to my boss on the phone. These are mundane occurrences, but you don't realize how special each moment is until you lose your ability to function like you are used to. At the convention centre, as I walked around

the stalls, I suddenly experienced speechlessness. My wife called and I was forced to cut her calls. I tried to tell the person at a counter something, but words failed me. I did not think that I was having a stroke. Instead, I thought there was a problem with my voice box. Every other part of my body was functioning, but I decided to go home and got in a bus. My wife called again and I gave the phone to the conductor. She, unlike me, had an idea about what was happening. The bus driver drove over footpaths and he sped past bus stands. All the while, I was bleeding internally and about 2 hours passed. There was someone who seemed unusually dressed in white sitting next to me, who helped me communicate with my wife. Was he just a traveller, or was he an angel? I'll never know.

THE AFTERMATH

Even as I was being wheeled into the hospital, I was an unlikely patient, because I looked 'normal'. But then, blackness, a fog. When it cleared, I saw myself in a hospital gown in a room with stark-white walls. My bed was raised and a pillow angled at my neck made my head throb. I was shown a hospital chart with big letters and signs. I couldn't read; I struggled and choked. The words were a jumbled mess. My brain refused to help. My eyes blurred with the effort of concentration.

I had every possible test over the next 12 days in hospital. Four days in the ICU after brain surgery, and another 6 on the neurological floor didn't yield many answers. I only knew it was a hemorrhagic stroke, with blood vessels that had burst, forming a pool of blood that spanned the right top of my head from front to back. Statistics say that 37.5% of hemorrhagic strokes result in death within 30 days, compared to 7.6% of ischemic stroke. Not great news for a 45-year old, previously healthy Karate black belt, who swam 45 laps of a pool daily.



THE MONTHS AHEAD

For several months after the surgery, I was banned from using a mobile phone. Gradually, the ban lifted and I began answering the phone myself. It was very exciting to push the green button and say hello, because regaining speech meant regaining confidence. I soon began to string 4 or 5 words together, though they would sometimes stall, lose direction and sound confusing. It was an effort. I pieced together a conversation with patient friends. I celebrated my progress every day, staying focussed on how well I was doing. I shared my triumphs with my wife Archana, and my younger brother, Santosh. No matter how small the progress, I was inspired to continue.

Learning to read all over again, is by far the hardest thing I've had to do. Poornima, my taskmaster and speech therapist, coaxed me along. Although I struggled, my brain, I was told by the experts, was now a work



I knew the world was not all sunshine and rainbows. But there I was that Wednesday, believing I was invincible.

in progress—very slow progress. Not at all like the quick mind of a child seeing the world for the first time.

The right side of my body went numb because of the stroke. I could barely walk and used crutches after the surgery, afraid to take a single

step without them, certain that I would fall. Slowly, the strength returned to my right leg. After 8 months, my right hand was still useless—I could not turn the pages of my son Dev's book, nor could I grip a pencil to trace the English

alphabet in the books that Archana brought me.

The numbness sometimes yielded to a feeling of pins and needles that run furiously along the right side of my body. I trained my left hand to grip a pencil. I also trained myself to use the bathroom without assistance.

A task as simple as tying my shoe laces took me 20 minutes and there were days when I fell back in bed in exhaustion, the laces a tangled heap. Slowly, after 9 months of flexing and fixing, I regained the use of my right hand. I had trouble remembering details, struggled with numbers and could no longer multitask—an ability that I was inordinately proud of before the stroke.

THE SELF-DISCOVERY

Perhaps, I will struggle with some of these challenges all my life. Although I am thankful that the stroke has changed and not paralysed me, it has taken me a long while to accept that I am no longer the person I was. In the initial months, I sank into depression and considered ending my life, but medication and therapy pulled me

through, although I was emotionally spent. When the darkness lifted, I realised that I was lucky to be alive.

Recovery is not something you achieve on your own. Family and friends held on to the belief that I would recover completely, regardless of whether it would take a year, 3 years or a lifetime. They showed me, in word and deed, that my quest to re-learn was achievable. Before, I was an independent man; now, I feel the need for support and kindness.

I have heard doctors say to stroke survivors, 'If you do not get your abilities back in about 6 months after the stroke, then you will never get them back'. Believe me, doctors can be wrong. My improvement continues 2 years after the stroke. The brain has a wonderful ability to recover lost function. Keep the faith.

To friends and families of stroke survivors I say this: keep talking and keep listening to your loved one. It aids recovery more than you can ever know. I am often asked, 'How long did it take you to recover?' My reply is always, 'From what?'.  Kumar has a stroke support group at Strokeindia.org

Life as it used to be has disappeared. The challenge of adapting and reclaiming as much of that life as you can depends on your resilience.

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