

A STROKE SURVIVORS' STORY **THE POWER OF A POSITIVE MIND**



"YOUR MIND IS A POWERFUL THING. WHEN YOU FILTER IT WITH POSITIVE THOUGHTS, YOUR LIFE WILL START TO CHANGE"

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My name is Mathew, and I am a stroke victim, or as I prefer to say, a stroke survivor.



I want to share my experience of suffering a stroke, my feelings and anxieties, and how keeping a positive mind helped me to get through the most traumatic time in my life. Yes there is a lot of specialised treatment and medication required to combat the physical effects of a

stroke, but one of the most powerful organs in the human body - the brain - has to be in the right mode, because if it isn't, a negative outlook will take over, and you'll just accept your condition, having the mindset that "this is my life now".

But it really doesn't have to be.

Having the right mindset creates a positive outlook, a determination to succeed, and a willingness to challenge your limitations.

Suffering a stroke was the most traumatic and turbulent event I have ever endured in my life. I was left in a state of disbelief, shock, and confusion. This couldn't be happening to me - I'm only forty nine years old! Surely strokes only happen when you're old? Wrong! A stroke can happen to anyone, of any age, at any time. I suffered my stroke in November 2019 - and I'm not going to give you a detailed account of every hospital appointment I had, every test I went through, or indeed a day by day rundown, much similar to a diary. I'm going to highlight how I changed my mindset from negative to positive, moving from a very dark and desolate place to a place with a glimmer of light, a ray of hope if you like, to grab on to and aim for.

But firstly, back to November when I suffered my stroke. I was admitted to hospital, and there I stayed for three days. I was an emotional wreck, kept bursting into floods of tears, and at times, almost inconsolable. I was in shock, a place of disbelief, and totally confused as to why this was happening to me. A blood test and a CT

scan confirmed that I had thicker than normal blood, and had suffered a blood clot and two bleeds on the brain. My blood pressure was also severely high, measured at 225/107.



And so it was, that three days later, after a few more tests and a number of different medications, my blood pressure had reduced, and the stroke specialist felt it was safe for me to be let home. A bit of happier news at last, as I really hated having to stay in hospital. So, armed with four lots of medication, I went home. And for the next few weeks (it was December now), I remained in a state of shock, my confidence flattened, my pride torn to shreds, my feeling of indestructibility and invincibility completely and utterly destroyed, and my attitude of "nothing gets me down" crushed.

I was still suffering the physical effects of the stroke - fatigue, weakness down my right side, especially my right arm and hand, slurred speech, and constantly tired. I kept having naps throughout the day - I guess the body's way of regaining strength after its recent traumatic ordeal.

I began to eat... a lot! As I was not allowed to drive, and scared of venturing out alone, I couldn't pop to the local shop and buy food, so I started to order takeaways online - five a week over those first couple of weeks! My weight ballooned, going from already overweight, to extremely overweight.

At a time when I needed love, understanding, and support, it came freely from my son and daughter. Both in their late teens, they understood what had happened. An emotional time seeing them again after my hospital stay, I felt I was a rambling shambles - a far cry from the Dad they knew, a proud man with an air of invincibility and a "nothing gets me down" attitude. And for the first time in their lives, I had been knocked down, showing them a vulnerability they had never seen before. A few tears later, they understood the kind of help I would need - transport to the hospital (for further tests), the pharmacy (for my medication), and also, the local shop (for food).

And it was through these trips with my children, that I began to slowly realise just how much I had been affected by the stroke. I felt uncomfortable at being out and about, around other people. I was well aware that my slurred speech made me difficult to understand, so I didn't talk very much. It also felt weird to walk, as I had spent the last few weeks either sitting down or sleeping. My energy levels were low, my motivation lower, and my self esteem even lower. And I just didn't want to be here.

And when I say "didn't want to be here" - I meant two things. Firstly, being out and about. And secondly, the

feeling that this was the end for me. The ordeal of the stroke had left me feeling like I wasn't going to make it, like death was just around the corner. And when your mind begins to spiral downwards with such morbid thoughts, it's very difficult to think of anything else. I was going to be fifty at my next birthday - and I just couldn't see myself making it. Every time I fell asleep, my mind would be racing with thoughts of "am I going to wake up", and "this is it".

But with the continued love and support from my children, and spending the Christmas period with them, it made me realise I was loved, and that I couldn't go - not just yet anyway! I had to survive, to get better, and to live. For both my children, and ultimately myself.



There are three choices in life:

Give Up

Give In

Give It Everything You've Got

And so the battle began...or rather a number of battles.

The first battle - my weight. Being overweight was an obvious health risk for many reasons. Reasons I had ignored for many years because of the "it won't happen to me" bravado. But now it had to be dealt with. Out went all the fatty foods, the biscuits, crisps and cakes. Out went the fizzy pop too. And an immediate halt to ordering takeaways online. In came healthier foods, such as meat, fish and pasta, along with nutritional cereal bars and fruit. And water became my beverage of choice. It was really hard those first few days to adjust my eating habits, but I knew what had to be done, and I disciplined myself to stick to the new regime.

And then came the second battle - my fitness. Now I've never been the fittest person in the world, always carrying a little excess weight, but I have always been fit enough to get by and enjoy life. My job does require a certain amount of physical strength and stamina, and despite my weight issue, I have never had any trouble completing my daily work routine. But suffering the stroke, a huge amount of physical strength and mobility was now lacking down my right side. And I'm right handed!

With near to zero confidence of getting out and about and being around people, I rejected the option of going to a gym, opting instead to purchase some weights and exercise at home. Weights are good for building physical strength, but do nothing for physical stamina. I would have to get out and about, and start walking. And that's where my next battle began. My mind was filled with thoughts of "but what if something happens", "what if I

collapse", and "what if I have another stroke". And here the old saying of baby steps is spot on. I didn't have to do a marathon distance right away. Just a walk around the block, or even down the road a little way, turnaround, and come back.

And after the first couple of walks, I came to realise that nothing was actually going to happen. So my walks became longer, and more often. And amazingly, coupled with my change in eating habits, the weight started to fall off. I could feel my clothes loosen! And now that I was weighing myself twice a week, every reading showed a weight loss. I was actually getting excited about losing weight - something I have never done before. I had no target weight to aim for, I was just happy to be losing it.

And today, I have lost a massive 6 stone - that's 40 kilograms for all you youngsters - dropped two sizes in clothing, and feel fitter and healthier than I have done for over twenty five years.

Physical dexterity and motor skills associated with my right hand, meant I had difficulties writing and typing, holding things such as a cup, glass, and fork. I kept dropping things, and quickly found myself acting clumsily. With the help of the Community Stroke Team (Swindon), I was given writing exercises, including pictures to colour in. Adopting a disciplined daily routine of completing these exercises, after a week, improvements started to become obvious. My writing was becoming more legible, my colouring was beginning to stay within the lines, and instead of missing keys while typing, I began hitting them. Confidence levels rose, and I started to believe that I could get back to

writing and typing the way I used to, you know, before my stroke. And so I kept at it, and after a few more weeks, I was writing with the same style and flair that I have for many a year, and my typing too, was getting more accurate, hitting the right keys much more often.

Also, with the continued help of the Community Stroke Team (Swindon) and their speech therapist, I began the battle to regain my normal speech pattern. My slurred speech and accompanied incoherence, had shattered my confidence and lowered my self esteem so much, I was embarrassed to talk. But the speech therapist gave me vocal exercises, and certain words and phrases to repeat, to exercise the muscles affected by the stroke. And again, by adopting a disciplined daily routine of completing these exercises, I became more coherent, and less slurred. Chatting with family and friends became more fluent, with a lot less "what did you say" moments.

And although my fitness, writing, and speech wasn't yet back to where it was, my confidence was sky rocketing and my self esteem constantly on the way up. I knew I'd won the war, but the battle was far from over. It was going to take more time - weeks, possibly months, maybe even years - before I was back to my best. But the most important thing was, I had started. And I kept going. And today, my writing and typing is back to normal, and my speech only shows a very slight slur. A slur that only I can detect - family, friends, and anyone I speak to cannot hear it. And while my physical strength down my right side hasn't quite fully returned to where it once was, I have accepted the fact that it may never will. It is what it is, and I'm okay with it.



Three months after suffering my stroke, I was heading to my appointment with the stroke specialist for a check-up, and to discuss the worrying issue over my ability to resume driving. After all, if I couldn't drive again, I couldn't resume my job as a delivery driver. But I had no need to worry - the appointment was a roaring success. The specialist was delighted with my progress, and after a short examination, gave me the news I so desperately wanted to hear - the okay to resume driving. To say I was overjoyed would have been the biggest understatement of the year so far. All the hard work I had put in over the last two months, now reaped its reward - I was okay to drive.

And now a new battle began. It was three months since I had driven a car, or indeed a van, and in that time so much had happened to change the way I viewed things. I had no doubt as to my ability to drive - after all, I have been driving for over thirty years! It was my confidence to actually get behind the wheel and drive that was causing me the most concern. But to get back to work, and some form of normality, I had to resume driving and regain my confidence as a driver - and right there was

my motivation to get behind the wheel. That first trip I made was only down the road and back, but I made it! And over the coming weeks, my trips got further and longer - my confidence boosted with each new trip.

Now I had been in contact with work all the way through my time off, and now was the time to discuss my return - and agree a date for that return. And so a date was confirmed - a date that acted as the final goal in my recovery, but also signalled the start of a new battle. This one was all about meeting my work colleagues - it had now been five months since I was last at work. How would I now be perceived after suffering a stroke, and more importantly, how would my emotions hold up, having to talk about what had happened. It was now very much a mind game, and this is where the power of positive mind came to the fore. I prepared, and practiced, what I would say with regards to my stroke. And that preparation paid off - for when I made my return to work, a return to some form of normality, I was able to hold back my emotions, and show all my colleagues that I was a survivor. That having a stroke hadn't beaten me, hadn't defeated me, or indeed, hadn't killed me.

And to this day I remain positive. Physically I have recovered very well, although mentally, I will always be scarred by the traumatic ordeal of suffering a stroke.

I am Mathew, and I am a stroke survivor.



Thank you for reading.

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