

# ***FINGER LAKES*** ***TIMES*** ***ONLINE*** Geneva, New York



Adleman's mother cherishes this picture from her daughter's nursing school graduation



It was here, on Lower Lake Road in Seneca Falls, where Connie Stallone Adleman found herself able to walk again without the use of a cane following a 1996 stroke. Lauren Long / Finger Lakes Times

## **Recovering from stroke: A journey toward health**

Sunday, May 22, 2005

By **Connie Stallone Adleman**

### **Special to the Finger Lakes Times**

*(In recognition of May as National Stroke Awareness Month, Connie Stallone Adleman, R.N., of Seneca Falls today offers readers a look at her personal experience with stroke and information she's come across in her extensive research.)*

A brain attack is an emergency. If you think that you or someone you know is having a stroke, call 911 immediately, because time lost is brain lost.

As a registered nurse and a stroke survivor, I couldn't agree more with those words from the National Stroke Association.

Early one morning in the summer of 1996, I was lecturing a group of nursing assistants in New York City when I suddenly felt confused and began having difficulty understanding what my students were asking me. My balance and coordination were off, too. I finally left the classroom to get help from another instructor.

By late morning I was hospitalized with a stroke. Within minutes, my whole life had changed. (See Appendix A for warning signs of a stroke.)

### **Learning to cope**

The good news was that my doctor said I'd saved precious time by going straight to the hospital. My actions had, most probably, prevented further brain damage.

But, I still had a long road ahead of me.

My life up to that point had been full and active. I had worked for over 35 years in the high-risk environment of psychiatric units in large hospitals in New York City and Los Angeles. Whether I was on duty as a clinical nurse, an instructor or a supervisor, my workdays were extremely hectic and filled with high-pressure situations.

I had lectured all over the country and in Europe. I had been published in professional magazines, had made radio and TV appearances, and I had no thoughts of retirement.

But that lifestyle led to what I consider one of the big risk factors for stroke: Stress. And that was coupled with two others, high blood pressure and the weight problems I'd dealt with my whole life. (See Appendix B for risk factors for stroke.)

The emotions I felt in this new situation also triggered stress<sup>1</sup>.

My first reaction was fear and despair, followed by more pain and sadness as I realized how much the stroke had limited my function. I felt as though I'd lost myself.

Then, the morning after the stroke, I woke up unable to move my left arm and leg. My fear was getting out of control, leading to rapid breathing and difficulty speaking.

My husband, Darrel, was by my side and realized my discomfort. He knew that fear usually elevated my blood pressure, so he began guiding me through a creative visualization<sup>2</sup> exercise to help me calm down and relax.

"Close your eyes and take, three slow, deep breaths," he quietly said. "Go within and know that you're in the process of healing now. Stay focused on your breathing, and imagine a peaceful scene, such as a sunny day at the beach. Know that you're surrounded with love. Now, take a few more slow deep breaths and relax."

I was still frightened, but at least I was able to cope. Creative visualization empowered me to participate in my own health care. It gave me more control over my situation and helped combat my sense of helplessness. I knew that while I was a patient I was going to have to use this technique often, along with meditation and positive thinking.

Darrel also worked to make my hospital room a sacred space. He told me that he had asked our families and friends to surround me with peaceful thoughts and not bring doom and gloom, but, instead, to remain upbeat and help me focus on healing from within.

As a psychiatric nurse, I valued the benefits of expressing feelings as a way of healing. But, that was difficult to do with slurred speech, being at a loss for words, and having difficulty forming sentences.

Realizing this, my husband gave me a notebook and encouraged me to journal my feelings. The journal was therapeutic and healing, and I have since begun turning it into a book that's nearly finished.

For me, the book has been another way to cope. I had been a witness to a stroke and would now be able to tell other stroke survivors and their families that I got through it, and they could, too.

Having a brain attack was a daunting experience. But, I had to make a choice. I could either accelerate my fears and increase my stress, or I could use the time to help myself gain a sense of control over the situation.

### **Stroke is devastating**

Almost from the beginning I began to use something called positive affirmations, which I had learned about years earlier in a book by metaphysical teacher and author Louise L. Hay, called "You Can Heal Your Life."<sup>3</sup> And, I found that listening to her healing tapes each evening in the hospital helped lower my anxiety. Using affirmations consistently helped shift my consciousness from stark fear to the possibility that I could recover. Reminding myself of such things as "I am more than this stroke" and that "My recovery is a continuous process" helped me cope more easily with my illness.

Research has made me realize how much company I had in this predicament. National Stroke Association data indicates that 600,000 people in America suffer strokes each year; it is the number three killer in the country, taking nearly 170,000 lives a year. The American Stroke Association states that stroke is the leading cause of long-term disability.

Stroke is devastating. As a nurse, many stroke patients have told me that they wished they had died rather than have to deal with the aftermath of this illness.

Realizing what you have to live for makes all the difference.

“You’re going to have to go deep into your soul, in order to make it through this, Hon,” my husband said. “Go into that sacred place within your mind, body, spirit; tap into your life force and hold on.”

And that’s exactly what I did. (See Appendix D for Affirmations.)

Stroke is no longer a disease of the elderly; 28 percent of stroke patients are under age 65.

I was 58.

And I lived to tell my story thanks to the amazing medical, nursing and rehabilitation care that I received and the alternative care practices that my husband and I decided to integrate into my health care plan, something that had not been routinely practiced in health care at that time.

Initially, I was paralyzed on my left side and unable to move my arm or leg. Along with being in a great deal of pain and having speech problems, my typically rapid-fire, problem-solving mind was significantly hampered. Overriding all of this was fear.

Sometimes, deep breathing and using relaxation techniques helped me get past my fears. (See Appendix C for Stress Management Techniques.) At other times, I would just cry my way through them. Also, looking over and seeing my husband by my side always made me feel safer. And I will never forget the triumphant feelings of small accomplishments such as moving one finger of my left hand on Monday and another one on Tuesday, and how that helped me begin to believe I could actually survive.

### **Therapy**

Early on, my doctor explained, “Physical therapy, occupational therapy and speech therapy will start immediately and continue for months to come. Time lost could be function lost.”

The physical therapist arrived each day helping me exercise my arm, leg and fingers. Eventually, she and the staff transferred me from the bed to a chair. Then it was standing and, finally, taking a few steps.

“These are your first steps toward independence,” my physical therapist said, reminding me what my rehabilitation would be about. I then began to use a walker, and then it was on to a four-, then a three-, and then a two-pronged cane.

During speech therapy, I kept complaining about my words being so slow and slurred.

“You may never have that New York fast, pressured speech pattern again,” my therapist said. “But, that wasn’t such a great thing, anyway.”

I knew that if I could not practice nursing again, I definitely wanted to return to teaching programs and classes in the community. How was that going to be possible, I wondered. What if I could no longer even speak correctly? What if I continued to slur my words and my voice sounded weak? There were so many things for me to worry about.

But, I had the advantage of being coached by my husband, an actor who had studied with one of the best speech teachers for theater in New York City.

My speech is fine now, although from time to time you can still hear my Bronx accent.

Initially, my occupational therapist helped me practice simple daily living activities.

I had to re-learn tasks such as brushing my teeth, combing my hair and getting dressed.

These things suddenly seemed monumental and were made even more painful and uncomfortable by the limited use of my left hand and arm.

Can you imagine needing guidance on how to comfortably and safely take a shower? How to tie your shoes? Or how to put on lipstick, while you’re drooling and your lips are turning to the left?

You need patience with yourself, a sense of humor and time to cry.

You also need an occupational therapist and caring nurses who understand how upsetting it feels to be unable to do those things as easily as you used to.

It was with fear and trepidation that I had to re-learn how to climb up and down a flight of stairs. It was with shock and disbelief that I had to re-learn how to use a washing machine. And the dismay that I experienced while I practiced getting in and out of the shower safely was frightening.

On the acute unit, I had been fighting for my life. Now, on the rehab unit, I would be fighting for my independence. And, I would succeed.

### **Home Care**

The final link to increased independence was Home Care. Instead of my doctor visiting me in the hospital, I now had to get on a bus and go to his office. His treatment, concern and sense of humor were often what kept me going.

“You’ve had a remarkable recovery,” he said. “But, remember, even if you return to your typically high-functioning self, you’ll have to give up being a workaholic.”

New physical and occupational therapists were now coming to my home helping me practice kitchen and shower safety, taking me food shopping and demonstrating how to accident-proof my surroundings. My husband continued to coach me with my speech. And, we also added “Jeopardy,” “Wheel of Fortune” and Yankees games to our TV schedule as a fun way to re-learn concentration and focus and to stimulate my thinking.

During my recovery, my sister-in-law Carol Stephens, who is a long-time resident of Seneca Falls, helped us realize that a quieter, more peaceful environment would be an ideal place to continue my journey back to normalcy.

Eighteen months after we moved here, I was enjoying my daily walk along Lower Lake Road when I realized I could get by without a cane. I remember that day vividly. The sun was shining brightly, the water was filled with ducks, gulls were flying overhead, and my heart was filled with gratitude.

### **Returning to work**

About six months later, my husband and I discovered the Seneca County Workforce Development Program, where Peg Birmingham, Chris Brown and the staff were instrumental in finding me my first teaching job in nursing.

A short time later, Darrel and I teamed up to develop and teach stress management and empowerment courses for health care professionals through Finger Lakes Health; at Workforce Development; and for several other Finger Lakes area businesses.

We with the help of Charlotte Wytias, we created a teaching, consulting and coaching business that offers programs for the community through The Springs of Clifton. With the support and caring of the Rev. Marilyn Foster of Seneca Falls Methodist Church and the Rev. Martha Forshay at Trinity Church we’ve taught many classes for individuals and groups, as well as at the Chiropractic College and in the Midlakes school district.

I’ve become stronger and more confident, and I’m back to my same professional-educator-self, with even more wisdom.

I love my work. Needless to say it’s been a great boost to my health, morale and self-esteem. Beginning to write a book about my experiences — titled “A Bold Stroke: Healing From Within” — has also helped, and it led to another course to teach, “Writing as Healing,” highlighting current research and testimony about the benefits of writing your way through an illness.

## Becoming whole again

As frightening as having a stroke was, I have slowly come to realize the many gifts it has given me. And I've been willing to look at these gifts and learn from them. I still help people as much as I can. But, I have also created a new road map of health and healing for myself. I'm losing weight more slowly and in a healthier way. My blood pressure is lower and under control. Getting my life back and learning to love myself more has been a powerful experience.

I give thanks for each day, for being alive and having a new opportunity to heal my life and grow in the process. I give thanks for my husband, Darrel, my family and friends, and for the many health professionals who helped take care of me and motivate me.

I now enjoy a less stressful life with more inner peace than I've ever known, and I place a higher value on what I desire. Finding wholeness within me was exactly what I had to do to both recover and save myself.

In many ways, the road toward health, healing and wholeness can seem daunting. It has to be taken one step at a time, one affirmation at a time, and one healthy goal at a time. You have to take care of yourself, love yourself and continue to go within to find your inner strengths. I'm not promising you a rose garden, just a magnificent journey toward healing and reclaiming your life.

Last, I offer this advice to caregivers:

In my heart, I know that my recovery had a lot to do with my husband's love, devotion and dedication. If you are caring for someone who has had a stroke, take time out for yourself. Manage your stress. Discuss your feelings with someone. Use positive affirmations. Cry when you have to and also give yourself permission to be happy. Eat healthful foods, exercise and seek out peaceful moments.

Keep a journal. Give yourself stickers, fun presents, dinner with friends and other rewards. You count, too.

## Appendix A

The American Stroke Association encourages us to learn to recognize a stroke and know the warning signs:

- ◆ Sudden weakness or numbness of the face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body.
- ◆ Sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding.
- ◆ Sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes.
- ◆ Sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination.
- ◆ Sudden, severe headaches with no known cause

## Appendix B

American Stroke Association's List of Risk Factors for Stroke:

- ◆ High blood pressure
- ◆ Diabetes
- ◆ Heart disease
- ◆ Weight
- ◆ Smoking
- ◆ Excessive use of alcohol
- ◆ Using illegal drugs

## Appendix C

Stress Management Techniques:

- ◆ Prayer or meditation, for quiet reflective time.
- ◆ Deep breathing and relaxation techniques.
- ◆ Staying in the moment rather than obsessing about the past or the future.
- ◆ Changing negative, fearful thoughts to positive ones.
- ◆ Approving of myself and accepting myself in spite of having a stroke.

#### Appendix D

##### Affirmations:

- ◆ I am more than this stroke.
- ◆ My recovery is a continuous process.
- ◆ I'm patient with myself.
- ◆ On the invisible, I'm perfect, whole and complete.
- ◆ I give thanks for each movement of my body.
- ◆ I love myself exactly as I am.
- ◆ I love and approve of myself now.
- ◆ It's safe for me to express my feelings.

---

<sup>1</sup> Benson, Herbert, MD. *The Relaxation Response*. Harper Torch, (re-issue). 1976

<sup>2</sup> Gawain, Shakti. *Creative Visualization*. Whatever Publishing, Berkeley, Ca. 1978

<sup>3</sup> Hay, Louise L. *You Can Heal Your Life*. Hay House Publishing, Carlsbad, Ca. 1984