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**The Stroke Partnership** • March 21, 2016

## EDITOR'S PEN

Gary Barg, Editor-in-Chief

### The Stroke Partnership

My friend Larry came by the house a few years ago. He had a stroke a few years earlier, which curtailed his motorcycling, boating and fishing. But Larry has made great strides through terrific doctors, medications and strict adherence to his physical therapy schedule. The effects of his stroke had become dramatically reduced to the point where we were talking about what kind of car he wanted to buy. Larry's wife has been by his side the entire time of his recovery – and has taken over everything from running his business to the household finances. Larry told me how proud he was of his wife for her work. In fact, in many ways, she is managing things better than he had done in the past. The issue they were having upon Larry's visit had to do with how much of his active schedule Larry take on again and at what pace. Like for so many couples, this transfer of and possible return to duties once a spouse recovers from an injury or disease can be quite challenging. And with the exception of some disagreement about the timing of Larry's slipping behind the wheel again, things had gone very well for them due to an open and active dialogue.

As Larry discovered, there is no rhyme or reason to the severity of strokes or to the recovery a person may need to undergo. Stroke damage can affect a loved one's entire body and cause a wide range of disabilities, from mild to severe. Learning to help through this transitional period with optimism and organization will make life easier, and happier, for both caregiver and loved one.

## The “New” Normal

After a major stroke, most people spend time in a hospital becoming stable enough to move on for rehabilitation, either at a special facility or home, depending on the caregiver’s availability and circumstances.

The first thing to address when a loved one returns home from the hospital or rehab clinic is safety, especially in the bathroom. A loved one may also come home with a new set of habits which were formed around a different level of care, and most likely, the ability to move around in a secured environment. A family caregiver can also be facing a change in routine and have a shock to their established “normal.” The main thing is to accept reality and progress as it comes, even though it may not lead back to the way things were before the stroke. Family and friends may not understand and therapy visits will become less and less frequent, leaving the caregiver and loved one to wade through the post-stroke life alone. There can be hope and joy to be found in each situation, however.

Don’t worry, be happy

Depression is a very real side effect of a stroke, for both caregiver and loved one. Honesty about emotions is a first step to dealing with them and moving forward.

Studies show that an optimistic attitude reduces the risk of stroke overall, but affirmations and positive thinking are just as important after a stroke.

Frustration and discouragement will be normal, but even small victories should be celebrated and empower caregivers and loved ones to go the next step. A big hurdle is the embarrassment associated with not being able to function as before, especially in public. Caregivers should encourage public outings because it will lessen the likeliness of depression and lonely thoughts.

Positive thinking and expecting the best, not the worst, promotes health and prevention of future strokes. It also helps a caregiver keep their best health and attitude, for their new role and any others they may have.

Whether your loved one living with the effects of a stroke is 17 or 70, strokes affect both loved one and caregiver in a multitude of ways. With good organization, awareness and attitude, it can be handled in a way that leaves both fulfilled and enjoying life, whatever the New Normal may bring.

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