



## A Different Stroke

We are often reminded of how precious life is. In this article, Alan Woollard bravely shares his story and reflections of when the unexpected happened, and how to cope with change...

*After finishing the course and qualifying as a Solution Focused Hypnotherapist, I had great plans. I was going to find a local clinic and offer my services, write a magazine/newspaper article, do talks, get advertising sorted and I looked forward to helping people improve their lives...*

I was in supervision at the time, my first session. I went to speak and found I was speaking strangely. To me, all the consonants were being pronounced as Ls. However, no-one seemed to notice. I am a person who likes to maintain control so, perhaps, I was able to do that sufficiently at the time for my problem not to show.

During the session, it came and went. I hadn't a clue what was going on with me, but I managed to get through it. Once home, I started to feel emotional and told my wife I

needed to take a nap for a while.

About 3-4 hours later I woke up, feeling cold. My wife appeared, and we discussed my health. I had been off the week before with a cold virus and we put it down to me doing too much too soon.

The next morning, I awoke feeling that I'd had a good night's sleep. My wife was already up, and she discussed my health again. She had done some research and suggested I call 111 for some advice. This I did. After answering their questions, they suggested it would be a good idea for a paramedic to call round in order to do some tests. So, about an hour later, they duly arrived. After more questions and some tests, they suggested I ought to go to hospital to do further tests. I was unaware at this stage that all the questions and tests I'd had were to test for a stroke. I went along with their advice and was taken to hospital. Once there, I was taken to A&E and wired up while they did their checks. Eventually, they told me they wanted to keep me in.

I didn't sleep much that night as every 30 minutes

I had my blood pressure checked followed by these tests that involved me pushing or pulling the nurses hands. Although I knew I was in a stroke ward I still had no idea of what they were testing me for. The word was never mentioned.

The next day, I was exhausted. My wife and step-daughter came to visit me, but I could not tell them anything new, nor could the nurses. As the day progressed, I was taken away to have my head examined. I don't know how many scanning machines they have at Yeovil Hospital, but I'm sure I saw them all. Every time I was wheeled back to the ward I was wheeled out again not long after.

Now, you'd think that, with all this going on, and without knowing why, I would be anxious, worried and stressed. Yet, for some reason, I was very calm and relaxed. I'm usually a calm person and one that has plenty of patience, but even I wondered why I wasn't more concerned.

*I've thought about this since and wondered if it was some sort of safety mechanism. The brain taking over to make sure I didn't do any more harm. I'd like to think it was my normal calmness, influenced by my SFH knowledge of how the brain works that I'd learned in my previous months of training at CPHT.*

So, Wednesday morning arrived. My wife and step-daughter are here again. Sometime around mid-morning I am visited by a small group of specialists. One of them tells me what they found.

The scans revealed some damage in the brain, very deep, suggesting it happened a long time ago, possibly at birth. Over a period of time this damage had calcified and, for some reason or another, a piece of it had broken off and blocked an artery in the brain. Basically, I'd had a stroke. They went on to show me the scans showing the new damage. They were unable to tell me what caused the piece of damaged brain to break off, or what I could do to reduce the risk of it happening again. It was a lot to take in. After the white coats had left, there was a moment of silence whilst we processed the information. I was shocked. My wife looked shocked too. Since I'd been in the ward I was fully aware of how severe a stroke can be, so I was grateful that mine was mild by comparison. Now I had to find out what happens next.

Later in the day I was told I could go home soon, maybe tomorrow or Friday. The next day, the specialist who had been assigned to me came in to have a chat. I asked her what I do from now on. Do I need to change my diet, cut out alcohol, and exercise more? As there was no health reason for the stroke she told me it was okay to carry on as before. What could I do to reduce the risk of it happening again? Avoid things like Deep Sea Diving was her answer. Throughout our conversation she made it very clear that, as they didn't know the cause, they couldn't really advise me as to what I could do to help myself. Having the knowledge that now that I've had a stroke I'm at greater risk for another, I found quite scary.

***Recovery from any kind of illness or injury is different for everyone, but as with our clients, progress is often best made by taking one step at a time...***





I was told later that I could go home the next day.

That night I thought a lot, or at least tried to. Thinking required my full attention, as did talking or listening, so it wasn't long before I was asleep, and I slept well.

On Friday, my wife and step-daughter came to take me home. It was strange leaving the hospital. I felt kind of safe in there. Knowing there were all those machines and nurses and specialists on hand was reassuring. Now we'd be on our own.

*I did have support at home after with a speech therapist and a psychologist as well as a nurse visiting regularly. Though it all came to an end after about 5-6 weeks.*

Once home, I settled on the sofa and rested while my wife and step-daughter tried to give me some space and peace and quiet.

*This is essential. Don't ask the Stoke Survivor endless questions; indeed, don't even talk too much. Listening and comprehending words and sentences is extremely tiring.*

Just sitting there doing nothing was boring, yet that is what I had to do. I found watching the TV tiring, as I did reading and talking. The only thing I found easy was listening to music (I had to wear headphones though as my family don't share my great taste in music!).

Physically, I was not affected by the stroke. There was no drop of the mouth on one side nor were there any weaknesses down one side of my body. However, I found that my fitness had completely vanished, all my strength had disappeared. Normal activity like using the stairs, were tiring. Walking 50 yards up the lane was tiring too. This I found very frustrating. In fact, I think that's one thing I took on board the most, how frustrating having a stroke was. Without a healthy brain you can do very little without feeling fatigued. I was also aware of how, after a stroke, it was easy to start negatively forecasting the future. Let's face it, I had no idea how to stop it happening again and there's every chance that next time it will be more severe.

A couple of weeks later, I was taken to see my mother on her birthday. My parents were naturally worried about me, but I was able to put their minds at ease by appearing to be okay. I was able to converse and appear in control. Little did they know how much hard work that was. It was just a small group of five of us, but boy, did I find it tiring. Once back home, all I wanted to do was sleep.

During my recovery, I started to think differently about it. I started to think of how lucky I was that it wasn't more severe. I was grateful for the NHS and a loving family. I also started to look at my strengths. I was able to keep calm throughout the event. Despite my lack of fitness now, being fit before had definitely helped. Being a calm person with lots of patience - that was really important too.

My rehabilitation was not how it should have been. It's best to avoid stress as much as you can, but a couple of months after my stroke my father, who had been unwell for some time, was diagnosed with Motor Neurone Disease. He died 6 months' later. There was a lot to deal with that year. I used my own strengths (calmness and knowledge and all the useful things I'd learned when I was training

to be a Solution Focused Hypnotherapist) and distraction (helping/focussing on someone else, in this case, my father). This, and the huge amount of love and support from my wife, enabled me to cope. Then, the following April, my mother had a mild stroke that developed into Dementia.

Since I had my stroke, things have been very challenging, especially for my wife (whose health has suffered as a result). We support each other and keep moving forward. Small steps at times, but always steps forward. I was so pleased to be able to finally start providing Solution Focused Hypnotherapy at a local clinic in June 2017.

## Helping others

If you are helping a stroke survivor in their recovery (either helping a client or a loved one), understand that they will be feeling very frustrated and scared. The rehabilitation time is long and tiring, so they will appreciate your patience. Be aware of your body language and facial expressions, keep them positive. Talk softly. Let them sleep as often as they need to. They may feel a hindrance to their family. There's a good chance they could become depressed due to the length of the rehabilitation. Boredom leads to over-thinking, and we all know where that can go. Confidence and self-worth may be at an all-time low. They will need plenty of reminding that they will get through this. They will improve. Don't forget the stroke survivor's family too. Their partner will feel they are under a huge amount of pressure. You may only see the stroke survivor once a week, but their partner will be with them 24/7.

Make sure you look after yourself too. You need to keep well to help them. Too much work combined with a lot to do at home can leave you little time for a break and to relax. Although I will never know what caused that little piece of old brain damage to break away, I do wonder if the busy year I had doing the course and practicing in the evenings, holding down a full-time job and taking my parents to various specialists contributed.

Now, over four years later, I find I still have improvements to be made. Fitness is a slow work in progress. My physical strength is still poor, but my mental strength has definitely improved, but I still get problems from time to time. I've got better at recognising when I need to rest. I'm able to notice that I have to work harder to concentrate when I'm talking, so I slow down. When I get stressed my voice can change pitch too, another warning sign I've learned to take notice of. All in all, I consider myself lucky and fortunate. I've learned a lot and continue to learn.

I can highly recommend the book 'My Stroke of Insight' by Jill Bolte Taylor. It was bought for me by my lovely wife, but I couldn't read it at the time, as it was too tiring. I've read it since and it is a fascinating read. Offer it to the stroke survivor to read when they are ready and suggest they at least read chapters 13 onwards; they don't have to read the others. It will help.



### About the writer:

Since his recovery, Alan now works as a Solution Focused Hypnotherapist and practices in a local clinic in Shepton Mallet, Somerset.