

'NEUROPLASTICITY AND APHASIA: WE CAN SPEAK AGAIN'

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As an optimist I choose to focus on good not bad; can do not can't do; solutions not problems; and the possible not the improbable.

When my brother had a stroke 4 ½ years ago his doctor said 'he would stop learning and reach a plateau after 3 months.' This doctor's thinking was defeating and devastating to someone who has suffered injury to the brain and, most importantly, it is inaccurate.

My brother suffered right side paralysis and developed aphasia after his stroke. I'm not writing this for anyone to feel sorry for me or these circumstances - I am blessed because my brother is alive -- and I choose blessings over bitterness.

I'm writing this for two reasons: 1) it is imperative people understand what strokes are and what to do if you witness someone having a stroke -- or think you may be having one yourself; and 2) There is no limit to recovery as long as you are determined, have a positive mental attitude and, as my brother says, "practice, practice, practice." to which I add, "Smart practice, smart practice."

When my brother had his stroke I decided to channel my feelings in a productive and positive way so I created a website - <http://www.thestrokefoundation.com/>, to offer free resources and information to those who have been effected by stroke.

My goals were to educate myself and learn as much as possible about the effects of stroke but focus specifically on the recovery process. I fully believe with today's technology, tools and a strong belief in the body and minds power to heal itself, that everyone can overcome the damaging effects of a stroke – there is no limit to healing.

Stroke is the number 3 cause of death in the United States and the number 1 cause of disability. Every 45 seconds someone in the United States has a stroke. A stroke occurs when blood flow is cut off to the brain. When blood stops flowing to brain cells, the brain cells die and this is when damage starts to occur; this is why it is imperative to get medical help as fast as possible. If you are having a stroke -- seconds may mean the difference between recovering fully and becoming severely disabled mentally and physically for life.

When my brother had his stroke, his wife knew what was happening and she got him to the hospital as soon as humanly possible. She did everything right, everything you are supposed to do, however, the doctor who saw my brother while he was having a stroke and while brain cells were dying each second, sent him home.

Understanding that each second counts when a person is having a stroke; and understanding that each second may mean the difference between full recovery or permanent disability; -- and understanding that it can even mean the difference between life and death - then sending my brother home was a very poor decision.

My brother suffered paralysis on the right side of his body and does not have the use of his right arm. My brother also has aphasia, which is a common after effect of stroke. Aphasia is a language disorder that results from damage to portions of the brain that are responsible for speech and language. It is estimated that approximately 80,000 individuals acquire aphasia each year. About one million persons in the United States currently have aphasia.

The left side of my brother's brain was damaged which contains the 'area of speech.' 'They' said he would only recover a portion of his speech and then reach a 'plateau,' but 'they' were wrong.

It's been 4 ½ years since my brother had a stroke and thanks to the help of an amazing support system, a loving family, knowledgeable speech therapists, my brother's determination and programs such as the Aphasia Center for Innovative Treatment (www.aphasiatoolbox.com) my brother's speech advances every day.

Overcoming aphasia is a slow process, but recovery does not stop, and with dedication and determination people with aphasia can and do recover from aphasia. One of my favorite quotes is "Even by crawling, the snail reached the ark."

Once brain cells die they do not regenerate HOWEVER, people who have lost brain cells due to stroke or brain disease CAN rewire their healthy brain cells to re-learn and reconnect the information in their brains and relearn how to speak again, and my brother is proof of this. This concept is called **Neuroplasticity: 'The brain's ability to reorganize itself by forming new neural connections throughout life'**.

When a person has aphasia they do not 'lose' the information they have learned over a lifetime. The information is still inside of their brains and as speech pathologists, caregivers, coaches and friends, we need to educate ourselves and learn how to help people with aphasia find and retrieve that information again. We do this by helping a person with aphasia learn to rewire their healthy brain cells and create new pathways within the brain so they can access and retrieve the information that's still there.

Be wary of anyone who says 'it can't be done.' 'They' said my brother would reach a 'plateau' after 3 months. 'They' were wrong; my brother will be celebrating his five year anniversary in November and with the help of the staff and tools at www.aphasiatoolbox.com a strong support group and his determination, his speech improves every single day.

The brain can rewire itself and the brain can and does create new pathways to be able to communicate again and recover from aphasia. As a younger sister my brother used to yell at me all of the time and I used to get so angry, and now, every time me and my brother speak -- and even if he yells at me, instead of getting angry I smile a big smile because 'they' were wrong.

For more information about neuroplasticity and learning to help people with aphasia rewire their brains, contact us: information@aphasiatoolbox.com or 724.494.2534