

## ***Identity Theft: Rediscovering Ourselves After Stroke***

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### **Chapter 11 Summary: People are Social Animals**

Seven months after Debra's stroke, her friend, Anne Payne, organized a trip to celebrate her birthday in Palm Springs. Debra said she couldn't go because of her limitations, but then her friend Kim Menninger convinced her to go. During the trip Debra often became frustrated because she could not participate in many of the activities and conversations. Sometimes she worried she was holding the group back. However, Debra also felt fantastic about being able to soak up the energy of friendships. She was able to get up and dance for the first time since her stroke. This made Debra realize how much she had been limiting herself by hesitating to rejoin the social world.

Social interactions play a key role in shaping our identities; yet most stroke survivors are reluctant to rejoin social structures that they once enjoyed. Stroke survivors' impairments can make interactions difficult and the emotional trauma and confusion can make them unsure about previous relationships. Stroke survivors may feel they are burdening their friends by forcing them to cope with their impairments. Debra has found through experience that close friends are usually willing to help and be patient.

Debra has encountered **six most frequent reasons** for stroke survivors' social hesitation. The first reason is **"I physically can't be social."** The second reason is **"it's too hard to be worth it."** For so many, socializing after a stroke is harder and incredibly frustrating. The third reason is **"other people piss me off."** It is hard to be in social situations where others around you display nonverbal clues that you are not welcome. The fourth reason is **"I'm a bother."** Many of us feel frustrated at our lack of independence and extremely insecure about the perceived burden we place on others. For stroke survivors, social interactions take a lot more effort. Friendships change but many of us find that those closest to us are even more supportive than before. The fifth reason is **"I'm embarrassed."** Often, we let ourselves be embarrassed by our new



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circumstances rather than choose to embrace a new social identity. The last reason is **“I’m depressed.”** One in three stroke survivors suffers some degree of depression, which can leave you feeling isolated and frustrated. One of the most important ways to push through depression is an active social life.

## Chapter 11 Highlights: People are Social Animals

1. People are fundamentally social by nature; we all need friends and a social life to be happy. Interacting with friends in social situations has positive benefits in helping to create your new identity poststroke.
2. This can be hard after stroke, and there are real reasons survivors reduce or avoid socializing such as depression or feeling embarrassed. Although it is difficult to socially interact, looking forward to time with your friends can be a positive experience.
3. But it is critical to overcome these barriers and reestablish a social life, whether with old friends or new ones. Even though your relationships with your friends may shift, you can still have meaningful interactions.
4. Social interactions are very important ways for survivors to experiment with and learn about our changing identities. Some find their social interactions with their friends to be a key part of their new identities which can be a shift from their pre-stroke identities.
5. Relationships may change, and some may fade, but others may emerge or become stronger than ever.
6. Joining a group with fellow stroke individuals can give you a safe zone to practice your speech skills. This is also a great way to meet new people and establish new friendships.
7. Once we commit ourselves to looking forward and creating a meaningful social life, we realize how many ways we can adapt. Debra's speech is better in the morning than in the evening when she's tired, so she tries to invite people over for brunch, not dinner.

8. One in three stroke survivors suffer from depression even if it is never diagnosed. One of the most important ways to push through mild depression is an active social life.
9. **Andrea Helft** states, “I think my stroke has improved me. I do. I think I’m happier and probably healthier—better in a lot of ways. I might even do it again if I had to. Isn’t that crazy? I think my relationships are deeper, too.” Although this level of optimism is uncommon, she enjoyed shifting her priorities to focus on fostering her relationships with family and friends.
10. Debra discusses a few stroke survivors and their experiences with social interactions:
  1. **Laure Wang:** She is confined to a wheelchair and unable to move anything but her eyes. She decided to finally attend her high school reunion which helped in adjusting her attitude to her new life.
  2. **Andrea Helft:** She struggles with significant memory issues and pain from her stroke. She received a lot of help and support from her friends which resulted in them gaining clarity in their own lives.
  3. **Gail Rusch:** She lost her ability to work and to run and coach running. She enrolled in college, graduated in 2016, and this was a huge catalyst in the process of recreating her identity.
  4. **Trish Hambridge:** She has gone on several vacations organized by the Aphasia Recovery Connection which have been particularly rewarding. She initiates contact with friends.
  5. **Julia Fox Garrison:** She realized her recovery required a lot of positive energy and states, “I learned who is my real friend. I thank my stroke for helping me to cut out most of the negativity and negative people in my life.”

11. Debra lists six reasons stroke survivors often give for limiting their social activities:
  - 1) I physically can't be social
  - 2) It's too hard to be worth it
  - 3) Other people piss me off
  - 4) I'm a bother
  - 5) I'm embarrassed
  - 6) I'm depressed.
12. Relationships serve as an important part of our identity with or without stroke recovery. They are powerful silver linings for most people going through stroke recovery.
13. "Identities are not simply features or products of the individual...They should be viewed as practices with others and the outcomes of those interactions." After stroke, we are in a process of rebuilding our sense of self and navigating a changing identity.
14. Steve's classmate Karen Jordan, who started helping out with their dog Kaya, offered Debra to walk with her weekly since that was part of Debra's new routine. Debra was touched by this because she knew Karen had a busy life. They are now close friends. This is yet another silver lining in Debra's life.
15. Once we commit ourselves to looking forward and creating a meaningful social life, we realize how many ways we can adapt. Debra was grateful when her colleague, Robin Ely, and her husband opened their home to her while she did a clinical trial in Boston. Their relationship has shifted. Debra realizes their bond and her identity is now more based on social connection than work.

## Chapter 11 Points for Reflection: People are Social Animals

### 1. Why did they call this chapter “People are Social Animals”?

People are like animals.

People need social interactions to create their identities.

I don't know.

### 2. One in three stroke survivors **suffer** from **depression** even if it's never diagnosed. Have you also **struggled with depression**?

No

Not Sure

Yes

### 3. Most **stroke survivors** are reluctant to **rejoin social activities** that they once enjoyed before their strokes. Have you also been **reluctant** to rejoining social events? If yes, **why**?

I'm embarrassed

Physical limits

I feel like  
I'm a bother

Struggling  
with depression

Other

### 4. How did you feel the first time you rejoined a **social** event with friends **poststroke**?

Sad or frustrated

Somewhat frustrated

Fantastic

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

5. How have your **social interactions** been with your **family** and **friends** poststroke? Have your experiences been **easy** or more **difficult**?
6. Debra created a new **friendship** with Karen by **walking together** on a weekly basis. What have you **experienced** in terms of new friendships since your stroke?
7. Debra talks about finding **silver linings** in her **stroke recovery**. What has been a silver lining for you since you had your stroke?
8. Are there any **social events** or interactions that have helped you adjust your **attitude** towards your **new life** after your stroke?
9. Debra lists **6 reasons** that stroke survivors (and also others with impairments or chronic illness) may use to avoid rejoining social activities. Describe which ones seem **most relevant** to your life: