

Identity Theft: Rediscovering Ourselves After Stroke

By Debra E. Meyerson, PhD with Danny Zuckerman

Chapter 18 Summary: Choice in Our New Identities

Debra begins the chapter by saying there are **3 choices for survivors**: to try and recover your old life, to accept your stroke passively, or to embrace the stroke and include it in the new path that you create for your life. While having a stroke can limit options, it also presents stroke survivors with the opportunity to prioritize what matters and to decide who they want to become. **Julia Fox Garrison** celebrates her 20 year “stroke anniversary.” She is proud of her progress and has adapted to her significant life changes.

Because relationships evolve after a stroke, survivors can determine what they want out of their relationships and who they want to surround themselves with. While some relationships may drift, other relationships may be strengthened. Debra has adapted the ways she socializes with her closest friends, but she values these relationships now more than ever. Feeling a sense of community can help survivors understand their own identities better.

Once stroke survivors are beyond the initial stages of recovery, continuing to set goals is an important part of ongoing recovery and personal growth. To get stronger and healthier, survivors can work to achieve goals that are *specific, realizable, and immediate*. Setting goals with this framework in mind helps with motivation and preventing burnout. For **Sean Maloney**, he uses his stroke advocacy to target communication goals, where he uses scripts as a support when giving speeches. For survivors of recent strokes, it can be challenging to prioritize certain goals and remain positive. Some may get stuck grieving the loss of who they were. However, looking at recovery as a “path to knowledge and self-discovery” can make the journey easier.

Jim Indelicato used his determination to focus on what mattered most in his life and positively impact the lives of others. He turned to his family values and allowed these to shape his post-stroke life. Stroke recovery can cause survivors to live a more rewarding life overall. Debra has learned new ways to realize her passions, and she is grateful for the love and support that she has received.

Debra notes that because our lives are constantly changing, our identities are also changing all the time, regardless of traumas like stroke. Therefore, all survivors are partly the same and partly different from who they were pre-stroke. After her stroke, Debra has become more aware of what gives her a sense of purpose. Therefore, she has been able to challenge herself to achieve and expand her potential for growth.

Chapter 18 Highlights: Choice in Our New Identities

1. Debra starts by saying that a stroke does not seal a person's fate. Stroke survivors still have choices with how they will move forward. Survivors can try to recover their old life, passively accept the stroke, or embrace the stroke moving forward in recovery.
2. A stroke disrupts the trajectory that a person originally had for their life, although Debra says that *opportunity* can also result from stroke. These include the chance to focus on what is most important to you, reevaluate what matters and why, and the chance to decide who you want to become.
3. **Julia Fox Garrison** mentions how she celebrates her stroke anniversary because it reminds her that she won. She has gotten to embrace her roles (wife, mother, daughter, sister, friend) for another 20 years, which she is grateful for.
4. **José Cofiño**, a friend of Debra's husband, lived with ALS and decided to regain control by choosing what he wanted the rest of his life to look like. He founded an organization to raise money and connect people living with ALS.
5. Relationships inevitably change after a stroke, so survivors can determine who they want in their lives and what they want out of their relationships.
6. A strong sense of community can help survivors understand their own identities better, and different people will find community in different ways.
7. Continuing to set goals helps survivors prioritize what matters most and appreciate the small wins that add up. Goals should be *specific, realizable, and immediate*.

8. **Sean Maloney** approaches his stroke advocacy with small, specific goals in mind. To improve his speeches, he uses scripts for support. This is helping him build independence in his communication.
9. It can be difficult for recent survivors to prioritize certain goals and adopt these positive outlooks. But the early challenges can become a “path to knowledge and self-discovery,” says Professor Kathy Charmaz.
10. **Jim Indelicato** used his determination during stroke recovery to turn inward and prioritize his family and helping others. Survivors can ultimately build more rewarding lives after their strokes.
11. Debra has found new ways to honor her core values, whether it be by supporting colleagues who push gender issues, coaching her children during family sailing trips, finding alternative ways to exercise, or always seeking new challenges.
12. Debra mentions how our lives are always evolving, which means that our identities are dynamic and changing over time, regardless of traumas. Therefore, survivors are partly the same and partly different from who they were pre-stroke.
13. Debra is more in tune with what gives her meaning, and she has shaped her new life and choices around that to prioritize what matters most.
14. Through writing this book with her son Danny, Debra has learned to obsess less over her deficiencies and basic needs so that she can instead focus on building a more fulfilling life full of growth.

