

Identity Theft: Rediscovering Ourselves After Stroke

By Debra E. Meyerson, PhD with Danny Zuckerman

Chapter 19 Summary: Fulfillment Through Growth

Debra stayed with a friend and colleague, Robin Ely, for four months in Boston. Robin noted a change in Debra's personal outlook. Robin described Debra as being "high strung" and a "glass half-empty" type of person when she was working. Now, Debra was the happiest Robin had ever seen her. Debra thinks her change was due in part to feeling encouraged by the therapy trial and by regaining some independence by living in Boston.

Debra also credits the change in her daily outlook to personal growth. She said for most of her life, her approach to the world was "determination and stubborn ambition." Her struggle to recover from the stroke made her slow down, think about her future, and figure out how to adjust to her changing goals. She began to appreciate what she has in her life more. She focused more on ways to become happier and more fulfilled.

Debra adopted recognizing silver linings and opportunities for growth as her main strategies. This approach made facing adversity more tolerable and meaningful. Holocaust survivor, Victor Frankel, highlights the critical importance of having meaning in your life. Debra shares that stroke allows for opportunities of both challenge and growth. If you only focus on what it means to be 100% recovered, it can feel overwhelming. Debra recommends clarifying values, setting goals, and celebrating small wins as you pursue them.

The stroke stole Debra's main identity as a professor. She felt her sense of self-worth and purpose were gone. She hoped that writing the book would restore that role and show everyone they were wrong. But it did not play out that way. Instead, in the process of listening to the many stroke survivors she interviewed, Debra learned to reflect, listen, and think about what was most important to share about recovery. Debra says the stroke knocked her down, but she got back up. She says, "I am still Debra Meyerson, but not the same

Debra Meyerson.”

Debra credits her recovery to all she has learned from the other stroke survivors and to the support of her family and friends. She offers that **survivors who are thriving share common attributes:**

- A viewpoint that **recovery goes beyond 12 months;**
- A **focus on the future** vs. recovering the past;
- **Accepting support;**
- Setting **achievable goals;**
- **Celebrating small wins** and **silver linings;**
- Drawing on **deeper meaning;** and
- **Recognizing** moments of **personal growth.**

Debra concludes that a stroke may limit some of our options, but it “does not have to steal our future or who we get to become next.”

Chapter 19 Highlights: Fulfillment Through Growth

1. Debra went to Boston for four months for a clinical trial of Melodic Intonation Therapy. She stayed with an old friend and colleague, Robin Ely. Robin noticed Debra was no longer “high strung” or had a “glass half-empty” outlook. Instead, she is the happiest that Robin has ever seen her.
2. There were several reasons for the change. Debra was encouraged by the therapy. She felt happy to reclaim some independence by living in Boston on her own. But she also thinks it had to do with her experience of personal growth.
3. Her outlook had changed. She was happier and more positive. Pre-stroke, her approach to the world had always been “determination and stubborn ambition.”
4. Fighting for recovery from her stroke forced Debra to slow down and reflect in new ways. To think about her future, Debra had to let go of some ways of being that didn’t fit her changing goals.
5. Debra realized that her pre-stroke perspective on life was narrow and very work focused. She started to appreciate all the other aspects of her life more. She focused on ways to become happier and more fulfilled.
6. Debra adopted recognizing silver linings and opportunities for growth as her main strategies. This approach made facing adversity more tolerable and meaningful.
7. Debra explains the idea of “flow” — a state where you are absorbed by the activity. You feel challenged, but the effort is rewarding. She also talks about meaning. Holocaust survivor, Victor Frankel, highlights the critical importance of having meaning in your life.

8. Stroke allows for opportunities of both challenge and growth. If survivors only focus on what it means to be 100% recovered, it can feel overwhelming. Clarifying values, setting goals, and celebrating small wins as you pursue them are important. This helps you to “achieve not just recovery but satisfying growth and fundamental meaning in our lives.”
9. The stroke stole Debra’s main identity as an educator. She felt her sense of self-worth and purpose were gone. She hoped that writing the book with her son Danny would restore that role and show everyone they were wrong. But it “didn’t play out that way.”
10. Debra was inspired and learned lessons from the stroke survivors she interviewed. She learned to think about what was most important to share about recovery.
11. It has not been an easy process. Debra is grateful for her support network. She has learned more fully who she is. She has gotten better at setting small goals. She can better recognize when she has fallen into a funk and adjust her outlook. She has learned to better feel and express gratitude, consideration, and vulnerability.
12. Debra says the stroke knocked her down, but she got back up. She states, “I am still Debra Meyerson, but not the same Debra Meyerson.”
13. The support of her family and friends has helped her through her struggles and challenges. Her research for the book helped her to make sense of what she was learning. She says, “I am *Debra Meyerson* because of those around me.”

14. Debra offers that stroke **survivors who are thriving share common attributes:**

- A viewpoint that **recovery goes beyond 12 months;**
- A **focus on the future** vs. recovering the past;
- **Accepting support;**
- Setting **achievable goals;**
- **Celebrating small wins** and **silver linings;**
- Drawing on **deeper meaning;** and
- **Recognizing** moments of **personal growth.**

15. Debra shared that it is important to notice and be aware of the moments that count and make a difference. The slower pace of her post-stroke life makes it easier to notice, pause and think about them. These moments add up and can be a source of light. Soon there is a “pathway lit with our own values, leading to a life that will be meaningful and fulfilling.”

16. Debra concludes that a stroke may limit some of our options, but it “does not have to steal our future or who we get to become next.”

Chapter 19 Points for Reflection: Fulfillment Through Growth

1. **Before** your stroke, were you more a **glass half-full** or **glass half-empty** person?

More Half-Full

Split Both Ways

More Half-Empty

It Depends

Other

2. **After** your stroke, are you more a **glass half-full** or **glass half-empty** person?

More Half-Full

Split Both Ways

More Half-Empty

It Depends

Other

3. This book promotes **small wins** and **silver linings** as important strategies for **personal growth**. Has it influenced the way you are thinking about **your goals** and **sense of hope**?

Not at All

Somewhat

A Lot

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

4. Debra lists **approaches to recovery** that help a stroke survivor **thrive**. Which ones are **strengths for you**?

- View that recovery goes past 12 months
- Focus on future vs. recovering the past
- Drawing on deeper meaning and values
- Accepting support
- Recognizing growth
- Setting achievable goals
- Celebrating silver linings or small wins
- Other

5. How has this book helped you to think about **rebuilding a positive post-stroke identity**? What are your most important take-aways?

6. What **three words** would you use to describe yourself before your stroke? After your stroke? How do you hope to describe yourself in the future?

7. Debra concludes by saying, a stroke may limit some of our options, but it *“does not have to steal our future or who we get to become next.”* What does this **mean to you**?