

## *Identity Theft: Rediscovering Ourselves After Stroke*

By Debra E. Meyerson, PhD with Danny Zuckerman

### Chapter 2 Summary: Everything Can Fail

Debra starts her acute inpatient rehab at a new hospital. Steve heads back to work and returns to a more regular routine. Debra still has no speech. She is terrified because she still can't talk. Her speech therapist helps her hum and then sing simple songs. She finally produces her first words! He uses melody and rhythm to help her say, "My name is Debra Meyerson." She repeats it over and over. This breakthrough comes with tears of joy. Debra explains to the reader that "there is no cure for stroke." Each stroke is different. It is hard for patients to know what their recovery will be. There are fears about loss of control of the body and of having another stroke. She writes about **Sean Maloney**, a former Intel exec whose stroke left him with aphasia and a paralyzed right side. He describes it as a shattering loss of wholeness. He realized that "everything can fail."

Debra makes good progress with her walking and talking for two weeks. But one morning it's harder to talk again. A CT shows another stroke in her speech centers and she's transferred back to Stanford. Medical complications lead to more time in the ICU. She is furious at this set back. She is still planning to be back at work in two weeks. The doctors discover the second stroke was caused by a clot that formed behind the tear in her carotid artery. The family agrees to a risky surgery to put in a stent. They worry when the surgery takes much longer than expected but are relieved when it's a success. Debra is soon back at the acute rehab hospital working on her recovery. One morning, her son, Danny, arrives to find his mom face down on the floor. Debra couldn't move or call for help. She won't admit to the nurses or Danny that she decided to try walking on her own. She was sure her willpower would be enough to make her body work. All her life, she has overcome challenges and met her goals. Debra shares that early after her stroke, she was still holding on to her old identity. Stroke changes your capabilities in an instant. Some survivors, like Debra, stay in denial for a long time. Others adjust more quickly to the losses. Her sense of self was now threatened. Debra says, she "was a teacher without words."

## Chapter 2 Highlights: Everything Can Fail

1. Debra starts rehab at her 4<sup>th</sup> hospital, Santa Clara Valley Medical Center. Steve returns to work which helps him feel a sense of routine and normalcy again.
2. Her son, Danny, is there for her first session with her new speech therapist, Jonathan. He can tell she is terrified and desperately wants to talk. She can barely make a sound.
3. Jonathan starts by asking Debra to hum along to the tune Happy Birthday. He moves her arms to the rhythm. She starts to hum and finally she gets out her first word, "You." She was overjoyed. He quickly gets her to practice other simple tunes. She gets more words.
4. Next, he makes up a tune for her to chant the phrase, "My name is Debra Myerson." After a few tries, she can say/sing the phrase. She practices saying it over and over. The melody and rhythm are a powerful way to unlock her fluency.
5. Later, Danny shares an update in their Caring Bridge blog about his mom's joy at her first words. He tells how, with tears streaming down her face, she kept practicing.
6. Debra quotes a medical researcher who says "There is no cure" for stroke. Through brain scans and medical history, we know that every stroke is different.
7. The nature of how strokes happen can damage a person's sense of self. It often strikes without warning. The cause is often unknown or random. We don't know how much or how fast survivors will recover. Losing control over your body can feel frightening and like a failure.

8. Debra tells how Intel Executive, **Sean Maloney's** stroke left him unable to speak or use his right side. Many years later, he still remembers the “shattering loss of wholeness and control” after his stroke. It was hard to realize that “everything can fail.”
9. Stroke survivor **Andrea Helft** told Debra that she was afraid of having another stroke. It could be life threatening. It's hard to live with uncertainty and lack of control.
10. Debra made good progress for two weeks. She could walk down the hall. She could say more and more words. But one morning, her speech came out garbled again. She tried desperately to prove everything was okay, but she couldn't get the words out.
11. Steve quickly got a hold of the doctor. A new CT scan confirmed a second stroke. They felt devastated. Debra was sent back to Stanford.
12. They discovered the tear in the carotid artery caused another clot. Low blood pressure and low platelets kept her in the ICU.
13. She kept her physical strength she had regained, but the new stroke was in her speech center. She lost her speech again.
14. Debra was furious about the set back. She wanted therapy in the ICU, but it was limited. Her family tried to help her with PT and Speech exercises. Her husband compared stroke recovery to a series of steps forward and then a few backwards.
15. Debra couldn't make a sound, but she wanted to work on speech. She was determined to be back at work in two weeks. She still saw herself as Professor Meyerson.

- 16.** The doctors recommended that the family consider brain surgery to put in a small stent to prevent another blood clot. It was a risky procedure and a hard decision. The doctors thought not doing the surgery was risky too. The family decided to do the surgery.
- 17.** The family waited while she was in surgery. It was supposed to take 2-3 hours, but it took over 5 hours. The family worried something went wrong. Finally, they learned surgery was a success. Soon, she headed back to Valley Medical Center for more rehab.
- 18.** Danny went to visit his mom but was shocked to find her face down on the floor. Debra had fallen and couldn't move by herself or call for help. He tried to help her up, but she pushed him away. Debra kept saying the only word she could, 'No, no, no, no.'
- 19.** Debra wouldn't admit it to Danny or the nurses, but she had decided to get up on her own and walk. She was sure if she tried hard enough, she could do it. While her determination and stubbornness were an asset, her denial could have resulted in a terrible injury.
- 20.** Debra didn't understand yet that her condition would be long lasting. She assumed it would just take effort to get everything back. She'd always worked hard and met her goals, figuring out any problem that stood in her way. One year, she and Steve even sailed around the world in a sailboat with their kids. They made it happen despite obstacles.
- 21.** Debra tells the tale of the father of one of Danny's good friends who was also a professor. He'd also had a carotid dissection followed by aphasia and right sided weakness. He too tried to get out of his wheelchair on his own and had fallen. His son discovered him on the floor. Like Debra, he would not admit that he decided to get up on his own. He wasn't ready to accept his new reality. They shared the same story.

22. Debra discusses that many people like her have a hard time early on after the stroke accepting changes in their capabilities. They cling to what they could do pre-stroke.
23. Debra admits it's a hard adjustment. Determination keeps you working on your recovery. But denial of the changes in your abilities can **keep you stuck** on your old identity **instead rebuilding** a new one.
24. Some people seem to adjust quickly. Many others stay in denial for a long time before struggling with who they were and who they are now. Debra realized she was now a teacher without words.

## Chapter 2 Points for Reflection: Everything Can Fail

1. Debra remembers her **first words** after the stroke. How well do you remember your first words?

Not at All

Some Memory

Strong Memory

2. Debra speaks about the **feelings of uncertainty** after a stroke because no one can tell you for sure how much you will recover or how fast. How uncertain did you feel at first?

Not at All

Some Feelings  
of Uncertainty

Strong Feelings

3. Debra's husband, Steve, says that you can take **steps forward and backwards** during stroke recovery. Did you feel like there were many ups and downs during your recovery?

Not at All

A Few

Too Many!

4. Debra talks about the challenge **balancing determination and realistic expectations**, especially early after the stroke. Did you find this a difficult balance?

No Problems

Some Problems  
Balancing

Very Hard  
to Balance

