

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

**By Debra E. Meyerson, PhD with Danny Zuckerman**

### **Chapter 7 Summary: Grief**

Debra recalls the shock that she felt when her father died suddenly in 1995. She did not know it then, but she was on the border of depression for several years. These feelings of grief resurfaced in 2013, when she learned that she could not return to work and would need to give up her tenured professor position at Stanford. After 3 years of working hard to recover and return to work, she was devastated. She felt she had failed. She knows now that she was grieving the loss of her own identity.

Most of the survivors Debra spoke to experience some level of depression, which can be triggered by physical damage to the brain as well as emotional trauma. Depression is one part of the **Kübler-Ross 5 stages of grief: *denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance***. Debra shares the story of **Malik Thoma**, CEO of a chain of day spas, who had a difficult time accepting his post-stroke status. He felt like life had no meaning and was often in the anger stage of the grieving cycle. Working towards some level of acceptance can assist survivors with looking forward to the future, rather than looking past to the old self. Debra says that optimism can feel extremely difficult but small wins, conscious choices, and finding new ways to live a meaningful life can benefit someone's post-stroke life.

Debra mentions how taking a small dose of an antidepressant medication helped with her anxiety while speaking. She promotes the benefits of therapy for stroke survivors. Many survivors with depression do not receive treatment for it. This can make it difficult for survivors to process the grief and damage that occurs to their identities. Many therapists are not specially trained to assist people with aphasia. When survivors do find qualified counseling services, the cost is often very expensive. This makes it hard for most people with aphasia to discuss their grief with a therapist. Some people turn to faith to battle the grief, and Debra uses meditation. Drawing on deeper values can lead to "post-traumatic growth"—growing past your grief. It takes the right attitude and support.

## Chapter 7 Highlights: Grief

1. In 1995, Debra's 64 year-old father drowned in his backyard pool. She was in shock. Debra looks back on that time realizing the intense grief she was feeling.
2. She felt similar grief in 2013, when she was told she could not return to Stanford as a tenured professor. After working on rehab for 3 years, she felt she failed. She cried, stared into space, and punched pillows. She was grieving the loss of her old identity.
3. 1 in 3 stroke survivors experience depression, and nearly all the stroke survivors Debra spoke to experience some level of depression. It can be due to physical damage to the brain, emotional trauma, or both!
4. Survivors cycle through the 5 stages of grief: **denial**, **anger**, **bargaining**, **depression**, and **acceptance**. It is common to move back and forth through the stages.
5. Debra acknowledges the difficulty and importance of striving for **acceptance**, which can ultimately help survivors live more fulfilled post-stroke lives. She stressed the challenge of looking forward instead of back at your old lives. Small wins, conscious choices, and finding new ways to live a meaningful life can help you get through grief.
6. She shared the story of **Malik Thoma**, CEO of a chain of day spas, who had a stroke and experienced a very difficult emotional journey. He did not have aphasia and could walk, but was highly discouraged, contemplated death, and often was in the **anger** stage. He could only focus on his losses. He felt let down by his family and was unable to find purpose.

7. Debra notes that stroke survivors adapt better if they recognize when they are in a “chaos” narrative. They can try to seek rebuilding and growth vs. thinking of pre-stroke abilities. **Laura Wang**, with locked-in syndrome, found meaning in her new life.
8. Due to performance anxiety around her speech, Debra takes a small dose of an anti-depressant. It is very helpful. Many people go without treatment for depression.
9. Stroke survivors often don’t have access to skilled counseling services to address the emotional challenges after a stroke. These services are rarely available and can be very expensive. It is very hard to find a counselor trained to help clients with aphasia.
10. Debra feels that given the biological and emotional impact of stroke, psychological support should be a standard treatment option, just like physical, occupational, and speech therapy.
11. As an alternative, some people can process their grief through faith and religion. Debra processes her grief using meditation practices.
12. At the end of the chapter, Debra discusses how psychologists often describe two paths people take in trauma recovery. People either go the route of depression and PTSD, or the other route of recovering and “bouncing back.”
13. A third route is mentioned, which is the path of “post-traumatic growth.” You get through the grief and grow past it. This is the route Debra believes she has taken in her stroke battle.

14. Debra ends the chapter with a favorite line from the book *Option B* by Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant that describes how to recover from grief: “Life is never perfect. We all live some form of Option B. This book is to help us kick the shit out of it.”

## Chapter 7 Points for Reflection: Grief

1. Debra mentions the **5 stages of grief**, and she says that not all survivors experience all stages. Which stages have you experienced in your stroke journey?

Denial

Anger

Bargaining

Depression

Acceptance

2. Debra says that it is a challenge to **accept your post-stroke self**. How much of a challenge has it been to accept the post-stroke changes in your life?

Not

Challenging

1

2

3

4

Somewhat

Challenging

5

6

7

8

Very

Challenging

9

10

3. Debra was devastated to learn that she would not return to work despite her 3 years of progress. Have you ever **received news** that you did not expect along your recovery journey?

Not at all

Occasionally

Frequently

4. Have you ever found it challenging to **stay optimistic** during recovery?

Not

Challenging

1

2

3

4

Somewhat

Challenging

5

6

7

8

Very

Challenging

9

10

5. Debra mentions that **adequate psychological support** from therapists can be expensive, which can make it hard to process emotional grief after stroke. What has been your experience with this?
  
6. In the book, Debra says that for some, turning to faith is a critical part of recovery. Describe the sources where you have **found emotional support** (such as faith, religion, or meditation)?
  
7. Looking back on different parts of your recovery journey, were there any points in which you experienced “**post-traumatic growth?**”