

Identity Theft: Rediscovering Ourselves After Stroke **By Debra E. Meyerson, PhD with Danny Zuckerman**

Chapter 8 Summary: Lean On

During Debra’s stay at the hospital, her husband Steve read letters to her from family and friends. Debra admits that she was known for being independent and stubborn before her stroke. Even though Debra was feeling a lot of anger and fear, she also felt a growing sense of gratitude for the strong community of support. Studies have shown that strong support networks are linked with better mental well-being and physical recovery. After Debra’s stroke, her friends dropped off pre-cooked meals and continued with deliveries for many months. Since a stroke can be isolating, being surrounded by loved ones helps with confidence, motivation, and the ability to focus on the values that matter most. Stroke survivor **Kathy Howard** was insecure about attending a high school reunion. Her friend convinced Kathy to go despite her fears. Kathy had a great time. Kathy shared with her old friends that she was attending a stroke awareness walk the next day. Kathy was surprised when about 20 people from the reunion came to support her at the walk.

Unlike Kathy Howard, many stroke survivors feel like they have no support. **Mary Jones** was placed in a retirement home by her family at the age of 44. Survivors are not always encouraged to seek out support groups, and some families do not have access to training or resources. Insurance rarely covers emotional therapies. Debra also explains how stroke survivors need the right kind of support. She recommends that friends offer to help with specific tasks instead of asking in general “how can I help?”

It has been a process for her to learn to accept help. Debra reflects that while it is important to acknowledge her stroke, she didn’t want it to be the only focus of the interaction. She explains that being a stroke survivor is only one part of her identity. Debra refers to psychologist **Susan Silk’s ring theory for trauma supporters**. The center ring is the person directly impacted—the survivor. The people next most affected, and often most able to support the survivor are in

the second ring. In the next ring are the people most able to support those in the second ring. Then you keep drawing bigger rings and writing the names of the next group of people most affected by the loss. Susan suggests, wherever you are in the circle, to “offer comfort in and seek comfort out” for a strong, sustainable support system.

Chapter 8 Highlights: Lean On

1. Debra's husband Steve continues to read supportive comments and letters from friends and family to Debra while she is in the hospital. Her support network strengthened Debra's determination to keep pushing forward.
2. Debra realized that although she felt a lot of anger and fear at first, her life is what it is today because of her support system. Studies find that social support has a positive impact on our psychological well-being and physical health.
3. These networks can help with everyday tasks which allows the stroke survivor to focus on recovery. It also helps the family. For example, one of Debra's closest friends, Kim, organized a food team. They dropped off precooked meals. Many of these friends continued deliveries for months after Debra's stroke.
4. Debra talks about stroke survivor **Kathy Howard**, who felt insecure about her disabilities and did not want to attend a high school reunion. A close friend persuaded her to go. Kathy ended up having a great time.
5. She told her old friends that she was attending a stroke awareness walk the next day. She was surprised when many people from the reunion came to support her at the walk. Kathy's friends provided a supportive and encouraging environment for her.
6. Debra admits that it is hard to accept help when you are used to being independent. Embracing help did not come naturally. She wanted to do as much as possible on her own. Over time, she came to feel gratitude for being able to lean on a strong network.

7. Debra shares that after her stroke, she felt embarrassed and a burden at times. She notes other stroke survivors often experience similar feelings. Once Debra opened up and overcame her fears, she noticed how ready people were to help her and she could accept their support. She realized that life with a strong support network was beneficial.
8. Organizational behavior faculty and graduate students from around the country attend “May Meaning Meetings.” These meetings focus on how to make a difference through meaning, and Debra loved to attend before her stroke. The 2014 May Meaning Meeting was the first academic event she attended after her stroke.
9. She used her “Lucky to Be Alive” speech and added a section on the book idea. Those who attended pushed her to commit to the book project and helped her find more meaning in her poststroke self.
10. Unlike Kathy Howard, **Mary Jones** was one of the stroke survivors who did not have a strong support system. After her husband divorced her, Mary’s family placed her in a retirement home at the age of 44.
11. Debra points out that many U.S. stroke survivors also feel they have little or no support. Unfortunately, survivors are often not encouraged to seek out support groups. Families also have little access to training or resources to help support the stroke survivor.
12. Debra has leaned on her support network for 8 years. She has learned what makes support effective. Friends who ignored the situation made her feel isolated. Debra explains that it is important to acknowledge the stroke, but to not make the interaction completely about the stroke. Being a stroke survivor is only one part of her identity.

13. Debra points out friends mean well, but do not always know how to help. She advises offering to do a specific task rather than asking in general what you can do to help. Debra explains that this saves the stroke survivor energy and the discomfort of making a response. For example, their friend Kevin said he would just install a left-side handrail for their stairs after confirming it would help with Debra's return from the hospital.
14. It is common for social networks to fade over time and become smaller. Psychologist **Susan Silk** developed a **ring theory for trauma supporters** to keep a sustainable support system. The center ring is the person directly impacted—the survivor. The people next most affected, and often most able to support the survivor are in the second ring. In the next ring are the people most able to support those in the second ring. Susan suggests, “Wherever you are in the circle, offer comfort in and seek comfort out.”
15. When there is not a strong enough support system, people may need to take the situation into their own hands. Mary, for example, moved herself out of the retirement home and into her own apartment. She then found herself a strong support system in a church in St. Louis. Mary has moved up to higher needs in Maslow's pyramid. She can now build a true sense of belonging in her chosen community.
16. Recovery from stroke is a long journey. Debra shows her gratitude for the overwhelming amount of support she and her family have received from both friends and family.

5. Debra notes that some people either make the situation **all about** the stroke or **completely ignore it**.

Have you felt that people you know have acted like one of these **extreme sides**, either **ignoring it** or making the situation **all about** the stroke?

Not at all

Occasionally

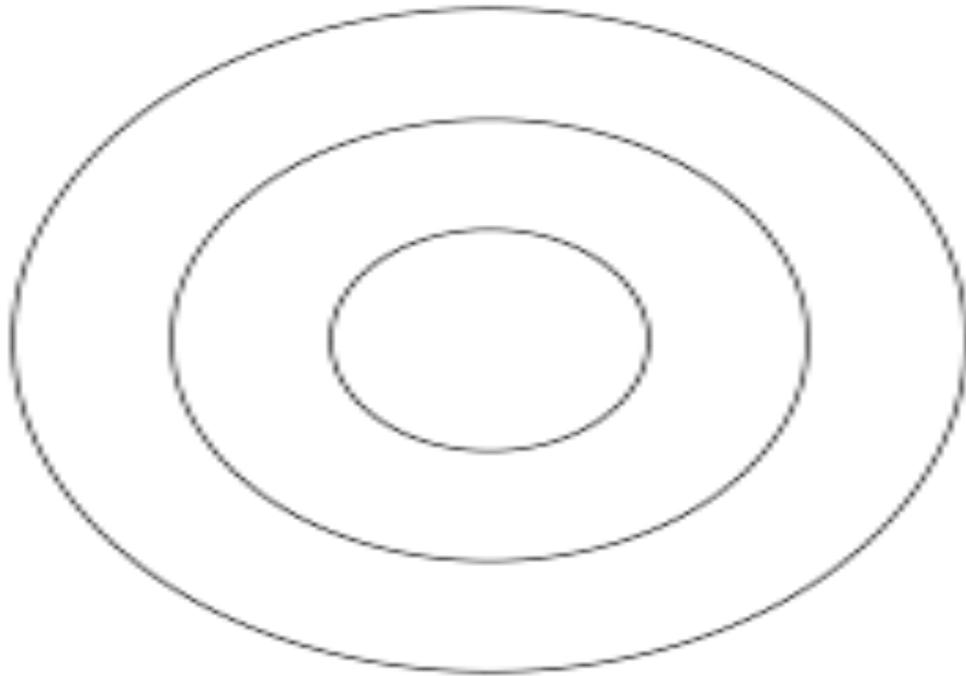
Frequently

6. Debra explains that making specific suggestions on how to help is **better** than asking a stroke survivor “What can I do to help?”. What are some **concrete ways** people have helped you after your stroke?

7. When Steve would read Debra all the **supportive messages** from family and friends, Debra became **more determined and enthusiastic** to push through, especially immediately after her stroke. What **helped you** get through those **first few months** of your stroke?

8. Debra points out that stroke survivors are often **not encouraged** to seek out **support groups**. How and when did you get connected to a stroke group? What was your experience like? What were the benefits for you or your family?

9. Susan Silk's theory suggests that the stroke survivor is in the center of a ring of circles, with those next most affected, and most able to help the survivor, in the next circle and so on. Write **your** name in the middle circle. **Who** would you consider to **be part** of your second ring? And in the third ring, most able to help them??



10. Share **your most valuable take-aways** from this chapter about learning to accept help and support networks.