A Stroke Of Bad Luck

A survival guide for when someone you know has a stroke

by James Divine
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A survival guide when someone you know suffers a stroke
James Divine
This book is about my personal experience during my mom’s stroke. I am a product of my life. Everything I have been through has made me the person I am today, including my relationships. Your experience will probably be different than mine.

I love my mom, but I also realize more and more how dysfunctional my upbringing was. Some of that dysfunction shows itself now even though I am 50 years old and mom is in her 70s.
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THE DAY MY WORLD WAS SHATTERED

I was returning home from an orchestra banquet and was greeted in the driveway by my wife. She was talking nonsense – but we all do in the midst of a terrible situation.

Susan came running into the driveway as I parked, shouting, “Get some food in you....we’ve got to get to the hospital.” I was confused. Why do I need some food? I just came from an all you can eat buffet. But my wife – always the caring individual – was thinking of my needs too.

“Your mom had a stroke. She’s at the hospital now.”

Nobody can prepare themselves for those words and the emotions that suddenly flow over your entire being.

“Your mom had a stroke...”

Those words seemed to bounce around the inside of my head. I can’t describe how I felt at that moment. Perhaps I was temporarily devoid of feelings. Numb! I was numb...in a fog...I felt helpless.

Lesson #1: None of us is guaranteed tomorrow. Live life with no regrets.
PRAYER IS ALL YOU NEED...THAT’S A LIE

People often resort to easy platitudes regarding God...

    Prayer is all you need...

    Just trust God...He will heal...

I believe in God! He’s my everything! I do trust Him for all that has happened, all that is happening, and all that will happen.

But I don’t believe prayer is all I need.

God put us here in community. Sometimes we are the one who comforts others. Other times we will be the ones comforted. To everything there is a season.

Susan and I arrived at the hospital and found mom. Mom was completely confused. She did not look well at all. She couldn’t remember much of what had happened to her or even why she was there. As best as we can put together with pieces of what she remembers and witnesses, this is what appears to have happened...

Mom was returning home from the grocery store in her vehicle when she was gripped by a head-splitting, painful headache. She managed to make it home but knew that something was wrong, so she limped to her front door, opened it and called out for help to a lady walking her dog. Mom collapsed on the floor. The lady called 911.

Mom was brought to the hospital in an ambulance. The doctor performed an MRI and found she had had a hemorrhagic stroke, which means that she had bleeding in the brain.

The doctor explained to us that the prognosis was not good. Mom
was scheduled for emergency brain surgery early the next morning to clean up the hemorrhage. The doctor informed us we should be in touch with family members. I called my sister and my aunt to tell them the devastating news. We prepared for the worst. We prayed. We prayed some more.

Lesson #2: Prayer is important. It’s sometimes all you have, but it’s not all you need.
HER CONDITION STABILIZES

I took the next day off work to be there for mom’s surgery. The doctor ordered another MRI. He liked the improvement he saw so he cancelled the risky surgery. He wanted to see how healing would progress on its own. Although more stable, she was still in considerable danger.

The stroke occurred on a Wednesday night. On the Friday night immediately following, we were scheduled to take a flight to the east coast to see my son’s law school graduation and visit his family. It was a tough choice to decide to continue with our trip. I knew if something happened to mom while we were gone, the false feelings of guilt would sabotage my spirit.

Lesson #3: Don’t let guilt – specifically false guilt – cause you to make the wrong decision.

Each of you has to make your own choice. I decided to proceed with our previous plans. Life goes on. Since we don’t know the future, we can’t let guilt destroy us!
WHAT IS A STROKE

This is the description given by the National Stroke Association on their website www.stroke.org.

A stroke is a "brain attack". It can happen to anyone at any time. It occurs when blood flow to an area of brain is cut off. When this happens, brain cells are deprived of oxygen and begin to die. When brain cells die during a stroke, abilities controlled by that area of the brain such as memory and muscle control are lost.

How a person is affected by their stroke depends on where the stroke occurs in the brain and how much the brain is damaged. For example, someone who had a small stroke may only have minor problems such as temporary weakness of an arm or leg. People who have larger strokes may be permanently paralyzed on one side of their body or lose their ability to speak. Some people recover completely from strokes, but more than 2/3 of survivors will have some type of disability.

**Stroke By The Numbers**

- Each year nearly 800,000 people experience a new or recurrent stroke.
- A stroke happens every 40 seconds.
- Stroke is the fifth leading cause of death in the U.S.
- Every 4 minutes someone dies from stroke.
- Up to 80 percent of strokes can be prevented.
- Stroke is the leading cause of adult disability in the U.S.
EARLY RECOVERY

After about a week, mom began rehab in the hospital. It consisted of speech, occupational and physical therapy. She was cooperative, cheerful, positive and determined to get out of the hospital...traits I had rarely seen in her for over 20 years. Mom has suffered what appears to be undiagnosed depression for the last 20 years.

At the start of rehab her personality seemed to have changed FOR THE BETTER. She even seemed happy at times. This story offers some background...

*For years, mom had turned up her nose when offered food that had been prepared by anyone except her. Her response was always that the other person did not know how to make food properly or that they couldn’t prepare it with good flavor! She often hurt peoples’ feelings who made food for her.*

*In the hospital, she continued this behavior, but when we told her she HAD to eat, she would ask what the choices were, then choose one of them. After eating it she would say it was pretty good. She was very kind to the hospital staff.*

My emotions were still on a rollercoaster at this point. Several of the staff – when discussing her case with us – told us that mom would more than likely never live on her own again. Mom signed a power of attorney so I could handle her affairs.

**Lesson #4: You can expect a continuous stream of varied emotions.**
AN EMOTIONAL ROLLER-COASTER RIDE

A few weeks before the stroke, Mom had already decided she was going to sell her condo. I didn’t think this was the best option for her. She had not researched rent in the area and decided on a whim to sell her house...decisions on a whim is a life-long trait of hers. Despite counsel to the contrary, her stubbornness kicked in. She decided to sell anyway.

She received and accepted an offer to buy shortly before the stroke. Since she was in rehab at the closing and I was handling her financial affairs, the sale of the house fell to me. At first I thought the quick sale was a blessing (more later).

I began by packing everything into boxes to prepare for storage. This task was extremely difficult. Mom’s mind had not recovered fully, so one day she would tell me specific items that she wanted to keep, but the next day the list would be different. I thought that she was going to be living in a nursing home so I gave away many items. It was with a heavy heart that I went through all the items in her house, deciding what was important to her and what I could give away.

My wife offered to help, but I felt this was a task I needed to complete myself.

Mom often became angry with me, especially when she thought I wasn’t following her wishes. I realize now it was the stroke speaking. My mother-in-law gave me good counsel...

Sometimes we forget that not only is a person’s body not well, but their mind has been affected.

Lesson #5: Wait
I wish I had waited. The hospital staff ended up being wrong about her level of recovery. She has recovered enough to live on her own (although I still think she shouldn’t). If I had waited and even somehow nulled her offer to sell, she might still be living in her condo, which was much nicer and cheaper than her current living situation.

If I had waited, she would still have all of the items I ended up getting rid of. She would have been mad about her condo not selling, but if you understood my mom you would know she ends up mad and depressed no matter what option is taken.

I managed to get everything packed and stored. The prospect of cleaning the place seemed daunting.

I hated being the caretaker for someone else’s money. I finally decided to use some of mom’s money to bring in a professional cleaner.

**Lesson #6: Don’t be afraid to use monetary resources if they are available.**

Mom had the money. She probably would not have approved using it for cleaning, but for my sanity I needed to hire someone. I should have done the same for moving and storage. A friend of hers and I did that all ourselves, storing her furniture and boxes in my garage. If I had blocked the sale of the house to begin with, none of this would have even come up.

On the morning her friend was due to arrive and help me move her furniture, Mom called me from the hospital to ask me a small favor. Mom has always confused “small” and “big” favor, so I knew I was in trouble. Here’s a true-to-life example.
“Jimmy. I have a big favor to ask of you.”

“Sure mom, what is it?”

“I know you might be busy now, so if you need to schedule some time to do it, just let me know.”

“What is it Mom?”

“A bulb in my living room light fixture is out. Can you replace it?”

“I’ll do that right now Mom.”

On another occasion…

“Jimmy, I have a small favor to ask you.”

“What is it Mom?”

(She always has seemed to make me go through this process of discovery).

“I want to sell my house tomorrow. Can you help me?”

“Mom, that’s not a small favor. That’s something that will take time. Have you thought this through?”

“I gave you birth and now you don’t want to do this small thing for me!”

This was her request for me on moving day…

“Jimmy, I have a small favor to ask you.”

My heart jumped in my throat. I knew this would be no small thing. She continued…

“Now don’t tell me “No” Jimmy. I want you to remove the ceiling
fan from my master bedroom so I can use it in the future.”

You have to realize I have no mechanical bone in my body. When we have bought do-it-yourself furniture, my wife tells me what to do with each piece because I can’t figure it out.

I told mom “No. I’m not going to remove the ceiling fan.”

Mom became upset. She said something along the lines of...

“I hardly ask you to ever do anything, and now you won’t even do this small thing for me. You never do anything for me!”

What! The last three weeks had been spent handling her affairs, selling the house, deciphering bills, packing and cleaning! What does she mean I never do anything for her?

At that moment I lost it. I screamed at my mom and told her that I had no intention of removing the ceiling fan. I hung up on her. Then I punched the wall and was screaming at God and asking Him to just take her to heaven.

I had a little pity party. Why did I have to deal with all this crap? Why was this happening to me? This behavior was totally out of character for me. I’m not a screamer. I don’t react physically to things. But I was at my wit’s end.

I sat down and started crying. I was pouring out all the stress of the previous month out to my heavenly Father. I was telling God how mad and upset I was, and God was listening. Soon I felt a tremendous sense of peace, more than I have ever felt in my life. It was like God was embracing me and letting me know He was there with me.

Lesson #7: It’s okay to be mad at God.
WHERE WILL SHE LIVE

The house was sold, mom’s furniture was stored in my garage and she was getting better in rehab. A target date was set for her return to normal life, but where would she go? She had no home.

I considered moving her into my home. All throughout childhood, mom made me promise that I would never put her in a “home.” It wasn’t fair for her to strong-arm this type of promise from a child, but that didn’t keep the guilt away as I searched for a “home” for her.

I met with her rehab team about once a week. They kept me posted on her progress and what they thought she would be capable of doing herself. She was using a walker. She needed help bathing and taking meds. She would probably never drive again.

Mom has never been good with money. When she was younger, if she needed more, she would take on an extra job or work longer hours. That plan works when you are in your 40s or 50s, but becomes more difficult when you are older. Mom is on a very limited fixed income, so this limited the options available to her.

I found a cute assisted living place that she could afford and signed her up. She would be in a small 2-bedroom apartment with another lady, meals included, free transportation, daily activities, someone would help her take her medications and she would be checked on several times a day. And the cost was within her monthly income. She also had some money from the sale of her condo.

This seemed like an ideal placement for her. Mom was not at all happy about this. I did get her to agree to try it through the end of 2016. Then she could move if she didn’t like it.
We moved mom into her new place. She immediately rebelled. She refused to eat. She said the food was terrible. My wife and I had eaten there several times. We found the food to be delicious and the staff friendly and accommodating. Mom found the food to be horrible and the staff rude. But this is how mom has found most people to be for the past twenty years. It is the result of her being depressed and refusing treatment for it.

_It wasn’t just the depression mom refused treatment for! She has had high blood pressure for several years. She has been in denial about the blood pressure. Doctors have told her that if she didn’t receive treatment, one day she would have a stroke. Here she is suffering the aftermath of her own stubbornness._

Mom was determined to move out. I told her that I would not help her find a place. She was on her own if she decided to do that. I also reminded her that rent was already paid for the next six weeks, so she might as well make the best of it. And there was her promise to remain until the end of 2016 (this was late July).

If she had not received help to find a place and move, I know the task of looking and moving would have been too daunting for her. However, she found a friend who helped her move. This friend asked me for advice. I told him that I disagreed with the decision. He went ahead anyway.

Mom moved from a nice place where she was safe and everything was provided for her to an apartment in an unsafe part of town.

_Lesson #8: You can help someone to the best of your ability, but you can’t make them do what’s best for them._

Mom has always been stubborn. She decided in her head that she wasn’t going to like the new place. It had nothing to do with the
place itself...or even the food. It was her decision.

I called her friend and gave him a piece of my mind. He pushed back some and accused me of not taking care of my mom. He said in the culture he grew up in, you take your elderly parents into your home and care for them. I had considered this and asked for counsel from many of my friends. One 85-year-old friend in particular suggested we not take mom into our home. He said it would cause a lot of stress and that my wife and I would not really be able to meet all of mom’s needs.

I felt judged by mom’s friend!

I was mad at him!

**Lesson #9: People will judge you**

The only one I have to answer to is God. People will judge you, but they don’t know all the consideration you made for your decision. They don’t know the family history. They don’t know you!

I ultimately decided that I would stay out of mom’s affairs. She needed to make her own mistakes and decisions. However, I determined that I would not enable those decisions, so I told mom that I would not help her move or do anything of which I didn’t agree with the decision. I have stuck to that. I still go to see mom regularly. I’ll help her financially if she needs food or money to pay for lodging.
AFTERMATH

Mom seems to be doing well in her new place. It’s on the 2nd floor of a two-story apartment building. The climb up and down the stairs is probably good for her. In the last ten years, her “exercise” has too often been crossing the street to get her mail.

Mom seems to be about 80% recovered from her stroke. Her speech still seems a little slurred. She has lost a lot of weight, but that is good. She took a trip to Italy to see her relatives. I was against the trip, until I told some new friends of mine about mom’s trip. They responded with “Good for her. It’s nice that she hasn’t let a stroke keep her from traveling.”

Lesson #10: Our response to a loved one’s desire is often based on the dysfunction of the past

My new friends were right. I’m glad she took the trip! I was basing my response on everything that had happened, my upbringing and my anger at mom.

In my opinion, mom should not be driving. Her reaction time has slowed considerably. Only a doctor can determine that an individual is not able to drive.

Mom failed to stop quickly enough recently and rear-ended another vehicle. Her vehicle was not totaled. In fact the damage was fairly minor. Mom bought a new vehicle. Now she has no money left from the sale of her condo.

Lesson #11: Lifetime habits are not going to change simply because a stroke has occurred.

Mom was bad about money before the stroke. She has been “poor” her entire life, first a real poor when growing up, but the
last 40 years her poverty has been mental. She has never really had money set aside, so when she came into $40,000 from the sale of her condo, she thought she was rich.

It’s all gone. That’s her choice.

She is still depressed. That’s her choice.

She’s still not taking care of her body. That’s her choice.

I don’t know what the future holds. Mom could have one more day or she could have twenty more years. Ultimately God is in control. He knows when each of us will die. He knows every intimate detail of our lives.

I’m still refusing to help mom in areas I disagree with her on. For example, I refused to help her get the new car because I didn’t think that was best for her. But I see her and talk to her regularly. The stroke hasn’t changed her except to make her weaker physically. She still refuses to come over to our house for dinner (you don’t cook good), still refuses to join us for family celebratory events (that’s not when I’m used to eating). These traits were all there before her stroke.

**Lesson #11: Respond with love**

Love is the ultimate rule! I will continue to love my mom. Despite my dysfunctional upbringing and her actions that come across as mean, she is still my mom. I have had to forgive her and now feel a deeper love for her. I have come to see her not just as my mom, but also as a sister in the Lord. I see her as God sees her.

Love never fails.
About the author:

James is a music educator who also speaks on issues related to life. Although this book is a serious one, James plans on writing a book on the funny experiences of his dysfunctional upbringing. The book will be called “Everybody Loves Jimmy.”

James and his wife have four beautiful children, two of whom are married. He married his high school sweetheart. They have three granddaughters.

www.jamesdivine.net

Contact James to have him speak to your group!

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