



A SEVERE STROKE DIDN'T STOP HIM

Here's how one man regained the ability to speak, read and write...

Ted W. Baxter with Zorro

Ted W. Baxter had what many people would consider a charmed life. He had an MBA from a prestigious school and traveled the world for his job at a top hedge-fund company.

Then, in 2005, at age 41, Ted's life collapsed when he had a massive ischemic stroke (due to a blood clot)—a life-threatening and often disabling condition that strikes nearly 700,000 people in the US each year.

Extensive damage on the left side of Ted's brain resulted in limited muscle control over the right side of his body. Worse, Ted was left with global aphasia—he couldn't speak, write or read.

Remarkably, Ted is now thriving. *Bottom Line Health* spoke with him about his relentless drive to recover—and why he believes that the stroke changed his life for the better.

What did you think when you were told that your stroke had caused global aphasia? I was terribly frightened. Global aphasia means that all communication is broken. It was difficult for me to understand what people were saying unless they spoke slowly and clearly. Because of the aphasia, I couldn't speak—the words weren't there—nor could I read or write.

What steps have you taken to recover? Like most stroke survivors, my recovery involved physical therapy, occupational therapy and speech therapy. Working to regain my words has been much harder than regaining the use of my body. I've had to focus and practice constantly.

In the beginning, I had to start with kindergarten-level worksheets that paired simple nouns like “house” or “banana” with pictures. I moved on to exercises that had me work through various parts of a sentence—subject, verb, etc. I practiced for at least an hour every morning

and an hour every night.

What role did acceptance play in your recovery? It took months for me to finally understand and accept my new reality, but that's when my recovery took off. What I learned is that accepting reality doesn't have to mean losing hope.

How did you get through your down days? The thing that saved me from disappearing into darkness and depression was getting a dog, a pug named Sullivan. I was never a dog person, but Sullivan saved me. A dog doesn't care if you can't remember his/her name or read a book. When Sullivan passed away, I got my dog Zorro.

It's also important to talk about your feelings and experiences. If you can't talk, find other ways to keep from growing apart from family and friends. Let them know that you'd like someone to come read to you or just watch TV with you.

You say your life is better now. In what ways? I approach everything with a fresh appreciation, and I'm doing things that I never had the chance to do before.

I volunteer at hospitals and universities where they focus on strokes, traumatic brain injuries and aphasia. I run and attend group sessions with people who are experiencing the stages of trauma and tell them what helped me.

In my old life, I didn't make time for things like art, but now I'm visiting galleries and museums regularly. I have discovered that I love modern art!

Do you have any advice for caregivers? The most important thing a caregiver can bring is patience. As stressful as it

was for me to hunt for words, it was a crucial part of my recovery to let my brain do the work instead of loved ones filling in the blanks for me.

Also, do research so you can understand what is happening to your loved one, and locate your own support groups. Knowledge makes you more confident, and your loved one needs to feel that strength within you.

Where are you at today in your recovery? I continue to work on my recovery every day—even 14 years later. My speech is not always smooth, but that doesn't stop me from giving public talks.

I still do physical therapy four times a week. I will never get back everything I lost, but I discovered that I have different facets of me that make my life fuller.

Any words of advice for people after stroke? Hope and positive attitude come first. Determination is second. Doctors told me I had a two-year window for improvement in speech. After that, I would be stuck with whatever disability lingered. But I wanted to defy expectations. I continued to practice and continued to improve. For anyone who has had a stroke, just keep challenging yourself. When you get stronger, set *new* goals and keep doing more!

For advice on faster stroke recovery, go to BLHExtra.com, code: 402256

Bottom Line Health interviewed Ted W. Baxter, a stroke survivor who now volunteers at hospitals and universities, providing his firsthand expertise in recovery from communication deficits. He is also active in philanthropic organizations and is author of *Relentless: How a Massive Stroke Changed My Life for the Better*.