

Emeline, France, Family Member's Story

This is the story of a stroke which changed my life. The words I used may sound strong, but I used them on purpose because I want you to understand what it was like for me. I was 2 and my sister 5 when our father died in a car accident. I have no memory of this period but a big loss. We lived together with our Mum. 3 or 4 years later she met Philippe.

They got married then had a baby girl Justine. These are good memories and the very nice years we had together, we didn't know it wouldn't last long.

In August 1966, 5 years after their wedding, a new page was turned. Philippe had been suffering with violent headaches. He didn't speak too much about it, but later we found pills under his bed and in his car. Finally, he decided to see a doctor who advised him to have a scan. When he got to the hospital, he was questioned on what he had done before. It was around the 15th of August weekend which is a feast in France. So, he was asked if he had had too much alcohol. Philippe said no since he was painting the house. The doctors presumed the headaches were caused by the paint vapours, so he didn't have the scan. But the headaches got worse. Philippe called the doctor back, who was angry that Phil has been refused the scan. My mother took him to another hospital, they found nothing at first, but kept him overnight. The very next day, the doctors found out that Philippe had an angioma on the brain, and he was given light medication.

He had an appointment a month later because the angioma wouldn't bleed before long. He came back home; he is just supposed to rest.

Unfortunately, the very next night, we were woken by my mother; she was yelling and screaming for help. Philippe had got up looking for a pill and he could not get back up the stairs. He had lost control of his legs and was just knocking his foot against the steps but nothing else. He went back to the living room and was knocking his head against the walls; the headache was so violent. Mother got up and called for the doctor immediately. During this short period Phil fell and had an epileptic fit. The ambulance arrived and we were taken to a neighbour's house in order not to be a witness to such a horrible scene, which nevertheless remained printed deep in our minds. My elder sister was screaming and the youngest was asking "Dad, he is not going to die" and I remember trembling, and nothing could stop me.

We saw Phil again 5 weeks later. He had spent 3 weeks in coma. His disabilities were very severe. His right side is completely paralyzed (he will never regain use of his arm) he doesn't speak anymore (it's very severe aphasia).

The first time I saw him again, he was sitting in a wheelchair tied on with a sheet so that he would not fall, his mouth was drooping and he was making funny noises which we could not understand. I was scared of him, I didn't want to see him anymore, I was ashamed of him. I was 13 and for me the way you looked was very important at that time. Besides this you don't want life to change, it's too hard. He could not remember much about it, he doesn't look like Phil anymore, and it was a nightmare I wanted to end. We could not talk about it and each of us kept our painful feelings inside. Justine is afraid of him when he looks at her and means to tell her how much he loves her. But she is only 4 and cannot understand "why us"

Philippe stayed a long time in a training center and after 6 months came home for good. It was very difficult, we had to rearrange the house, but worse, I did not want my friends to come to our house any more just because I was ashamed of him.

When he comes out of the toilet, we have to help him to get dressed again. Today I feel like I would react differently, we were so close and still are.

Time has gone by and Phil has learnt to live again, he walks with a cane, but can only use one hand. What you can see from the outside is just the physical disabilities, but who knows what is going on inside of him, the depression, the resentments for which we were not prepared, the unpredictable reactions). How many times have I thought what an idiot he is, he is just making our lives rotten. But I speak to myself. Phil isn't able to work anymore and is very limited in his mobility -he cannot drive, no gardening (he only has one usable hand) and no intellectual activity. When I am fed up, I can take my car and drive somewhere for a change air. He is always dependent on somebody.

And now my mother's viewpoint: What sort of life does she have now? She works but always has to consider his and the family's wellbeing, and to do what the man of the house normally does (the garden the car maintenance etc...).

SO YES, STROKE CHANGES LIVES!