GENERAL

Living with Invisible Insecurities After Stroke

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When people hear ?stroke survivor,? they often imagine someone in a wheelchair, slurred speech, or a body visibly affected by paralysis. And while that can be true, it?s only part of the picture.

What many don?t see?and maybe never will?are the invisible weights I carry every day.

To most people, I look fine. I?m walking, smiling, maybe even laughing. But what they don?t notice is the way my left hand still doesn?t do what I want it to. They don?t see the way I hesitate before picking up a pen, or how a simple task like buttoning my shirt can take minutes of trial, error, and deep breaths. They don?t hear the silent frustration when my hand curls or stiffens without warning, a reminder of a body that?s still healing in ways they can't see.

Then there?s the fatigue.

It?s not regular tiredness. It?s the kind that seeps into your bones, the kind that feels unfair when all you?ve done is have breakfast or answer a few emails. It?s the kind that makes you cancel plans, not because you?re lazy or antisocial, but because your body is screaming for rest. I?ve had to learn to forgive myself for this, to stop justifying or over-explaining my exhaustion. But the guilt lingers sometimes, especially when people assume I?m ?back to normal.?

And that smile?my once-bright, easy smile?is now something I practice in the mirror. I never thought I?d miss my own face. But I do. On some days, when I look at old photos, I wonder if I?ll ever fully see that version of myself again. My smile now feels different. Not just on the outside, but inside too. It?s tentative, like it?s still rebuilding trust with the world.

Speech has been its own quiet battle. I used to love speaking?presenting, joking, chatting for hours. Now, some words feel like they're playing hide and seek. I know exactly what I want to say, but my mouth doesn?t always cooperate. I stumble. I pause. Sometimes I feel people?s eyes dart away when I struggle. It?s small, maybe even unconscious, but I notice it. Every time. And it stings more than they know.

But here?s the thing I?ve come to understand: recovery isn?t just physical. It?s emotional. It?s relearning how to move through the world when you?re not quite who you used to be, but not yet who you?re becoming. It?s carrying the grief of what was lost while still reaching for what?s possible.

Invisible disabilities are tricky. They often demand the most strength while getting the least recognition. But they?ve also taught me things I never would?ve learned otherwise?patience, empathy, presence. I notice the quiet struggles in others now. I?m gentler, not just with them, but with myself.

So if you see me smiling, walking, talking?know that it took effort to get there. And if you know someone who?s gone through something similar, don?t assume their silence means ease. Sometimes, the heaviest burdens are the ones we carry alone.

Let?s make space for those invisibilities too. Because just because it?s not visible, doesn?t mean it?s not real.

Competing interests

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