

The Brain Came Back - Cecy Galvan on Five Years After Stroke

5 Years After Stroke: Recovering Her Voice, Her Memory, and Her Will to Walk Again



On 29 April 2021, Cecy Galvan was doing what she had always done, working a client event, surrounded by people, moving at full speed. A celebrity publicist with a client list that included the Wayans Brothers, Cecy had built a career on being present, persuasive, and always on. Then she collapsed in a bathroom in Boston.

She was 47.

A bartender called 911. Doctors found a tear in her aorta. She woke up three days later with a scar and what appeared, initially, to be a second chance. But four months later, she was back in the hospital for aortic repair and heart valve replacement surgery. On 15 September 2021, as she came out of anaesthetic, she had two strokes, one affecting her speech and motor function, one involving her cerebellum. In the hours it takes to close a chest, Cecy's life changed completely.

Five years later, sitting down to tell her story, she said something that stopped the conversation:

"I just told my friends the other day that my brain is finally back."

When the Warning Signs Are Easy to Miss

The week before her collapse, Cecy had been dizzy. Vertigo for two days, the kind that made her afraid to drive. It was during the COVID period, and going to a doctor felt like an unnecessary risk. So she pushed through, got on a plane, and

made it to the event in Boston.

This is not a story about a woman who was careless. It is a story about how stroke symptoms, particularly in the lead-up to a cardiac event, can present as something mundane and easy to dismiss. Vertigo. Fatigue. A feeling of being slightly off. For Cecy, those were the only signals before everything changed.

Recognising early warning signs of stroke remains one of the most critical conversations in stroke prevention. If symptoms persist, even mildly, seeking medical review is always the right call.

What 5 Years After Stroke Really Looks Like

Cecy's recovery has been shaped by two distinct strokes, both occurring simultaneously during surgery. The effects are layered and ongoing.

Her right vocal cord is paralysed. She walks with a forearm walker indoors but has not yet been able to take it outside. Her core is still rebuilding, and her cerebellum, responsible for balance and coordination, remains affected. Her vision changed: she now needs glasses for reading, something she never needed before. For the first three years after her strokes, she barely remembers anything. She kept a journal and relied on her sister's videos to piece together what had happened.

Her sister and brother-in-law became her primary carers. They modified their home, building a ramp, converting a shower for wheelchair access and showed up every day with a consistency that Cecy describes as the quiet foundation of her survival. Her parents, both in their late eighties, also cared for her until they passed her father at 90, her mother at 89, in the years following her strokes. The grief of losing them, layered on top of the grief of losing her former life, has been one of the heaviest parts of the journey.

"My whole life changed overnight." - Cecy Galvan

And yet she keeps going. She does speech therapy exercises daily, recording herself and playing them back. She uses both hands, intentionally brushing teeth with her non-affected hand, rinsing with her affected one. She gets massages

weekly. She reads and re-reads books her memory hasn't yet retained. She is, in her own words, constantly doing the work.

The Myth of the Recovery Plateau

Two of Cecy's doctors told her she would not walk again. One sent her an email last year to confirm it. A third told her she would improve within six months.

None of them has been entirely right. None of them has been entirely wrong. But the idea that recovery has a fixed deadline, that the brain stops responding to rehabilitation after a set number of days, is a narrative that does genuine harm to stroke survivors.

Cecy's experience over five years is evidence against it. Her lung capacity has measurably improved. Her speech, which was largely absent for years because she was afraid no one would understand her, has progressed to the point where she is now giving interviews. Her memory, the one she describes as the most disorienting loss, has started to return not all at once, but in a way she can feel and name.

Neuroplasticity does not operate on a clinical deadline. The brain continues to find new pathways when given the right conditions: repetition, intention, rest, and time. Bill's book

Bill's book *The Unexpected Way That A Stroke Became The Best Thing That Happened* explores this in depth, drawing on both the research and the lived experience of survivors who were told they had reached their ceiling and then kept going anyway.

What Newly Diagnosed Survivors Need to Hear

Cecy's advice to someone at the beginning of their recovery is grounded in her own experience of those first disorienting months: the early period matters enormously. The first three to six months are when the brain is most responsive to rehabilitation, and the work done in that window has an outsized impact on long-term outcomes. But that is not where recovery ends.

What carries a survivor through the years that follow is not speed, it is consistency. It is doing the small things every day. Using the affected hand even when it spills water. Recording your voice even when you hate how it sounds. Crying a little, then trying again.

Cecy's five-year goal is simple and unambiguous: she is going to walk again. She does not know exactly how. She does not need to. The direction is clear.

Keep Going

Recovery after a stroke is rarely a straight line, and no survivor should navigate it alone. If this episode resonated with you,

If this episode helped you, consider supporting the show at patreon.com/recoveryafterstroke. Every contribution keeps this content free and accessible for survivors who need it.

Because if Cecy Galvan's story tells us anything, it is this: five years is not the end of recovery. It might be where it finally begins.

This blog is for informational purposes only and does not constitute medical advice. Please consult your doctor before making any changes to your health or recovery plan.