

116. Brainstem Cavernous Angioma - Whitney Spotts

Being a mom to a toddler is challenging enough and when you have to deal with a brainstem cavernous angioma causing a bleed in your brain it becomes even harder.

Socials: <https://www.instagram.com/whittermac/>

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I was just a very active person that was my lifestyle. And now to not be able to stand on one leg, not be able to really run for longer than 10 seconds, you know, not be able to do so much like even to write or, you know, a lot of things it's very different. But I don't care as much as I did before. I was really upset in the beginning. Because change is just difficult. There's no way around it. And I learned, the more that you accept what's going on, the better things become and the better you actually feel, and acceptance is huge in my recovery.

Intro 0:46

This is the recovery after stroke podcast, with Bill Gasiamis, helping you navigate recovery after stroke.

Introduction



Bill 0:59

Bill from recoveryafterstroke.com This is Episode 116. And my guest today is Whitney Spotts. At 34 Whitney experienced a brain stem stroke caused by a cavernous angioma. At the time of the stroke, Whitney was only very recently married and was also a mom to a toddler, who was one of the big motivating factors that kept her mommy going and doing her best to overcome the challenges that stroke caused.

Bill 1:29

Now before we get started, if you have ever wondered what else I can do to help you with your stroke recovery, you should know that I have set up a few recovery after stroke support packages where stroke survivors can come into a community while trying to get better on their own and get help from people who are already further along in the recovery timeline.

Bill 1:49

I too am a three-time stroke survivor and a brain surgery survivor. And I have built for you what I was missing when I was sent home from hospital in the hopes that you don't have to do stroke recovery as tough as I did. Support packages give you access to a variety of tools 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Bill 2:07

So that you can also work on other areas of stroke recovery, that you don't get the chance to a physical therapy or rehabilitation. With tailored support available for

less than \$8.50 per week, all recovery after stroke support packages, bring stroke recovery to you in the comfort of your own home.

Bill 2:27

to try out recovery after stroke support and see if it is right for you, you will get the first seven days free as well as a 30 day money back guarantee no questions asked. As a bonus, you will also get two face to face zoom support calls with myself to take your recovery to the next level.

Bill 2:44

Go to recoveryafterstroke.com/support to sign up. You won't cost you anything for the first seven days. And you will get a full refund. If you are not happy after 30 days. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain. And now it's on with the show. Whitney Spotts. Welcome to the podcast.

Whitney 3:03

Thank you. It's an honor to be here and just help raise awareness about stroke.

Bill 3:09

It's interesting how many people come forward to talk about it. And how many stroke survivors say things like I just want to help other people. I just want to tell other people what my story is what my experience is just to make their life a little bit better, which I just find amazing that stroke survivors are doing it really tough. really have that front of mind and it's heartwarming. Tell me a little bit about what happened to you?

The Stroke Symptoms

Whitney 3:41

Right before the stroke, you know, I was 34 years old when it happened. But I was a physician assistant in the ER I was comfortable in my job. I've been working six years I married my husband just a couple years prior and had a beautiful baby girl and it seemed like you know, life was just starting for us.

Whitney 4:02

And I really didn't have any warning it was just another Monday morning and I woke up at about 3am with the worst headache of my life. And as a physician assistant in the ER you know what that means, but I didn't even put it on the radar because I was young, I was healthy. I had no risk factors, no family history.

Whitney 4:28

So I just assumed I had a migraine or something I'd never really had a migraine before. And I was very wrong. I started to get sick and slur my speech and my husband luckily knew that something was very wrong and took me immediately to the hospital but I was having a hemorrhagic stroke.

Brainstem Cavernous Angioma

Bill 4:51

Was it an aneurysm and AVM what caused the bleed.

Whitney 4:55

I had a cavernous malformation in the brainstem. And so in addition to having a hemorrhagic stroke, I needed emergency brain surgery on my brainstem. So it was a very risky procedure and but I'm here all as well,

Bill 5:14

Yeah, well, it's so fascinating, because I know plenty of people who have had brain stem stroke. I know plenty of people through the podcast, of course, who have had a Cavernous Angioma, that has caused the bleed.

Bill 5:28

And when, in the past, I had heard about people having a brain hemorrhage, or an aneurysm burst or something along those lines, it is very, very rarely was a good outcome. Like we never in the past, we never got to hear about all these amazing stories of survival and recovery and overcoming. When you woke up from all of this drama, what were you left with? What kind of challenges did you have to overcome?

Whitney 5:59

Well, unfortunately, I was awake, I didn't have the proper affect. Like now I would be scared what was happening, but I was more I had a flat affect that I was just curious, I was losing function on my arm, I couldn't sign into the ER, I was losing function of my leg. They told me I had blood on my brain. I needed surgery and all these things.

Whitney 6:25

And I'm just like, it wasn't quite clicking appropriately. But the way there was so much inflammation on my brain that the surgery was done in one day, because it

was located in my brainstem, and there was so much inflammation, they weren't sure that they'd be able to get to it.

Whitney 6:44

So that one day was pretty tough, because I couldn't talk I had severe facial droop. And I could just think, all day of possible scenarios. And so I kind of wish that I was asleep, but I was awake during that time.

Whitney 7:06

And then when I woke up from surgery, I was completely paralyzed, on the right side the surgery did cracked, the facial droop, and it took about a few weeks to significantly change, and then a few months to change all the way. But it was corrected a lot by surgery. But I was left with my arm and leg paralyzed completely no movement, nothing can wiggle toes, like there's nothing for about two months.

Bill 7:40

So that was a pretty intense rehab. So what you're saying to me is you went to the hospital, actually quite aware, although you didn't realize the significance of what you're hearing and what were telling you, you actually quite with it, and therefore you had a lot of time to run everything through your mind on what the possible outcomes might be.

Whitney 8:01

Correct. So it was a tough day for sure. I have a daughter, as I said before, and she was 18 months at the time. And so I was fearful of having to say goodbye and my family and my husband and my life. And just I felt young. I was 34. I was like this is all at this time I have you know, it was a tough day.

Bill 8:32

And was family able to get there and see you or did it happen relatively quickly that it was just about getting you well, rather than sort of bringing everyone around.

Whitney 8:44

They did. They flew from California, New Mexico, my mom drove up from South Florida, everybody was there because we had that one day. So it did give people a little bit of time to say goodbye, if you know, that was kind of it was presented like this is really your only choice.

Whitney 9:06

She's bleeding in her brain and we don't like to do brainstem surgery, but this is the best option for her. And so it was a very real possibility. And like I said, I just had a very flat affect. Like I couldn't really comprehend the severity of what was happening to me.

Bill 9:25

How could you I mean, you're three minutes earlier, you're just a normal person in bed sleeping, no need to worry about brain injuries or anything like that. And now you're suddenly bombarded with all this new information about your life being at risk and you can't comprehend it how can you possibly comprehend it?

Bill 9:45

I went to a hospital and I had a bleed on my brain and I went seven days after it started bleeding. And then when I was at hospital, I was walking around I was never in my bed and the the nurse we're always looking for me and telling me to stay in my bed. But because I felt well, after they gave me some medication.

Bill 10:07

I didn't also connect the dots into how serious this could be and turn out. And they were so concerned. And I think that being unaware of the seriousness really helped early on, especially when family found out that I was in hospital, they came and saw me and they did the whole oh, but he looks great. I don't really know what the issue is. Which was good and bad. Because then later on, they did the whole you look great, even though I was really unwell. So how long has it been since so you were 34? How old are you now?

Whitney 10:45

I'm 36. Now, so I'm very early on my stroke, recovery, and having a miraculous recovery, really. But it was January of 2019. When that happened.

Bill 11:00

Then you've gone from hospital into rehabilitation for a few weeks, or was it months.

Whitney 11:06

I was in the hospital for a few weeks. And then I went to two different rehab facilities for a few weeks each. And it was a total about two months.

Life at home after hospital

Bill 11:21

And then when you came home, what was that like how was the reintegration into the house life after that with a little baby and being a mom and dealing with stroke.

Whitney 11:34

It was really, really tough. There's really no sugarcoating or silver lining, it was absolutely terrible. In the beginning, I couldn't change her diaper, put her in a highchair put her in a car seat, put her in bed, I couldn't hold her, I couldn't really barely walk. So I couldn't chase after her and play with her, there were so many things that I couldn't do.

Whitney 11:59

And as a new mother, as a young mother and a new mother, you just almost feel like you're not doing enough or you're not a good mom, even though that's not true. But you just can't do so many things I couldn't do her hair, for example, like, which is not important. But like I just couldn't be the mom that I wanted to be. And I couldn't drive to the grocery store for my family, like help out my husband and I just been through a lot.

Bill 12:29

Were you hard on yourself sounds like you were hard on yourself for not being able to do these things.

Whitney 12:34

I was in the beginning. And that has been this whole experience has been has taught me so much about myself. But it's kind of a neat experience, really, I'm grateful for the wake-up call. And just for all of the lessons that I'm learning. And I was proud of myself, when I couldn't do something, I would say, Oh my gosh, you should totally be able to do this, you know, I would try 20 times or something.

Whitney 13:00

And I couldn't take as little as I do unto a lid or something like that. And you'd have to ask for help. And it was really hard for me to ask for help. I'm a very independent person. In the beginning, I needed help with everything from tying my shoe to putting up my hair and taking a shower to just driving to rehab. Like I

just needed help all the time. And I was harsh on myself. And I'm learning just to let go and soften you know, and just be a different person, I guess.

Bill 13:38

Now, the question would be, what do you say to yourself, you know, the person you are today to the person just two years ago? What kind of conversation would you have with that person now?

Whitney 13:54

You know what I did, which really helped me I put a picture of myself as a baby as a little girl, I think I was four, right by my bedside in a frame. And I really liked this picture. And I talked to that person all the time, because she looks like my daughter, like look like Stella and of course I would never say what I said to myself to my daughter, or my best friend or anybody else besides me.

Whitney 14:25

And I knew that it wasn't a healthy relationship or personal relationship with myself, and that I was going through a really tough time and that I needed to soften and that I needed self-love. And that was probably the best thing. I still have that little picture by my bedside.

Bill 14:46

Whitney, that's really profound what you just said. How did you get to that point because not many people think of that and you did and you've experienced a profound shift in how you've experienced it. The challenges that you've had to face so, what made you get to that point to bring little Whitney into the picture and have this amazing heart to heart conversation with her.

More self-love and compassion after a stroke

Whitney 15:11

I must have read it somewhere or seen it somewhere or something, I don't recall that. But, I mean, just this whole experience, the emotional journey has almost been harder for me in a way than the physical journey. So I have thought about ways to create more self-love to create more compassion for myself.

Whitney 15:40

I mean, I went into medicine because I wanted to help serve other people. That's why I became a physician assistant. So when this happened to me, I was like, it's

not about serving other people right now. It's about serving yourself so that you can serve other people.

Whitney 15:57

And that was kind of the turning point where I just started. I feel like I just kind of came into all of the right people at the right time. I mean, books and people like you and, you know, just, I'm in sync or something, you know, and I just feel like I'm getting tons of information.

Whitney 16:25

That's really neat and really interesting from everything about neuroplasticity, two-stroke rehab, to the American Heart Association that I'm working within the United States. And just, there's so many great things happening right now.

Bill 16:43

That's great. I know that in coaching, when I've coached people in the past and now. And before I coach stroke survivors are coached people just from all walks of life, often, very often, many of them, when they had an injury that was associated to their body or to their health or to their well being, they often went into the physical side of it.

Bill 17:06

If I can get up and go there, it's all good. If I can do that, it's all good. If I can do it all good. And they neglect the emotional recovery, thinking that it's too hard, or they don't know how to go there, or it's too raw. And there's a whole bunch of reasons why they avoid it.

Bill 17:22

But sometimes it's just because in stroke recovery, to get out of hospital, you really have to be able to be independent in some way, shape, or form, whether it's pushing your wheelchair around, or walk with a cane, or with the assistance of some sort, it's all about the physical recovery.

Bill 17:41

And for some people, that takes a really long time. And therefore, it could be the only focus for a really long time. And the emotional recovery just gets neglected, not by choice or on purpose just because it has to take a backseat so that that person can go to the toilet themselves or shower themselves or all those other things.

Bill 18:03

And then it catches up with people eventually. And and if I can bring people to that point where they are doing both recoveries at the same time, then that's even better. Because what you want is you want to do the physical stuff. But while you're sitting down and resting do a heartfelt meditation doesn't take any time, it doesn't take any extra effort, just pop your headphones in, grab one off YouTube or Spotify for free.

Bill 18:30

And just allow yourself to go into this place, you know, where I think recovery really begins and what we see externally on the physical is important, but I think its second in the order of which recovery is most important.

Bill 18:49

And I know for me, when my head went offline, I actually started to notice my heart in my chest for the first time like I properly started to notice that I didn't realize that this thing that I was feeling in my chest was my heart and the importance that played in my life and it was just so bizarre. I'm glad I found it.

Whitney 19:11

Yeah, I mean the mind-body, some people speak of the mind-body connection, and I don't feel like they're separate. Like it's one unit. It's not mind affects body or body affects the mind but like it's all one thing. So I think that for people to separate physical limitation, and then separate emotional or mental health, that creates a barrier for some because it's all kind of related and intertwined. And it's like one unit.

Bill 19:44

Yeah, it's like the, you know, we've got the land that we can't get to the different continents unless we use the sea and the sea is what connects the entire planet, right? So without the sea. Then we've just got this landmass and you could be forgiven for thinking that if it's all landmass, then it's all connected.

Bill 20:06

And because the sea is in the way, we kind of see this disconnection. But the reality is that there's ways to navigate that. And without one, we don't have the other. We just, we have this different version of it. So I love the way that you spoke to this little version of yourself. It's a really important thing. And I love that

you're somewhere you don't know where but somewhere you picked up on that you wouldn't talk to your friend the way you're talking to yourself. And you ran with it.

Whitney 20:38

Yeah. It really worked for me. Like I really feel like I actually not that I was never a person that hated myself or anything or thought I wasn't enough or anything like that. But I wasn't necessarily a person in love with my qualities, and myself. And now I can say that I am. I think I'm amazing. And I'm just wonderful. And happy to be here and survivor and thriver and everything.

Bill 21:14

Yeah, that's awesome. How did your husband deal with all of the sudden stuff that happened? hospitalization and then your recovery? How is he doing?

Whitney 21:25

Well, it's really tough also on him just because we have a toddler. Um, well, I mean, the initial response from him was amazing. Like, he noticed something was wrong. He got me the help that I needed. He was really calm, even when we got terrible news. You know, he didn't freak out, which probably helped me not freak out.

Whitney 21:49

And he was wonderful. And it was really tough because I live in Florida, and one of my rehab centers was in Georgia. So I was about seven hours away from here. And so it was tough to try to see me like he wasn't always there. Because we had our daughter. And we were trying to make life as normal as we could for her because she was just at the age where, of course, she didn't know why I was in rehab or anything.

Whitney 22:21

But she sort of knew that I was in the hospital like mommy's not here, you know, Where's mom kind of thing. And so I think that just tugs at your heartstrings, you know, and it was hard for him, but he did a really wonderful job. He's very supportive. And yeah, I couldn't ask for more.

A reason to recover after a stroke



Bill 22:44

Yeah. How, what an amazing motivation, though, you know, having the little one at home, thinking, Where's mom? And it's like, well, I'm getting back to you, like, I'm gonna get there. You know, I'm gonna get better. Did she play a massive role in your recovery?

Whitney 23:03

Absolutely. When I was at my first rehab center, right out of surgery, I was in the hospital for a couple weeks, but a couple of weeks out of surgery. I was pretty blue. I was paralyzed, I was down and out. I was feeling really emotional. And just wait, what, why am I here? Why did they even save me? Why did I even get out of surgery, I don't want to even really be here.

Whitney 23:33

Not that I contemplated suicide. But I just felt so useless. And I couldn't move my right side. And I couldn't do so many things. And so I put pictures of her all over my hospital wall, like 25 pictures, probably. And I just looked at them every day. And over the course of a few days, even.

Whitney 23:58

I just changed my attitude. And I said, she needs me and I want to be here for her. And I can only be here for her if I'm here for myself. So even if I can't move my right side ever, it's okay. And it was like the first step of acceptance. Like I started thinking of all these people that I have seen celebrities and things that

don't have arms or don't have legs or are in wheelchairs or whatever. And I was like they have a beautiful life. So you too can have a beautiful life.

Bill 24:33

Regardless of what happens.

Whitney 24:36

Yeah, and she has been a huge factor. In my recovery every single day. I play with her toys, like when I did OT, I would play with her toys and just do as much as I could because I had all of these puzzles and blocks and stuff in the beginning that you know, was very hard for me.

Whitney 24:58

And so she's perfect. She's at the perfect age. Actually, I don't like using the word perfect, because what's perfect, but she was a great age. And really, she's my little angel.

Bill 25:14

You can say she's perfect. I mean, there's nothing wrong with that she's perfect. In Episode 56, I interviewed Jason Gaudette and Jason was from Canada. And he experienced the bleed in the brain, he had an AVM rupture and arteriovenous malformation.

Bill 25:33

And he, in the interview was talking about how the recovery that he experienced, was happening around the same time that his son was starting to walk. And he couldn't walk. And he realized that his son was going through the same things that he was. And because he had this real adult awareness of what it's like to try and walk again, he was his son's biggest, you know, supporter of go on, you'll be right, you know, you're not walking yet or you fell over, you fell on your bum, it doesn't matter.

Bill 26:08

And he just had this new awareness of what his son was going through to get back on his feet for the first time. And it was so motivating to him. And he was talking about that really massive connection that he was able to have with his son that he wouldn't have had in that way had he not experienced the challenges of regaining his ability to walk again.

Whitney 26:33

I mean, that's kind of how I feel this time that I've spent at home with Stella recovering and everything, I was always at work, I wasn't around as much at all. And we have formed a really beautiful bond over this. And I feel the same way. It's really, kind of neat.

Bill 26:58

I was at home when my kids were in their teenage years. So at a time where I would have been pretty full-on in work and out of the house for many hours. And then in the study, you know, putting together all the things I needed to do for work, I would have spent less quality-focused time on them.

Bill 27:23

And my wife was at work doing all those things that she needed to do to keep us going and keep the family afloat, in financial and all those things. And because I wasn't able to work, I was able to be there for the kids, when they came home from school. When they left for school, I was able to prepare their lunches and do all those things.

Bill 27:42

And I wouldn't have got that opportunity to be so involved in their teenage years at a time, which I think is really important for kids for their parents to be really involved when we're in the thick of trying to keep the bills paid, and the mortgage paid and all that kind of stuff. So it was a really amazing time for me as well.

Bill 28:08

And I got to have this little gift that kept on giving for both the stroke and the opportunity to be at home with the kids. The stroke kept on giving the gift of letting me be at home for years. And the being at home for years kept me involved in those for many years of my kids lives without trying to be a weirdo Dad, you know, who imposes himself all the time.

Bill 28:35

I was just here. So I wasn't doing the whole imposing myself. It was just I'm here, they'd come home. And we'd chat about things that at 3:30 or four o'clock in the evening. I wouldn't normally chat to them about because I wouldn't see them until seven o'clock. So it was a really bizarre gift that you get. It was a great gift that you get from a bizarre situation.

Whitney 28:59

Yeah, yeah, it's really tough to have kids and have a stroke. And then on the flip side, it's the most beautiful thing because you do have that time and you do have that bond.

Bill 29:12

Yeah. How long did it take for you to get back to all the things that you were doing beforehand? Basically what I mean by that is, did you get back to driving relatively quickly. Did you go back to work? What happened there?

Whitney 29:29

Well, I'm still am recovering. Today, actually. But I couldn't drive for about 11 months. I am not able to go back to work yet because the duties of a physician assistant suturing and just doing tons of typing. I can't really type on the computer. I usually use voice to text a lot for our social media or for texting.

Whitney 30:05

Although it is getting a little bit, it's gotten better with my left hand. But I had spent last year yeah, it's just still ongoing. I am just starting to be able to run again I just another probably a couple months ago, got the strength to hold my daughter again. I'm almost fast enough to chase her. But, you know, there's a lot of things that I once did. I mean, I was a gymnast growing up, I was a competitive cheerleader. I was super active prior stroke. You know, I did yoga paddleboarding, running , I mean.

Intro 30:50

If you've had a stroke. And you're in recovery, you'll know what a scary and confusing time it can be, you're likely to have a lot of questions going through your mind, like now long will it take to recover? Will I actually recover? What things should I avoid? In case I'll make matters worse.

Intro 31:07

Doctors will explain things that obviously, you've never had a stroke before, you probably don't know what questions to ask. If this is you, you may be missing out on doing things that could help speed up your recovery. If you're finding yourself in that situation, stop worrying, and head to recoveryafterstroke.com where you can download a guide that will help you.

Intro 31:29

It's called seven questions to ask your doctor about your stroke. These seven questions are the ones Bill wished he'd asked when he was recovering from a stroke, they'll not only help you better understand your condition. And they'll help you take a more active role in your recovery, head to the website. Now, recoveryafterstroke.com and download the guide, it's free.

Acceptance



Whitney 31:52

I was just a very active person, that was my lifestyle. And now to not be able to stand on one leg, not be able to really run for longer than 10 seconds. You know, not be able to do so much like even to write or you know, a lot of things, it's very different. But I don't care as much as I did before I was really upset in the beginning.

Whitney 32:19

Because change is just difficult. There's no way around it. And I learned, the more that you accept what's going on, the better things become and the better you actually feel. And acceptance is huge in my recovery.

Bill 32:36

So what it does is acceptance allows the body to just calm down, it allows the stress hormones to relax, to go away, it allows the blood pressure to stabilize, it allows the heartbeat to you know, just settle down. And therefore that creates the perfect environment for healing in the brain to happen. And then as you go about your daily life because you have to be active anyway, because you have a toddler.

Whitney 33:05

Right, which is a good thing.

Bill 33:07

Yeah, you have to because what that's doing is that's allowing neuroplasticity to continue happening and repetition to continue happening. And there'll be a time where you're holding something in your left hand, and you're going to try and reach out with your right hand.

Bill 33:21

And that movement without thinking about it in that acceptance phase of your life is going to allow for great neuroplasticity to occur. And, I'm not saying that that means that your hands are going to come back exactly the way that it was before. But what it will do is allow for the natural evolution of recovery to happen.

Bill 33:40

And therefore you don't have to really think about it, you just have to know is that I need to be able to chase after this little thing because I need to be able to get to her when she's going into the wrong direction, you know. So the running will come as well. So I started running probably about eight or nine months after my brain surgery.

Bill 34:03

And at the beginning, I was really afraid to do more than a couple of steps because I felt weird. It felt strange, the feedback from the ground was different. I was afraid that I'll buckle my knee and hurt. But then as I started to just run to the corner of our street or across the road when it was quiet or something like that. Then I started to notice that the amount of distance that I could take next time just grew, even if it was by two or three steps.

Bill 34:21

The muscle memory kind of kicks in a little bit. And before you know it, you're like oh yeah, I know how to do that.

Bill 34:44

Yeah, so it might feel a bit different and a bit not the same as before, but it still allows you to do the function of running so that it could be useful. Whereas before when I used to run at the gym I think I did it because I thought I was running to be fit healthy, all those things.

Bill 35:04

But I didn't realize what they used to running was for me running became useful after the stroke because one of my physios said to me, why do you want to be able to run and I said not to run a marathon, but just to get across the road for cars coming, but don't want to be in the middle of the road? He goes, Well, that's a great idea. It's a great reason to run. Now let's give it a go.

Whitney 35:30

Well, yeah, I actually have found other things that I almost love more than running. Because, you know, adapt is the name of the game when you have a stroke. And so I bought a tricycle and it looks just like a beach cruiser. I live on the beach here in Florida. And it allows me to go with my family for bike rides.

Whitney 35:53

And when I kind of drive, I would ride my bike 8, 10 miles and go to my appointments and stuff. And it was great repetition, and I took up swimming. And running is kind of on the back burner. You know, it was more important in the beginning, because I couldn't do it. And I just wanted to do it. It was like, something that I had to work with. And now it's okay, that I can't exactly run because honestly, I like other things better.

Bill 36:29

You seem like a very curious person. Is it curiosity that gets you thinking down these paths? And tangents? Or is it just a willingness to explore? What is the quality that you're tapping into, to discover all these new things?

Whitney 36:46

I would say I was just raised from two beautiful people. And I don't know, I just keep a really open mind, this whole experience has really offered me like an opportunity to just dive deep, you know, and explore and just don't sweat the small stuff, you know, and just kind of explore options and ideas maybe that you didn't think about before, or that you are opposed to or closed minded about before, like, maybe, you know, think about something new or try something new.

Whitney 37:31

And it's liberated me. And in a way, I was always a very, I wasn't like necessarily. But I did have perfectionism. I did have overachiever in my blood. And I still do a little bit, but it's not about that. And that's what this whole experience has taught

me.

Bill 37:53

Who would have thought that these profound amazing lessons come from such adversity, but you're not the only stroke survivor, to say that there's so many people saying the same thing. And there's a lot of stroke survivors who aren't there yet. They're still cranky about it and upset about it and still have a lot of other struggles.

Finding happiness



Bill 38:09

And that's perfectly fine. And sometimes it's okay to not be happy with something that it's left you you know, I mean, that's perfectly fine, too. The thing is, is not to stay there. It's just to acknowledge that you're not happy with something and then go alright, well, I'm not happy with that, what can I be happy with and move towards finding what it is that you can be happy with.

Bill 38:32

And you've got so many things that you can be happy with, because you have so many other gifts that life has given you and so did I, and so do many stroke survivors, and one of the great questions that I asked myself was even in this most terrible time, like what's good about this situation right now? And that one thing of what's good that curiosity to find what might be good, even if it was just the flower has bloomed? That's enough.

Whitney 39:01

If I can say one thing, gratitude has changed my life in a big beautiful way. And I was in rehab and somebody told me to start a gratitude journal and at the time, I really couldn't hold a pen I couldn't write one letter. And that so I looked at her like, she was crazy. You know, I said I'm grateful to be alive and that's about it.

Whitney 39:01

Then I thought about it and I was really at that time just very determined to get my handwriting back. I was right-handed and I didn't want to learn with my left I just want to do my right. And so I did it and it started out, you know, a letter and then I thought and then a word and then months later and sentence and then months later, a couple sentences.

Whitney 39:52

And the uniqueness the muscle memory as we talked about. It has coming back in my In my hand, and it's like my handwriting has a little bit of its uniqueness back. And it's still very hard and challenging and my wrists get tired easily. But it's, it's a beautiful thing. And in the meantime, my whole life changed.

Whitney 40:16

I see gratitude, everywhere I look every day, I wake up grateful for the day grateful that I'm awake. And it's a beautiful thing. So just to have one good thing you know, even if you just cling to one thing, you know, flood yourself with gratitude and things shift.

Bill 40:38

They do, because it focuses the mind it gives creates neuroplasticity, new pathways in focusing on the positive rather than the negative. And the sneaky part about writing a gratitude journal is that it's stimulating all sorts of parts of the brain, and connecting dots that were potentially lost in mist, and I've gone to sleep. So you think you're writing a gratitude journal, just to focus on gratitude, but it's doing all sorts of amazing things to heal your brain.

Bill 41:08

But we're not really focusing on that we're not aware of it's just happening in the background, just this amazing stuff. So yeah, gratitude is a huge one. And a lot of people who know about gratitude can go into it quite easily. After a serious health issues, some people need to be reminded of the fact that somebody told you that it's possible at the time for people to also take that the wrong way.

Bill 41:37

Like, if somebody came to me, at certain times in my life, when things were terrible, and I'm not talking about my stroke experience, and tell me to be gratitude, to have gratitude, I would have probably told them where to go, you know, seriously, I should be grateful about this terrible thing that just happened to me. That was, that was where I was then.

Bill 42:01

And, yeah, and when you're stuck there, when you don't understand where they're coming from, it's pretty easy to get stuck in that place of, I'm going to be shitty with you for even suggesting that I should be grateful about this situation, because I'm not going to be grateful about this situation. But then if you allow yourself to see beyond that, and the offense, and then you can move on.

Whitney 42:30

And that's my thing, it's really important just to, to allow yourself time to go through all the phases, because at first I was angry, I was sad. I was like, Why me? You know, and someone said to me one time, why not you? What makes you, you know, too good for this to happen or something.

Whitney 42:50

And I was like, I was so kind of taken back in the beginning. But it's true. It's like, why not you? And you know, just to go through that angry face and questioning why and what does this mean, and you know, it is really important to designate time to you know, really feel all those feelings during that time, because so many people have a tendency to say I shouldn't be angry, I should be grateful, I shouldn't be sad, I shouldn't cry, these feelings aren't valid, or, or whatever.

Whitney 43:27

And it's not true. And in order to move through those feelings, you have to feel them and they're uncomfortable, they are painful, they are scary, they give you anxiety. But the bravest thing I ever did was just sit with it for a little bit. And then it's almost like it just kind of eats away. I mean, it doesn't go away completely, but it does just change.

Bill 43:55

It becomes less impactful. And that's the thing, you know, with emotional hurt when people have been hurt in a relationship or in any part of life, and it's

affected them emotionally. You see a lot of people after many, many years and decades, you know have not, for example, talking to a family member or a brother or a relative or whatever.

Bill 44:16

They get stuck on the fear of allowing themselves to experience the emotion in its full experience, right so that then they don't realize that it's on the other side of that where the healing happens, where you can then just let go of the hurt that was caused or the misunderstanding that occurred and getting people to go there can be scary, but it's scarier to stay there because the regret happens later.

Bill 44:48

That's where regret is. But if you allow yourself to go there and be brave at that time and overcome that fear of feeling the feeling that you are so desperately trying not to feel. Just do that. Then it just, it's like a switch. Isn't it just like flicks over and then it's different.

Whitney 45:10

Yeah, if you can just stick with that, well, it's so tough. That's like the transformation. You know, like if you just stay with that. Like I say, I'm trying to get comfortable being uncomfortable. So you know, so that when something uncomfortable comes up and you don't want to do it's like, that's the exact thing you should do it.

Bill 45:33

Yeah get comfortable being uncomfortable. Yeah, that's a great thing to do. your Instagram is a really cool one, because it's got a lot of the stuff on there that I like to read about. For people listening who might want to connect with Whitney, they can go to whittermac.

(BDNF) Brain-Derived Neurotrophic Factor

Bill 45:57

I'll have the links on the show notes. And the reason I said that it's a really cool one is because some of your posts, they speak to me and one of them, particularly that speaks to me is the one where you're introducing BDNF Brain-Derived Neurotrophic Factor and it's this cartoon of this little dude, doing this with a, really colorful hat on and blue shorts, and he's green.

Bill 46:24

And what people need to know about the BDNF is, that's one of the most amazing things that we create, just by being active. Exercise creates a whole bunch of amazing impacts and positive things into the brain. And one of those things is the BDNF the Brain Derived Neurotrophic Factor, and you can support it in many different ways.

Bill 46:46

And here, the other ways, you can support it other than exercise is, you can support it by having good levels of vitamin D going out into the sun, green tea, social connection, omega 3 that comes from foods. And, isn't that amazing that social connection supports healing the brain after stroke, and getting people better. I'm lost for words like reading that I know. But just reading that, that's fascinating to me.

Whitney 47:23

They say it's like Miracle Growth for the brain, you know, it's really important.

Bill 47:32

Yeah, it's amazing. How did you grow your social network? Is it roughly the same? Or does it include people now that have had a similar challenge to you?

Whitney 47:45

A few since I started working with the Local American Heart Association. And even the National American Heart Association, I've come across a few people that we have connected and shared stories and spoke to each other and done zoom calls together. And some of them you know, I was really big into yoga before.

Whitney 48:12

And some of them were yoga teachers now. And you know, a lot of people that I talked to just had this beautiful life experience that unraveled with the devastation of a stroke. And most people that I've connected with have a really positive outlook. I'm not a big fan of like positive vibes only, because it dismisses the negative, which is really important.

Whitney 48:40

And it's telling you something about your life or yourself or something that needs to be addressed. But, but they're very optimistic, I would say. And that's really helped me a lot. Because in the beginning, especially when I was still paralyzed, I

was really scared, I was scared of how I would do so much in my life.

Bill 49:06

Optimism is such an important tool. I mean, if you can't be optimistic, you're missing out on the possibility to find those unique things that come out of left field you know, those doors that open that you didn't expect that then change your life like the gratitude journal.

Whitney 49:24

Yeah. I live so much more presently. Like I'm really grateful for the wake up call that I was given, because when you almost die, and as you know very well, and it like shakes something up in you and it makes you realize, wow we might not have as much time as we think we all pretend like we're going to live to we're 100 and it's not the case and you don't have to be fearful at all.

Whitney 49:55

But if you're just aware of your time here, and you make the most event with social connections and other people and your work and your family and whatever is important to you, then it's when it does come. It's kind of okay. This big, fearful, scary thing.

Bill 50:16

I was raised in a family. That's Christian. I suppose they're religious, I would say, but I'm not really, really religious. But I do understand what people say when they talk about having faith. And was your faith tested? Did you feel that your faith was tested? Whether you're religious or not? And has that shifted? Now?

Whitney 50:45

I would say that I'm very much of a spiritual person who believes definitely in a bigger energy or God, maybe that even though that was overplayed, but for me, that's not the right word. But definitely don't think that I'm really religious, but I do believe in higher power.

Bill 51:14

I suppose the question was, I know I tied it into religion, but it wasn't about that it was about faith. And do you kind of practice a faith of some sort, and I'm not talking about a religious faith or faith of things will be right things will turn out all right, that type of thing.

Whitney 51:30

Well, I'm a big believer that life happens for you, not to you. So it's all acceptance. Like I said, you know, it's just things are gifts with really ugly wrapping paper, you know.

Bill 51:50

If you chose the gift based on the wrapping paper, you might not want it right?

Whitney 52:00

Right, exactly.

Bill 52:03

That is such an awesome analogy. I love that I'm gonna use that I'm gonna steal it.

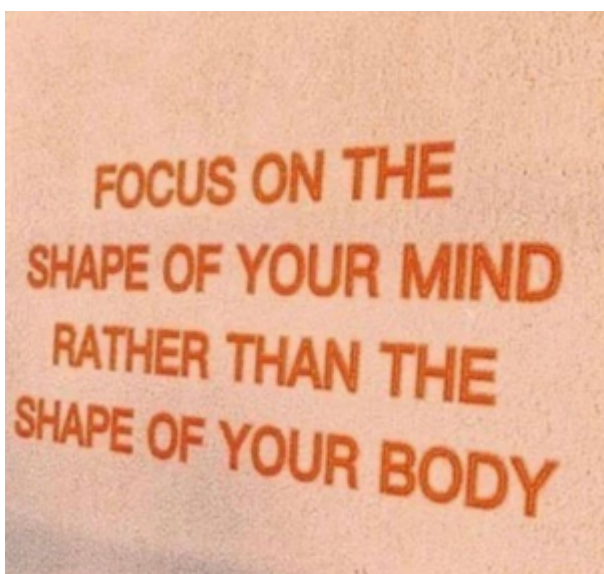
Whitney 52:07

Yeah, use it.

Bill 52:09

You've got one of your most recent posts on Instagram, it says focus on the shape of your mind, rather than the shape of your body. What do you mean by that? How come that resonated with you?

Meditation helps with stroke recovery



Whitney 52:24

Well, there's a couple reasons. One is that my body is not the body that I had before, it's not able to do so many things that I once did. And so you know, really,

when I do focus on my mindset, and my mind, some how my body gets better, or more agile, or I can do more things, or, you know, the more meditation I'm really big on meditation, because I didn't meditate prior to my stroke.

Whitney 53:03

And I wish that I would have, I found it because I couldn't do anything, I couldn't walk down my street and drive my car, go for a run, you know, I couldn't do anything. And I was very, it was hard for me to sit still in the beginning. But I rather do meditation than just cry everyday, like I did for a few months.

Whitney 53:29

And so I found it. And it came to me about a year and a half ago or so. And I love meditation. And I think that's another reason why I've developed the relationship that I have with myself, in addition to the photograph that I put on the bedside, because it just puts you in touch with your triggers and your personality and, life in general and how precious this time is on the planet.

Whitney 53:58

And so the more I meditate, the more my body responds. So it's like, I'm more focused on my mindset, which in turn brings recovery to my body.

Bill 54:13

Yeah, mindset is really important because it can derail recovery, and it could make it harder than it has to be. Meditation is really awesome because you can do it just by sitting in your chair at any time of the day, you can do it for a minute that has positive beneficial effects. any longer than that, it's just positive right through.

Bill 54:36

It is bringing together it starts to help combine the body and mind where we've experienced our body as separate entities because of the way that it's spoken about. You know, when you have a headache you go to see somebody about your head when you have a problem with your heart.

Bill 54:54

You're gonna say somebody about your heart and so on and medicine and the Western world has compartmentalised the body. And we've learned about it in the same way. So meditation starts to reunite everything and bring everything together. And I remember being in hospital trying to, and waiting for

rehabilitation and to get back on my feet for the first time and start learning how to walk again.

Bill 55:21

And I had been practicing meditation before my surgery. And then after surgery, I was meditating, and watching myself walk again. Because I learned that neuroplasticity activates the same part of the brain, if you pretend that you're doing something as it does, if you're actually doing something.

Bill 55:48

So that time that one or two hours, a day that I spent imagining myself walk was doing the same positive things to my brain as if I was actually walking, and therefore I was able to double my rehabilitation time.

Whitney 56:05

I visualization is huge. Also, in my recovery. I visualized just for five minutes or less every single day, for a year of running on the beach, what it would feel like the sand, the smells, you know, everything. And then I did it one day, you know.

Whitney 56:29

And so for me, it's just, I visualize, you know, I can't really do certain movements with my foot, and ankle and different things. And I visualize all the time, because I read a study one time that showed if you visualize, you know, doing bicep curls for a couple of months.

Whitney 56:57

My daughter, I'm she's like, pounding on the door. But anyway, I read that if you visualize that, they actually strengthened the muscle, and they never touched a weight. And so just powerful for me, like I visualize all the time, everything. That's probably why athletes and CEOs and really professional people do it because it primes the brain, in addition, maybe to strengthening the muscle or something, but it does prime the brain to get ready for the activity. And like you said, the brain doesn't know the difference between what's you know, really happening and what you're imagining,

Bill 57:38

Yeah, we can take a little bit of we can make it think that it's doing something that it's actually not, and then we can use that to our benefit. And that's a really amazing thing. And one of the hardest things for me, one of the things that I

feared a lot about was getting intimate with my wife again, because I had a bleed in my brain and it was there for a while I was there for about three years.

Intimacy Issues caused by the stroke

Bill 58:04

So they kind of said to me, you're going to have to take it easy on a lot of things that are strenuous. And that means you shouldn't go to the gym, exercise, run any of that stuff. And then I asked the inevitable question, you know, like, what about intimacy? And I said, you know, off. Right, so getting it back was a bit of an issue a bit of a concern. Did you have any challenges around intimacy? Was it something that you guys were able to navigate quite well? Or was it a bit of a challenge?

Whitney 58:16

I would say that it was a challenge. Because of our relationship stressors, because of how stressful this was on a marriage on a young couple that just sent their vows, you know, in sickness or health like just a couple of years ago. And that's exactly what it was.

Whitney 58:57

And it brought a lot of challenges into our marriage. So I think that played a role in it. I don't know if it was really the surgery itself or the stroke itself, but maybe our connection at the time. Just was very, it was a stressful time. And it wasn't as supportive as we are because of each other. He was going through his own stressful event. And then I his wife had a stroke. And it was it was a very stressful time. And I think that had a lot to do with it.

Bill 59:39

A lot of things coming together at once. And that's interesting, because I've been spoken about that specifically. Not the intimacy part, the marriage part specifically with a lot of people in that very early marriage. 34 year old people doing the vow of in sickness and in health in death do us part.

Bill 59:59

I mean, you're basically not really focusing on what that means. You're focusing on all the amazing things that are going to happen? And that's kind of funny that you say, because most people say it. And then, man, you're dealing with all of that

stuff that the vow is talking about right now.

Whitney 1:00:16

Yeah, it's pretty wild really.

Bill 1:00:24

Wow. I really have enjoyed getting to know you over this last hour. I really appreciate your being so candid, and so open. I love what you're all about. And I think it's really important the story that you shared today, because it's going to make a difference for other people that are listening.

Bill 1:00:46

What makes it possible for you to say, to the stranger from the other side of the planet, who sends an email and says, you know, can you be on my podcast? Like, what makes you able to go yeah, I want to do that I want to be a part of that I want to share.

Whitney 1:01:10

First of all, I've made sure you have like a page and that you weren't a creeper or something. And I looked you up online and made sure that you know that that was okay.

Whitney 1:01:23

Because I get people commenting all the time that say weird stuff, and they don't have any followers and posts and no website and I'm like, I'm not gonna say anything back to you.

Bill 1:01:33

I know them.

Whitney 1:01:36

I guess I just really want to help be another person that can raise awareness about stroke, because so many people in the stroke community know that it definitely happens to young, healthy people.

Whitney 1:01:51

But outside of the stroke community and outside of the medical field, it's not common knowledge that a stroke can happen to a young, healthy person. And it's really become important to me just to be an advocate and just raise awareness.

And also to tell people that, you know, we all go through the unexpected.

Whitney 1:02:14

I mean, you if you can't control what happens to you, like, you can control how you respond. And I just want to give inspiration to people that might be really having a hard time because when I was having a hard time, if I had somebody come to me and say some things that I know now, it would have been amazing.

Whitney 1:02:39

It would have meant a lot to me at the time. So I want to give that back to others. And I just always have loved helping people. So I feel like I'd like to keep sharing.

Bill 1:02:51

Beautiful. That's a perfect way to end the podcast. Whitney, thank you so much for being on the podcast. I really appreciate it.

Whitney 1:02:58

Yes, thank you so much, Bill.

Bill 1:03:01

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Bill 1:03:19

Doing this will make the podcast more visible to other stroke survivors that are doing a tough right now. And it could help them feel inspired and feel better about the road ahead. Thanks for tuning in.

Intro 1:03:35

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Intro 1:03:45

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Intro 1:04:02

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Intro 1:04:14

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Intro 1:04:30

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Intro 1:04:46

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Intro 1:05:04

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