

62. Recovery from PFO - Heather Leigh Whitley

How a PFO (patent foramen ovale) caused a stroke.

Heather Whitley is a mom of 5 a midwife and a ski coach who experienced a stroke that was most likely related to a PFO (**patent foramen ovale**)

Links mentioned during the show:

[Instagram](#)

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www.segolilymidwife

[Jack Wolfson](#)

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Heather 0:00

Part of my brain died in the emotional region and it was clear because what I think was happening is, is I would be having a not like, two months ago, this

would have been very difficult for me just talking about the stroke in the event, the emotional, like, either somebody like giving me some emotional information about themselves or me relaying something emotional, it was almost painful. Like, I felt like there was the neurons were having to try to find new pathways that were going over dead space now or something. And I had dizzy spells where I felt like I was going to pass out or get sick. And I had to like lay down. And that was it would happen daily for like the first week or two, then it went to weekly. And then it was very sporadic when it happened. And when I cleaned up my diet, because of what I found through you, I noticed that process progressed much quicker. The healing.

Bill 0:51

Yeah.

Intro 0:54

This is recovery after stroke with Bill Gasiamis. Helping you go from where you are to where you'd rather be.

Bill 1:01

Heather, welcome to the podcast.

Heather 1:04

Thanks. Thanks for having me on.

Bill 1:06

Can you tell me a little bit about what happened to you at the beginning?

A PFO Caused The Stroke

Heather 1:10

Sure. So I had been skiing. I'm a ski coach at Snowbird, here in Utah. And I had been on the mountain with a bunch of 10, 11 year olds, I was fine. And I had had this like euphoric moment on the mountain, I've listened to some of your podcasts. And it's been interesting hearing different people's stories and what they attribute it to be stressful life or drug use or different things. And you know, it was interesting because I don't have any vices or predisposing health conditions.

But when I think back to like the 20 minutes before the event, I had this kind of euphoria, where I was just like came out and just beautiful VISTA and this beautiful view. And I was like life is great. And I'm so happy right now. And it was like the antithesis of what you would expect somebody you know, who would have a stroke would have something stressful going on. But I really had the opposite of that. So I go down to the coaches race building our locker room, and I'm de-booting and I had a little bit of a dizzy spell and some funny vision in there.

But I didn't think much of it. But thinking back, it was probably about 10 minutes before the stroke. And it was significant, probably, but then it passed. And I walked to my car chatting with people along the way carrying my skis. And I got in my car. And I don't talk on the phone very often in my car, but I had to talk to my 13 year old daughter who was coming off another mountain and I was as a mom organising logistics and the traffic coming out of a mountain Canyon was very slow. And it was going to take a while and I was trying to say to her, I will call you when I get out of the canyon and it came out

Hello, little below my speech completely went and my left arm I could see my left arm floating across the car, but I had no control over it, no sensation of it. And I was terrified. And I my brain was working. Okay, so I kept saying to myself, let's try that again. And I tried to get the sentence out and it wouldn't come it was just the garbled speech. And she thought I had bad service. But thinking back she said, clearly there was something going on. And so I hung up and I thought I think I'm having a stroke.

I'm in the healthcare field. And I guess I was like, there's no way I'm having a stroke. But I think I'm having a stroke and I I got my passenger window down and honked and by then my speech had returned because the whole episode was like 45 seconds probably. And I flagged down the car next to me and I just said I'm having trouble speaking and I lost my left arm. And it was a cardiologist in the car next to me.

Bill 3:45

Well done,

Heather 3:47

it was a couple visiting Utah, from Washington, DC, and she was a cardiologist. So I was able to pull over in front of them in traffic. And by the time she got to my

window, my speech was back. But I had related to her. I'm like something just happened and my left arm was still really weird. And an ambulance was there within like two or five minutes. And she said, You don't look like you're having a life threatening stroke. My face wasn't drooping, or I was talking completely cognitive. I was aware. But I was also like intuitively aware something had just happened.

So I rode the ambulance down the canyon, and my vitals were completely fine. My blood sugar was fine. And they said altitude dehydration, and you probably haven't eaten enough today. And I said, Yeah, you know, why don't I go home. So I never went to the hospital, they dropped me off at the fire station, the bottom and I had my son pick me up and went home and just I just didn't feel right. I just knew something happened. So an hour later at home, I was sitting there and I just felt really like not right. And my left arm started getting weird again. And I felt really nauseous.

And I know as a clinician myself, like, often one thing isn't too concerning. But it's two things when you have two clinical presentations of something, no matter what the condition is like you have something going on that needs medical attention. So I had my son Take me to the hospital and and MRI showed within a half an hour of getting there that is a moderate CVA and the right frontal lobe

Bill 5:22

wow dramatic.

Heather 5:23

Yes.

Bill 5:25

What's scary is how dangerous it is when somebody makes assumptions about what's happening to somebody else. And I knowq it happens all the time. And I I'm not, I don't want to give anyone a hard time I totally get it. Because you know we are human firstly, secondly, we want to think that nothing is wrong, whether we're attending to somebody who's got some symptoms, but we also have more, you know, paramedics would have so many people they need to see on a daily basis so you can understand how they jump to conclusions.

Heather 5:57

Well, and I just don't fit the clinical picture. Somebody struggling like that, you

know, I went I went and saw them a couple weeks after and reported on what had happened. So I visited the fire station and connected with them and was able to show them the images of my MRI and it was kind of a neat experience to reconnect with them like that.

Bill 6:19

The How about with stroke you hardly ever hear about the good luck stories that occur. You pulled the window down and there was a cardiologist on the other side of the other window.

Heather 6:30

It was amazing. It was amazing.

Bill 6:32

Did you guys connect after that, did you manage to find out who that person was?

Heather 6:36

I tried tracking her down and I couldn't I don't know if you can call like 911 and get like records of who called a be nice to find her I never did. She's a cardiologist from Washington DC and I did some sleuthing on Google and came up to Dead end. So yeah, haven't found her yet

Bill 6:53

Fair enough,

just before we go on 911 is the number that people called in an emergency in the US. In Australia, it's 000. And in a different country, it might be something different. So anyone experiencing something weird, don't call 911 if you're not in America or triple zero, if you are not in Australia. So Heather how was the time after that? So you've experienced this stroke, then you go through a process of trying to work out what went wrong and how to fix it. What was that like? what happened after that?

Heather 7:27

So I was at a small city hospital when they diagnosed me and they as soon as the MRI came in, they shipped me by ambulance pretty quickly to a big tertiary, the stroke centre of Utah at Intermountain Healthcare. And I was on the the stroke unit and I was probably the healthiest person in the stroke unit. But I was there for four days while they like had me on bed alarms that if I sat up or got out of

bed for the first 24 hours a nurse would be called I couldn't, I couldn't do anything unsupervised. I wasn't allowed to have water unsupervised, I had to have physical therapy, occupational therapy and speech therapy come in to clear me to have jello.

So interesting. You know, I was doing walks around the hall, I had different like mini agility things to see how my if my balance was still intact, and I was able to be cleared first round of all that stuff within 24 hours. But I guess they just were monitoring for another one coming. But also, um checking my body. So I had like scans on my looking for deep vein thrombosis on my legs, which is often with women, I have five children. So women that have had a lot of babies are women middle aged, that's one of the first places they look, but they say those clots will usually travel to the lungs, not the brain.

And they said the shape of my stroke on imaging and the MRI indicated it was heart in origin. And it was like a wedge shaped patterns at the the edema or whatever presented on MRI. So they stuck. They did an external echocardiogram where they didn't see any problems with my heart. But then they sent a camera down my oesophagus under some anaesthesia. And they blew bubbles in an IV it's called a bubble study. And in that they found a small, a tiny hole called a PFO, and this is the most striking thing.

What is a PFO?

Every human baby is born with a foramenovale, it's a little functional hole that exists to support the baby in utero. And then most people will close theirs at birth. But about 25 to 30% of the population does not close it after birth. And they think that in an otherwise normal healthy young person who strokes or heart attack, they think it's just a it slows the blood around enough to form a clot, which is fairly normal for our bodies to form clots. Usually they're sent to the lungs broken up a little bit. Basically, one pass through the hole and then went up to my brain. So they're like 80% sure is what this is, is was it that's what caused it because I don't have any other risk factors. So I was like, Well, I was a B minus student in school.

So I guess I'll take the 80%. And so they made a plan to plug up the hole in my heart, which they were going to do while I was still there, and then neurology

shift change said no, let's send her home and give her like three weeks for her brain to settle down and then bring her back in and do that. And that's I agree to that. I think that was a good call. Because the the brain trauma from the stroke was actually, despite the fact that I have no long term deficit, it was pretty remarkable, like what I experienced in the healing of that like concussion kind of thing.

Bill 10:43

Yeah, yeah, it is quite traumatic. Anytime anything happens to the brain, it presents differently. And it challenges people very differently. So what were the challenges that you experience when you went home?

Heather 10:54

So when I checked me out, and the neurologist described to me it was right frontal lobe, which is the emotional no region of the brain, specifically executive functioning. So

Intro 11:05

if you've had a stroke, and are 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, how long will it take to recover? Will I actually recover? What things should I avoid? In case I make matters worse, doctors will explain things. But obviously, because 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 finding yourself in that situation, stop whining, and head to RecoveryAfterStroke.com, where you can download a guide that will help you. 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, they'll help you take a more active role in your recovery. Hed, to the website now, RecoveryAfterStroke.com and download the guide, it's free.

Heather 12:18

That venues he gave me when I was being discharged was you some people have depression that experienced this. Some people experience some personality changes. And some people might miss some basic social cues. And I thought I was really afraid of that and what that would mean and I'm single and I thought well, I'm going to be single a lot longer, apparently. But I also put my kids on notice to

like, watch out for these things. But I also kind of had a moment when when I was like receiving the news of that. And in the days that followed where I was like, no, that's not going to be my story.

My Brain Needed To Shut Down

And I I told him too like I felt so injured in my brain while I was laying in the hospital. I mean, I didn't, I'm if you've seen me at all, I mean, I'm on social media, I loved connecting with people that way. You know, I don't mind watching movies. But I just felt like being in a dark room. Without anyone talking to me, I just knew my brain needed like a shut down. And I told the doctor I was afraid to read afraid to like, watch him. But I was afraid to like, get anything going in my brain. And he said, We want you doing those things.

And it made a lot of sense. Because what I felt happened was part of my brain died and the emotional region and it was clear, because what I think was happening is, is that would be having a not like two months ago, this would have been very difficult for me just talking about stroke and the event, the emotional, like either somebody like giving me some emotional information about themselves or me relaying something emotional, it was almost painful. Like, I felt like there was the neurons were having to try to find new pathways that we're going over dead space now or something.

And I had dizzy spells where I felt like I was going to pass out or get sick. And I had to like lay down. And that was it would happen daily for like the first week or two, then it went to weekly. And then it was very sporadic when it happened. And when I cleaned up my diet, because of what I found through you. I noticed that process progressed much quicker. The healing.

Bill 14:19

Yeah, this is the beauty This is the beauty of it, we we can support the healing. And mostly it's just by taking stuff out of our diet rather than what we put in. And stuff we need to take out is inflammatory food. And I'm doing some interviews with two with a with a new nutritionist and a personal trainer who are a team, they married the Turner's from Australia and our five episodes are going to be five reasons to quit sugar. The reasons why you need to quit caffeine, gluten, even dairy, we're going to discuss dairy a little bit, but also alcohol.

So they're going to be the things that we talk about, because they are the things that inflammatory to the body under normal circumstances. And when you got a healing brain, they are inflammatory to the brain. But on a far greater scale, because it's under distress and it's trying to come down and it's trying to heal and it's trying to create new pathways. And what you mentioned, the pain that you are experienced is really true. It's true, it's pain, your brain hurts, and people can't understand when you tell them that.

But often when I get overwhelmed with information, overload, I just shut down my brain just says not no more can't do this anymore. I need a break. Yeah, maybe do something else. And I physically doesn't matter what I do to try and make it happen. It's not going to happen. That's it. And having that conversation with the person on the other side of you is really challenging because thankfully, they didn't get it



I Was No Longer Able To Be Empathetic

Heather 15:54

well and I was concealing it from everybody because I have to support my family. So I was like back at work both as a midwife and a ski coach. And I remember standing on the mountain talking to one of my girlfriends, and she's just telling me this very normal benign storey of her daughter getting into the minor fender bender car accident, nobody was hurt or anything, just the legal drama that was going on with that. And, and I think my brain was trying to find empathy for her. And all I had was a voice inside my head that says,

You got to get out of this conversation like you have. And I'm sitting there smiling,

like nodding, like thinking of an escape plan to escape from this very basic conversation that happened so many times, like as a midwife, I do a lot of counselling and prenatal work with pregnant women. And I would be sitting in my chair, and the voice inside my head while they were talking was you're gonna pass out like, it was just so heavy, like basic stuff that is usually I'm really wired for felt so incredibly, like almost life threatening heavy for me to deal with that. It was I was afraid it was going to be like that much longer. But um, I have really improved I, I would have really struggled even talking about this like two months ago with you. So yeah, I've come a long way.

Removing Inflammatory Foods

Bill 17:05

Yeah. So what happens when you take those inflammatory foods out of the diet, including carbs, When I talk about carbs. I'm not talking about veggies fresh stuff.

Heather 17:15

No yeah,

Bill 17:15

processed stuff right?.

Heather 17:16

Wheat

Bill 17:17

Yeah, when you take that out, what happens is your cortisol levels drop because those foods increase your cortisol level, which is your stress level. Cortisol ongoing is challenging to the body because it keeps you at an elevated heart rate, elevated blood pressure. So you're just overworking you're in a state of state of stress. And when you're staying there chronically, it's no good for the body. But when the brains is there, it has this, especially after stroke recovery has this really spike of the way that it affects people and affects them dramatically.

Yeah,

Heather 17:17

for sure.

Bill 17:50

So when you take about the when you take out the foods that cause spikes in blood sugar, and therefore heart rate, blood pressure, and cortisol, when you take those out, then the body doesn't have to do these really quick responses to get rid of blood sugar, and pump it out of the blood. What it's doing is just staying in a really state of calm and ease. And then it doesn't release so much cortisol and as a result doesn't have that draining effect on the adrenal glands. And then it allows the brain to take more energy from the body to heal and work and process. Because that's what the brain is doing when the brains under distress, it needs more of your energy resources to get going to do that simple task, which was before very easy to write a note with a pen and now it's not

Heather 18:48

right. And what's too bad is the hospital stroke unit is serving you like all the carbs and all the gluten and you know sugary stuff and pies and like, you know, an in my initially I'm an athlete, and I work with elite athletes. And athletes already know like what you are saying about healing whether it's an ankle injury or a knee or on this inflammation and diet. A naturopath Pathic physician friend of mine explained to me the science much how you just did about why the brain is extra sensitive to those things even more than others body, which is why we feel it so much more acutely, when we do like indulge in that stuff when we're trying to heal.

Bill 19:26

Yeah, and when we're, quote unquote, normal when we haven't had a stroke, and we noticed headaches, and we notice fatigue. And we notice all these things. That's the only way the brain can give you feedback. Because the brain doesn't feel pain per se. It doesn't have sensory neurons that transmit pain back to those areas that tell us about pain. So the brain doesn't feel discomfort, like the belly does when we eat some food that bloats us or gives us a tummy ache. The brain doesn't do that. But it does represent in migraines, it does represent in other things.

So for people that are listening, who haven't experienced a stroke and a wondering what we're talking about and how you might notice that when you're perfectly healthy and your brain hasn't been impacted. That is how you're noticing it. And you'll find that if you take those things out of your diet, you'll start to notice a real difference in every aspect of your well being and how your body

operates. So I'm glad that you noticed that. Were you getting people bring you food to hospital at some point?

Heather 20:26

Oh, well, when I got home, I had weeks. You know, it's a big Mormon community here in Utah and the Mormon food chain. You know, it was great because my kids got fed and everything but yeah, it's always lasagna and pastas. And it really wasn't until I connected with you and I think it was you that turn showed me the Paleo cardiologist was that you referred that book to me. Okay, somebody referred to me the Paleo cardiologist which is like everything you're talking about, it's a cardiologist that married a chiropractor who is very aware of like all these things that we're talking about.

And he wrote a huge book I'm about two thirds the way through it on the science behind some of this and you know, why everybody it's not specific to stroke but preventing or minimising cardiac or brain, you know, events by eating a little more paleo which is, you know, animal products are okay, but yeah, cut out the sugar cut out that the processed, you know, the farmed stuff, and

Bill 21:24

yeah,

Heather 21:25

I really like that. That's a really great read you may enjoy it too.

Bill 21:29

Yeah, I think I will. we'll share that link of the book in the show notes.

Heather 21:33

Yes, By jack

Bill 21:34

at the end of the podcast.

Heather 21:35

Yes. Jack Wolfson?

Bill 21:37

Yeah. Awesome. So you're so you're now how far off your stroke. How long ago did that happened.

Heather 21:47

Let's see today is a

Bill 21:49

10. May in Australia.

Heather 21:52

Right. So we're right. And I have so three months. So I had it February, 8, March, April, May. So exactly three months went out. And I had the surgery two months ago, early March. So you know,

Bill 22:07

Let's talk about the surgery, what was the surgery for?

Heart Surgery

Heather 22:10

So the surgery was to plug up that hole in the heart to hopefully prevent another one. They said, if I did not plug the hole up, I had a 6% recurrence rate with all nice statistics and health picture. In the first year or two, I'd have a 6%. And that was too high for me. Even though they were only 80%. Sure, that's what caused it. So I agreed to the surgery where they went up through my groin via a catheter and inserted a three centimetre titanium wrapped in gore tex device to plug up this PFO the hole in my heart. And I read a lot of medical research on it. The results are good. They've been doing it for 20 years, and I feel really good.

I felt oddly incredibly normal, a few days after even. And then about the fourth or fifth day, I started having really strange arrhythmia's and I called the doctor and they said, Yeah, your heart just figured out there's a foreign object in there. So I had to really commit to this way of eating because my heart was now really sensitive to inflammatory foods. Where if I, and I'm not a drinker, but there was one night where I went out and had a pretty strong cocktail. And about 48 hours later, I had such a huge event. And you know, between my heart and my brain that I almost went back to the hospital to make sure I was okay. And I just said, you know, zero of that, like I just I got too, too much going on, you know, to be messing around with my health again like that. So yeah, so I'm just starting to, like I'm on blood thinners for another couple weeks, I think and then they pull me off of all that. And I have all my follow ups. And technically I'll be done with it all

like out of the woods, completely, seemingly unscathed,

Bill 23:55

seemingly unscathed. How about emotionally?

Heather 23:58

I mean, the first several weeks or maybe couple months, I mean, I lived in fear of like, happening again, because it was so crazy that it happened. I mean, I just No, no, no cholesterol, no blood pressure, no family history of this. No vices. I'm not a drinker, I I just, you know, my stress, like, maybe I'm in denial of how much stress I'm under, I'm a single mom of five kids. And you know, I'm always trying to like, make, you know, support us better. And I think there is some underlying stress I've really been trying to get in touch with and work through and accept that I do have some stress instead of being like, I'm fine, I'm fine. So I'm really like I've worked on like, I bought an Apple Watch, which I want to talk about because they do EKG's and test for a atrial fibrillation, which is a risk to this surgery I had, also from inflammatory food eating and stuff. But it also tells you like time to breathe. And, you know, I try to set like five minutes aside a day where I just do like a breathing meditation. And it sounds silly, but I think it does really help me sort of shut my brain off for a few minutes.

Bill 25:12

So let me tell you what, yeah, breathing meditation does, it does. So when you take all that food, or those foods we spoke about out of the diet, while healing, the meditation actually impacts that in your body in a positive way, by doing exactly the same thing is the decreases your blood pressure, it decreases your cortisol levels. And it allows your body to your brain to shut down for a little bit. And to go into a space where it's just being rather than doing. And when it's being, it's allowing for. And as the stress and the cortisol decreases, what happens is your blood vessels change in the shape that they that they are, so they become less constricted, therefore blood flow happens better.

Your lungs expand more, so you're getting more oxygen into your blood, therefore, you're getting more of the healing oxygen into that part of the brain. And there's so many physiological things that change when you meditate, and you focus on your breathing, that that five minutes of doing that can have a massive positive impact for the entire rest of your day. And then not only that, if you find yourself later on in the day, needing another opportunity to rest and de-stress

doing another five minute meditation from the reminder from your, you know, your Apple Watch, will also help take it to the next level.

So then what that does is that leads up into a very more peaceful, more better evening, which allows you to sleep better, and allows you to heal better during sleep. So if, I suggest to a lot of people who asked me about meditation, the best time to do it is right now, anytime. But if you really want to get massive bang for your five minutes is do it five minutes before bed, whether you're sitting up in your bed, or laying in your bed, and you've got a track in the background that will just turn off on its own. So in case you fall asleep, you don't have to wake yourself and switch it off.

What that does is that puts you into that space where you're going to go into those brainwave patterns that are going to support better sleep, and better healing overnight. And when you wake up, you'll be more refreshed, because you'll have had a better sleep. So whoever's listening and always thought that meditation was woo woo, the science is now showing that it's actually not we and the people who came up with meditation many thousands of years ago, we're onto something. So definitely consider it.

Heather 27:49

Yeah, I think it's powerful. And I've never really done it before. So I feel committed to it now.

Bill 27:54

Yeah, it doesn't cost anything does it, you can get meditation, guided meditation tracks from YouTube or from Spotify that's free. So it doesn't cost anything, you can just get it on your phone, it's really simple to

Floatation Tanks

Heather 28:10

On that note, one of my birth clients had gifted me one of those session of salt water floating and those pods would be seen.

Bill 28:18

I've done that.

Heather 28:21

And I was afraid I was afraid to do it. When I first offered it because it was too soon. Like I just I just intuitively knew I wasn't ready. And then I finally just in the last couple weeks did it and it was perfect. It was in a they use it a lot for PTSD, survivors. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. And I thought for this type of thing, it was perfect. I knew when I was ready. I knew when I wasn't quite ready for that. And it was really, really like an hour of just meditation while you're floating in 1000 pounds of salt and 10 inches of water.

Bill 28:57

Yeah, bliss, just bliss. I've done that a few times. And it's very difficult to get out. Because you know, you hear the little bell or whatever it is, it's time to get out. It's like oh, have I already been in here for an hour just seems to go. So quick. Yeah, I love it. People should consider doing that. How did the stroke that you experienced affect the five children? What was that like for them?

Heather 29:24

Well, let me preface that by saying you know, at first I was I was alone, so I have one at college across the country, and she was really upset and wanted to fly home. And then my next oldest, is 17 year old boy who's pretty ill equipped to handle this stuff, but pretty good to manage everything at home for me. But um, you know, I was sitting there waiting for the MRI results. And of course, as the busy mom, I'm thinking like everything I had to do the next day, I'm talking to friends, like I think I'm still going to ski tomorrow like in my brain total denial while I was waiting for the MRI to come back. And But meanwhile, intuitively I knew I was like, almost having a breakdown that I'm sitting in the hospital alone with no spouse, like waiting to be told I had a stroke.

And it was really emotional for me because when they told me I had a stroke, I had a breakdown, like I completely broke down crying and the male doctor didn't cope with that very well, not much bedside manner. He was like, are you okay? Right now, and I was like, Yes, but as a woman, I'm just like, processing what you've just said to me and what that means for my life and my children. And you know, I, I had a moment where I was, it really highlighted my single status. And it would have been nice to have my partner, you know, that I don't have but I future partner there.



So it's my kids were great. I mean, they like, you know, the the hatches were buttoned down, I've got another driver in the house, they were, but I think there was overwhelm because my 17 year old son was texting his sister in the middle of the night, mommy just had a stroke. And I don't know what to do. And she thought maybe I died like there was just some chaos, about the communication of what was happening at home. But then I was able to reassure them like I'm fine. They just gotta run some tests keep me for observation. So I was able to really still I was

pretty highly functioning, considering what just happened. And they came to see me in the hospital.

So I think we all panicked about, their dads across the country and just not like in the picture. So they were really on their own for a few days and did fine. But I think we all were like on pins and needles about what the long term effects or consequences could be in my in my mind, even though I was fine. In that moment, I'm like, Am I gonna have to go into a nursing home, you know, I had no idea and but in reflection, I was almost, I'm almost glad I wasn't remarried. At the time, if even if I was married to the father of my children. And you know, I thought about like, how he would have done it, he would have done very well.

But I would have obstructed my own healing by worrying about what he was thinking and feeling about me and all of this. And I think it was kind of a blessing that I didn't have anyone else except my kids to like, deal with or worry about or wonder what this is going to mean for them. I just I just it was me alone dealing with this. And as scary as that sounds, it was super empowering. Because I could just like, do my thing and get with the program, heal and not worry about somebody else feeling like they have to take care of me or anything like that. And so in reflection, I feel like it was perfect how it worked out.

Bill 32:41

Yeah, I can relate to that too. Not in exactly what your method, but I did have to worry about what people were going through, I was very highly functioning at the, in the first situation, the first instance, and I was walking around and the doctors and the nurses were going but actually supposed to be lying down bed,

whatever I was, well, well, maybe I don't feel like I should. So I'm not going to being up and about made a better for my parents, and for my brother, and for my wife and for my children who were 12. And, you know, 16 at the time. So that helped.

And I remember the biggest challenge I had when I was going into surgery nearly three years later was actually dealing with the emotional state of everyone that was around us, we were a Greek family, Greek families and emotions run hand in hand, emotions run high, there is a very really calm, level headed the Greek people. And especially when it's about children and all that type of thing, they don't cope. So when I was heading into surgery, I had to be the best version of myself to appear to them, that this is a under control, although it's serious, and they can operate on his brain that it's actually going to be a good outcome.

So I was constantly telling them about me, you know, healing myself stopping the alcohol, stopping this and stopping that and not smoking and not doing all these things. And when they saw me, I had lost some weight because I looked after myself better. And the state I was in when they saw me going into surgery, I think that would have helped them quite a bit. But why I became so dramatic was because my mother in law passed away, literally three weeks before my surgery. So then we had to deal with the the funeral and all the challenges that that creates.

And then the possibilities of people connecting the dots of death and brain surgery and the drama. So it's such a burden on the person who's going through the stroke. That if people are listening, you haven't gone through a stroke, you know, somebody that has really take care of your state. And I wanted to tell my wife and I didn't, but I wanted to tell my wife that don't let person X, Y or Z come and see me. But I couldn't because she's not the kind of person who would say that to them, especially if they're not part of her immediate family.

Heather 35:20

Yeah.

Bill 35:21

Because they were really difficult to deal with when I was in hospital. So I can relate to what you're saying. Your children stepped up, because as much as we think they're not capable of doing anything, all of a sudden, they just filled all the

gaps, and they do everything they need to do and they're resilient. How have you spoken to them about it since and now that some time has elapsed? I know, it was very difficult for my children to speak about it for a while with me. And we're good now. But it's been many years for me seven years, how have they been since?

Heather 35:58

Well, I'm a super transparent person. Like when I went through my divorce, I broke all the rules and was like completely transparent about my stuff, their dad stuff, and they came out of that feeling really close to both of us and knowing we're both just human beings and make mistakes, you know, so like, I've always been really transparent. So they were really part of this with me. And I put them in charge of watching me like with my you know, missing social cues or, you know, noticing little changes about me and I was like, if you guys notice something, you need to tell me because you might notice before I do. Depression, usually with you know, I deal with postpartum depression with clients, I've experienced it with one of my kids, you know, the person suffering, it is the last person to see it, it's usually the people closest to them that will know something's not quite right. They're not quite participating or engaging as normal.

So I really asked them to step up and make sure they were in touch with me. And one thing they noticed right away is, you know, the family joke is I cry in every movie, or TV show with even the remotest amount of emotional moving, you know, scene you know, they always look at me, because I'm usually like, weeping, I'm very sensitive and empathetic to that. And for a while, they noticed right away that I wasn't doing that, like I was a little I lost, some of the empathy died. And it's come back, like, I feel like now I'm back to normal without that, but that was one of the things like mom's really changed. She's not crying during movies.

So maybe I was a little concerned, I had lost a little bit of empathy. But sometimes that's not a bad thing, you know, if you're too empathetic, you know, so they've, they've done great, um, you know, there were times where like, I would feel emotional overwhelmed from some of the noise in the house. So they'd be play siding, and, and I'd have to just go in my room and shut the door or just ask them to tone it down. But other than that, it was a pretty normal, we're pretty dialled in, I homeschool the younger ones were very close, you know, the kids and I and I feel like, I just made them part of it, and was really healthy. Because if they had questions, I can answer them. And even my five year old, kind of understood

something was going on. But my big kids were great. I wonder if later in life, they will reflect back and impacted that much more than I really understand. But I mean, so far, it's been okay,

Bill 38:19

yeah, well, you'll know, because you're that kind of person already, you know, you're quite in tune with human beings. You're a midwife. So you're constantly involved with people in emotion and the things that are occurring, and help people shift from one phase to the next phase, to get to the other phase, I think you'll be okay, you'll start to notice that they will perhaps present with some underlying issues that they're not sure about. And then, and you'll tune in, and you'll be able to discuss it with them and get them over the line.

Heather 38:56

Well, and I could see how males going through a stroke would have trouble a greater degree, I mean, I'm a female to being really in touch and highly functioning with my emotions to begin with. And then having to process with the loss of some of that, but being able to be like aware of what was happening and articulate it like Cognizant, but men, and I joke to someone that I was almost more empathetic of men, because, you know, and sometimes I could never understand how men couldn't like, deal with certain emotions or deal. And I all of a sudden could have empathy for the male wiring and the male brain because, like, like I said, a conversation that for me would be very normal. I literally was like, yep, I gotta go, like, I can't deal with this. And you see men just do that haven't stroked, you know, just on a basic, just the way you guys are wired. So I would imagine going through something like that it's hard to articulate what's happening for you.

Bill 39:47

Yeah, especially to a female partner who is female. And then I say that in the nicest possible way, we're wired differently, we're meant to be the female is meant to have more empathy has the opportunity to bear children and give birth and raise them and nurture them. You know, men are, men aren't traditionally supposed to be doing that. And not that we shouldn't, we just haven't been. So that we still have some of that ancestral stuff going on that we, you know, haven't evolved from, and I'm not sure whether we need to, but we do need to talk about it. So we're aware of when we need to jump into empathetic states. Now, I was the opposite. I went into complete reversal, my head completely switched off, and

my heart completely came on board, I started to feel things in my chest that I had never felt before, it was called a heart. And I would cry watching movies, and I still do, and I would cry, watching a cat trip over and I would cry over these weird things. And my wife would be going, what are you crying for now?

You know, I'm noticing these things. And simply what happened for was my heart was able to come to the fore for the first time in a long time. And people listening may not know that there's the heart has neural structures in it just as the brain does. And when you haven't used the heart, and you are not somebody who wears their heart on their sleeve, or when you're not somebody who has followed their heart, your heart has less neurons, and it does less. So it's the same as the brain use it or lose it. And you can create negative neural patterns in your heart, because you don't use it. As much as you can create positive neural patterns in your heart, when you start to exercise it and tell people you love them more. Just that makes you connect with your heart. And that's what I do now. So my children have seen this completely different version of me, almost overbearing, loving, hugging, dude that used to be rough and tumble and, you know, not really give a crap about anything. But I, I really enjoy that part of myself now and being different.

My stroke happened near the cerebellum. So nowhere near the emotional part of the brain. But the impact on the the load on the brain was so high, that I knew that it needed to switch off, and it almost totally did. And I was aware I had a witnesses, but my awareness wasn't wasn't head brain related awareness. I wasn't conscious at that level, for some period of time. And it was maybe weeks, maybe a few months. But the awareness of my gut, and my heart really was where at where it was at. And I was noticing all these things I had never paid attention before. So that was where the biggest lessons for me came from. And it was at that took some adjusting for the other humans in my life, because they've never seen this side of me. And it was strange, you know? Yeah, yeah. I related to the first time how women can be emotional, which was great. So I have that ability to now leave have that for the rest of my life that a winner.

And I was able to relate to for the first time how mentally challenged humans have their life experience. So when somebody is trying to tell you, they are, they have some kind of a challenge that's head related, and they can't iterate it to somebody, I don't we have this stigma about mental health. That why you look fine, but in fact, that person isn't. And I experienced death for the first time. So

now I understand how people go through that, and depression, and all those things and how they experience it. So I'm glad that kind of these beautiful things came out of strike. It's not all terrible for me.

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Heather 42:48

Yeah, yeah.

Becoming Emotional After Stroke

Bill 42:50

Now, I was the opposite. I went into complete reversal, my head completely switched off, and my heart completely came on board, I started to feel things in my chest that I had never felt before, it was called a heart. And I would cry watching movies, and I still do, and I would cry, watching a cat trip over and I

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Heather 43:44

Yeah, I know it is. And I think it helped the healing, to feel gratitude and to also like, make a decision, you know, because I could have been like, I don't want to read on I want to watch movies, I don't want to do anything that could cause me to feel that overwhelm. But I think just continuing to like walk forward and just deciding, like, that's not going to be my story, like depression is not going to be my I don't have time to be depressed, I have too much responsibility. And I really had that mindset with it. And I do think that helps like staying positive, because I think I could see how people could easily slip into feeling sorry for themselves getting depressed, and then that interrupts healing, and then they're not changing their lifestyle to be healthy, it's getting worse. And I feel grateful that I captured the mindset, I think to speed up healing with all this.

Bill 44:37

Yeah, one in three people who experienced a stroke will experience depression. As a result, yeah. So it's really important to get some counselling, coaching psychological assessments done really soon. So if you're a carer listening to this, or watching this, definitely consider that for your loved one. And vice versa. If you're someone that's had a stroke, are you concerned about those things, just ask for a referral to somebody who can assist you with getting an evaluation done.

Heather 45:08

I'll tell you how in the US, you can actually take a little quiz online because I give it to my pregnant ladies. It's called patient health questionnaire number nine, they can Google at [PHQ9](#), it'll pop up this little online 10 question quiz. And last two weeks, how often have you been blah, blah, blah, and you get a score? It's really incredible. I do it for all my clients all through the pregnancy. And I've caught some things with women, I thought were fine. They clearly weren't. And then you know it, I think it's a great way if you don't want to spend the money to go, you know, and we don't have good health care here in the US in terms of coverage for therapy and stuff. But you can actually self assess, or have your loved one. Take the assessment because it's Yeah, it is going to be the loved ones you usually when you're in depression, you don't know it. And the minute you say, I think I'm depressed, that's usually you're climbing out of it after losing months, if not years of your life, you know, to

Bill 46:03

I see, wow, so that's really important. We'll share that as well, in the show notes. anyone listening can find that easily. So what? Tell me about how it impacted your work, because you do beautiful, amazing work. You're a midwife, so you help deliver babies.

Heather 46:19

I do at home born at home, wow. Yes. Well, so when the stroke happened, I mean, I had women do and I was like, no one can know about this, I'm laying in the hospital, like, you know, I got my family. I'm trying to organise logistics and not sure what was going to happen there. And then my work and my client base, I had like, nine or 10 clients at the time, and one woman was like imminently due. And I was like, What am I going to say, I, I've put another midwife on call through the weekend that I was in the hospital for three or four days, which is really unusual when you're in solo practice.

You know, people hire you to have just to be their midwife. So that was very difficult, but I didn't disclose why I just said family emergency. You know, she's going to be your midwife through the weekend, if you give birth. So when I was being discharged from the hospital, I let my client and really all my clients know what had happened. And I was super transparent, because by that time, we had a plan, we had, we knew the cause we knew the likelihood of it happening again, eminently it was low, I was on blood thinners to prevent that as well. So I was

like, Who's gonna hire a midwife that just had a stroke.

But not only did I be transparent with my clients, but I also went public with it on my social media, which is has a fairly large following. And I was afraid of doing that. But I had clients continue to interview me and then hire me and say, I saw you had a stroke, I'm glad you're fine. And I was gonna say it pays to be really honest and authentic with people on this stuff. I haven't lost any business. So I did have a birth about 48 hours after I was discharged from the stroke unit. And I brought another midwife with me because I was nervous of falling asleep, passing out stroking again.

Faking Being Well At Work after PFO

I wasn't quite right. And I was faking it, that I was okay. And so I got through the birth, and it was fine. But I'm glad I had I brought help in because it took some of the burden of responsibility off of me, but I was pretty tender still. And then I had several weeks. So I had another one. But just even like my regular office visits, like I said, were very difficult for me for a good month. sitting through them was really challenging, because it was all the emotional connectivity clinically, I was fine. Physically, I was fine. I could process clinical information, just fine. It was like the emotional piece, which is really 90% of our what we do. And it was very difficult. It was very, very hard for a while.

Bill 48:45

So you went from Come on, it'll, it'll be okay, you can do this to come on lady get it out.

Heather 48:51

Yeah, it was a longer birth than we expected. So it was like, I let the student and my other midwife pretty much do everything. And I just kind of sat there and took pictures and was just there just in case. But I really outsourced as much as I could of that birth because I knew I was in make major healing mode at that point.

Bill 49:09

Yeah, it's something it, that denial part of it plays a big role. I did the same with regards to trying to fake things, you know, work related, and it doesn't help but it's what we know, you really can't be guided any other way until you do it and feel terrible after having done it.

Heather 49:30

Right.

Bill 49:30

Ah, It's there's no other way to really learn. We right, we had to take advice from other people, especially I just felt I struggled with trying to understand, just trying to understand what my limitations were until I hit the brick wall. And then it was, okay. gone too far done too much.



Heather 49:52

And because it's brain is so complicated, the neurologists can't really give you any kind of like normal assessment, because every like a thumbprint, everybody's healing is going to be different because everybody's injury is very unique and different. And so I was cleared to do I was clear to ski, the only restrictions I had on

skiing actually wasn't from neurology was from the cardiologist because I was now on blood thinners for a while, because they didn't want me falling and bruising and internal bleeding. But they I was clear from neurology to pretty much resume life as normal as I saw fit.

So it was really up to me to find those boundaries. And I wouldn't know until I was started go about my day, and then all of a sudden, I was like, I'm dizzy, I gotta go sit down. And, you know, intuitively, I was like I should eat to keep my blood sugar up. And I was eating carbs. And I was eating stuff that intuitively I thought would keep my energy up for longer periods of time. And that's what was killing me. That's what was causing the episodes of interrupting healing, or I'd have to reset and go back to bed for a little while or go sit down because I was eating all the stuff that my brain was like on fire from Yeah,

Bill 51:01

I was set from top time when we go somewhere and I have a sweet cake after dinner or whatever it is, I can feel the sugar running through my veins from my mouth, and my stomach, into the extremities of my arms, my hands, my heart starts to race, I can feel it in my brain, I can feel it just doing stuff that I had previously been completely unaware that it was doing. So it does have a major

impact. And when you're off it for as long as I've been off it, then you try it again, you you oh wow, like that is crazy, that are noticing that and how the body becomes used to that and then stops giving you that feedback and stops telling you that this thing that you're consuming is really affecting you.

And let's face it, I've been addicted to sugar from when I was a baby, when ever had the opportunity to grab some chocolate or somebody fed me something sweet. That's That's how long it's been for me. So more tha 40 years, or at that stage more than 35 years. So it's amazing people, people's responses when you tell them to do that. And then they give it a try. And then they go through this couple of days of feeling like withdrawal symptoms.

Heather 52:17

Yeah.

Stroke Recovery And Artificial Light

Bill 52:17

And then feeling amazing and saying, well, I've just noticing all these things that are different about me. And then also telling me how they experienced the consumption of sugar after that break that they had. So something to consider, I'm glad that you did that. That's really amazing. When you talk about the other things that impacted your brain like noise and too much information, some of the things that other people don't realise that impacts the brain is light, light really impacts the brain. So that's why you sometimes went into dark room to withdraw so that there's no stimulation happening and you know, noise and it's similar to what autistic people experience when their brain is overwhelmed with too much dot or too much information.

And I did an episode with Dr. Michael Merzenich on episode 27, who's a world renowned leader in the field of neuro plasticity, and he is some of his studies talks about how there's how children who learned in a school that is on a main road, the ones that are nearest to the main road will learn at a slower rate than the ones that are further away to the main room. And it's simply because of noise interrupting the connections that the new new Ronal structures are making. And light has a similar impact because light impacts the body by the skin sensing when it's daytime and when it's nightttime, and that switches on certain hormones

for certain things to occur.

And if we're in a home, that's a very well lit, and we're supposed to be living in a cave, where the sun goes down at 6pm, or 7pm, and we're still at 10:30, or 11pm. With fluorescent light the body puts us into a state of being awake and alert rather than a state of being getting ready to sleep. So all of these things you would never consider. Because how could you when we come from the backgrounds that we do, which is just regular people going about our days trying to achieve our tasks. And this is where the learning is the learning and how to heal from stroke is not only in what the doctors tell you, but it's in that other part. That what the naturopaths tell you what the research is showing and how we think it's normal to live in a home with lights and sounds and noise and traffic. Where that's so far from what what is actually normal.

Heather 54:52

The paleo cardiologist by [Jack Wolfson](#) talks a lot about that he has a whole chapter on that on artificial light and, and going to bed early. And yeah, everything you just described was in there.

Bill 55:03

Yeah, brilliant. We're gonna do, we're gonna definitely have a look at that. And I might even try and contact him and get him on. Yeah, have a conversation with him. That'd be great. I interviewed a gentleman called [Alex Ferguson Episode 11](#), who is just a real cool dude he's a New Zealand guy who does bodybuilding and he's just it's a bit being healthy. And thankfully, he's never experienced any health dramas. And I interviewed him. And we talked about how light blue light can affect sleep. And he walks around his home at night with red light globes everywhere, so that he can as much as possible mimic what would happen in front of a campfire, when the sun goes down.

He switches off all the little LED lights around his home, have all that sticky tape on them. So there's no possibility of artificial light interfering with his sleep habits and his pattern. And he teaches that to corporate people, and he's noticed massive difference in his life. And imagine, imagine if he's noticing a massive difference in his life. If the people listening and watching this, just do just a little bit of these things that you and I have discussed already. They'll feel something better. So we're not

Heather 56:14

totally

Bill 56:15

we're not we don't want to overwhelm people. But just think about these little things as little bits of information that you might want to consider.

Heather 56:21

Yeah, midwives there's some great texts and books on there on on light and how it affects the artificial light nightlights if you know that if if left alone in a dark room women's like even gynaecological cycles will cycle with the moon usually, but when we're in urban settings and artificial lights and not strongly window coverings, and we're not in our cave, that tends to they think, cause a lot of like whether it's fertility issues or gynaecological issues. There's a lot about this artificial light stuff that affects all aspects of our health. Yeah,

Bill 56:55

wow so tell me as we come to wrap up a little bit, before we do turn it, what is your main concern that you're left with now

Heather 57:07

is a huge hospital bill in the United States, I think the bill between the stroke and the heart surgery is like 70,000. So in terms of my healing, and that, by the way, there's good news on that, which I'll report on at some point later, like in my own community, but there is some private health care, that's going to pick up like 90% of it, which will be great. In terms of my own long term, I mean, I fear of having another one that's more profound, that leaves me debilitated, I live in pretty constant fear of that. So I'd say I'd scaled back my physical activity, like, you know, skiing, I normally would be skiing still this time of year here in Utah, and I really haven't gone at all.

And just, you know, I want to be able to make sure I can still support my family and, you know, not be impacted and not have this determine like having a normal ability to read partner and have them worried that they're going to be a caretaker for someone who's likely to stroke again. So I think those are just my big issues, because I feel like from this one, I feel pretty fully recovered. But I'm also treading lightly because I know how significant it was and how severe it could have been.

Bill 58:17

Yeah, treading lightly is a good thing. I mean, it's still very early days, and you are doing well. And you are recovering, and you're healing and most of the challenges have been resolved. The heart, you know, the clip inside that's closed to home. That's all good. So you're doing everything that you could possibly do you're getting, you're going to get a really good outcome. But I think if you just tread lightly, it'll give you enough time for you to come back into your own space and heal yourself. That emotional healing that you need, and also pay attention to whether you are stressed or not. And all the other little things that we are in denial about

Heather 58:59

nothing. So there's a mile Yeah.

Bill 59:02

Yeah. And that's the, that the treading lightly and doing less is most likely going to be more beneficial to that aspect of your healing and your recovery. Rather than keeping yourself occupied and busy. and avoiding facing it, just face it a bit earlier. And get it out of the way sooner. And

Heather 59:23

yeah,

Bill 59:24

hopefully that that will mean that you get to be look back and reflect in a year from now and go. Well, I made the right decision by treading lightly Yes, I love to ski but the mountains are going to be covered for snow for a little while longer, you know, in our lifetime. So let's go ski when we can, you know when. When things are really truly back on track. And skiing is, again, the priority because it's not a priority at the moment.

Heather 59:53

Yeah, thank you for giving me permission to tread lightly because it's hard to do that for me.

Bill 1:00:00

Welcome. Tell me, Heather, where can people find out about the amazing work that you do? And how can they follow you and connect with you?

Heather 1:00:06

Sure. So my most active page on Instagram is shabby ski sh a BB y ski, sk I, or Heather Lee Whitley, on Facebook. And I'm through both those channels, they can get to my midwife page where there's some really neat birth videos. I would say find me on those two channels. And then from there, they can navigate to more of the birth stuff if that's what they're interested in.

Bill 1:00:32

Yeah, now I know, the Shabby ski what it means. I didn't understand what the scheme is. Now I know that you're a bit of a ski fanatic.

Heather 1:00:40

Yes, yes. Yeah, a little bit.

Bill 1:00:42

Thank you so much for spending some time with me connecting with me as well, I really do appreciate it. I'm going to follow your work and keep an eye out on what it is that you do and on you. And if you need anything, please feel free to send me a message. That's the best thing that you could have done.

Heather 1:00:59

Yeah,

Bill 1:01:00

I really do appreciate. And I I'd like to encourage people to connect that way with us with whomever they feel that they need to connect to. That's what my goal has been is been to make it easier for people who are recovering from stroke to navigate stroke recovery, because that's what I needed when I started seven years ago, and I didn't have anything and I didn't know enough and the doctors didn't and you wouldn't believe in seven years, how far we have progressed with the information about alternative, not alternative additional things that we can do ourselves to help heal our brain that are in line with what the doctors are doing and a supporting what the doctors are doing because we don't want to put the doctors. We don't want to give doctors a hard time without them. We wouldn't be here so whoever thinks that they need to go down the alternative path. You need both Don't, don't do that. So I love sharing people's storeys and makes me feel good when I help people do that. So thank you for making me feel good and playing a part in that.

Heather 1:02:05

so grateful you have this community Bill. I'm glad I found you.

Intro 1:02:09

Discover how to support your recovery after stroke. Go to RecoveryAfterStroke.com