Post-Traumatic Stress and Stroke – Travis Cowsert

Travis Cowsert is a former US Marine who experienced a stroke and nearly 10 years later is still overcoming the challenges that post-traumatic stress and stroke can create.

Highlights:

07:24 Sometimes hospitals get it wrong.
15:22 Healing the heart after a stroke is key
21:24 The challenges of riding a bike after a stroke
29:23 Learning how to behave again
36:02 Coordination problems after stroke
44:40 The difficulty with numbers
57:23 Proving yourself
1:03:15 How to manage post-traumatic stress and stroke
1:08:34 Taking care of mental wellbeing

Transcript:

Travis Cowsert 0:00
It was something that I had to come to the realization that when you know when I was a marine and I was doing all this training and I was bettering myself I looked at it as I was in control you know I did this and then stroke there is no control and

stroke it you know it takes everything and in a matter of just falling asleep waking up and it's gone.

Bill 0:25
yeah

Travis Cowsert 0:25
So I think that you know people need to look at it that way is as even you may get your former life back but you know there's, Don't be frustrated if you don't it doesn't come back right away mine you know I like I said I'm still mentally I'm still not there.

Intro 0:45
This is recovery after stroke with Bill Gasiamis helping you go from where you are to where you'd rather be

Bill 0:52
G'day. Travis, welcome to the podcast.

Travis 0:56
Thank you, Bill. First of all, Hey Bill. I want to thank you for the opportunity to share my story. I know that when I originally reached out to you, it was to ask about the mental recovery part of stroke recovery. Really, there's you know, there's two sides of the stroke recovery being, you know, physical and mental when I feel like I've surpassed Doctor expectations, my expectations of where I could be post-stroke, however, since I've put so much emphasis on my physical recovery, I didn't recover mentally I still haven't recovered mentally so I would like that to be the overall why I would like to share my story and help others is so that others can see that there's another aspect to recovery. It's not just physical it's mental

Yeah, sure, mate I know the stats are that, I'm pretty sure this is a global statistic. It's one in three people who experienced a stroke or then experienced depression. And that's missed obviously, during that, exactly what you said during that time where there's so much going on to help people to get them over the line that often the mental torment is missed. And it's put down to lots of other things. And I know that early on, I was extremely challenged by the sudden changes by the ability not to work by the ability not to walk, you know, do all the stuff that we were doing perfectly well, like literally a couple of days earlier, and I needed to,

you know, mental well being is a big topic as it is, but I think that we're not there's not a process there's not a linear process that we can follow that support stroke patients and I know for me, what I needed was I needed physical rehabilitation that I needed this then I needed that and then I needed mental rehabilitation and the doctor the medical system doesn't have all these little systems, you know, in place for us. And I think we need to be involved in creating our own path forward of recovery. Tell me Firstly, what happened to you with regards to the stroke?

So to go back to day one, arguably the two things that might have caused my stroke, One being on 2003 New Year's Day I was in the Marine Corps. Our unit was about the ship off to Iraq. I was sent home on leave basically, our commanding officer came and said, Hey guys, get your things right. Get your orders and you know everything in order and get right with your family. So I went back home and I left California and went back home to Missouri and I was helping my older brother cut down some firewood, just a freak accident. The tree we were cutting down, took a bad snap and drove me to the ground like a tent stake.

My older brother said, he rolled me over our first rolled the tree off my arm, because the tree ended up resting come, the rest of my arm rolled me over, my eyes were open and I was unconscious. He said, I was unconscious about two minutes and it was about a lifetime he said so just because, you know, the eyes were open and I was unresponsive and it was just scary. So you know I went to the hospital is there in Missouri they couldn't treat me as I was you know, property of the government, United States Marine and they called my base basically and they said, you know, get me in a stable condition and ship me back to California. I didn't have any pain meds for three days.

I didn't have any pain meds for three days. I had a broken arm, dislocated elbow. My ulnar styloid was broken off and floating on my wrist I was in pretty bad shape. So I got back to California and had some surgeries separated out of the Marine Corps. It was about three years after I separated from the Marine Corps and I was trained in mixed martial arts and am at the top of my game. I was training you know, training, three, four hours a day, weight training, boxing kickboxing, Jiu Jitsu, Judo, doing everything I was, you know, felt like I was unstoppable.

It was during the 2007 wildfires that we had out here. And the fires came out a

couple of miles away from the house, and there's a lot of smoke and ash in the air. So I tacked up my stroke at the onset of the stroke to smoke inhalation. Confused that I was that to me was normal and that it was just you've just experienced that smoke inhalation.

Bill 6:05
It was smoke around, there was a fire there was you had to do what you had to do and there was smoke inhalation just part of it.

Unknown 6:12
it.

Travis 6:13
Sure. So I didn't do anything about it. And I was home by myself for the weekend. And it just got worse. Had a splitting headache. My vision. Photo, the light was really sensitive to light, really weird. I was like an insatiable thirst. I was drinking so much water. I was just pounding water. I couldn't walk up the stairs. So I just slept on the couch downstairs. Three days later, my girlfriend at the time came over because I didn't go to the gym and so she was upset came over and found me on the couch

You know F.A.S.T. It's pretty much the textbook you know, the definition of the acronym.

Blurred speech. Exactly Yeah. Minus the face. My face wasn't really drooping at the time, but I had a left-side weakness. I couldn't walk. I was slurring my speech. I couldn't really form words. I was really confused. She called the ambulance and took me to the hospital. And then originally was a crazy story. Originally, I got diagnosed with having a diabetic attack, even though I'm not diabetic.

Intro 7:00
FACE ARM SPEECH

Sometimes hospitals get it wrong

Travis 7:24
But they said that's your discharge. And they said your sodium was really low and your potassium was really low, gave me fluids, and sent me home. As I was walking out of the hospital. I had asked to use the restroom. So he had a male orderly walking into the restroom, and I kept kicking my list sandal off like a flip-flop. You know, I kept kicking it off. And it was shortly after that my left leg went paralyzed, and I fell, and then the left arm started to ache and started to go numb. And then eventually paralyzed.

And, I they rushed me back in for an MRI of my brain, and at that point, they hadn't done any MRI. So my brain at that point,

Bill 8:05
wow, this time or your issues that never done an MRI

Travis 8:10
No, nothing. They did a CT scan and nothing showed up and moving to San is what they told me. So they ran the MRI that came back then I remember the doctor had kind of a, you know, a solemn look on his face and said, you know, you know after we did the MRI, we they found two small clots in my right cerebellum and one large clot about one centimeter in my pons.

At that point, I was already upset because they, they, they discharged me and you know, I could have gone home and died basically. And I was being a wise-ass to the doctor and the doctor, you know, kind of set me straight and said, You know, I don't know if you understand the seriousness of the situation but you got about a 5% chance to pull through the night.

Bill 9:00
Wow

Travis 9:00
So, yeah, it was at that point, I, you know, I thought of falling asleep by equivocated falling asleep with death. You know, if I fall asleep I'm going to die. And I remember trying to stay up trying to stay up and you know, eventually, I fell asleep I woke up it was pretty scary. I woke up and at first I opened my eyes and everything was super bright and I had double vision. I couldn't make out heads or tails of what was in front of me. I heard someone talking in the room which ended up being a doctor talking to some interns but uh, I couldn't turn my head to look at them to address them. And then I instantly started doing a body scan you know, started realizing where I'm at everything upstairs was still working.

I realized where I was at a body scan. I can't move. This can't move this. Can't move that. So I went to try that speech. And when I did, my mouth wouldn't open and it was just, you know, just noise came out. Yeah. And what was hard, you know, for the first fight three days up until I mastered speaking again it was like every time I tried to talk there was like this frustration or confusion to where it hurt my brain and I actually would cry instead of something coming out. I would just cry and just kind of, you know, went downhill from there. Then it was test after test after test.

Bill 10:43
When was that? How long ago was this?

Unknown 10:47
This was

Travis 10:48
This was October 24. 2007 was when I stroked out that was when so the onset probably started. The 20th I guess is when the stroke symptoms started to happen and then I stroked out on the night of the 24th

Bill 11:05
so I'm curious did you get to serve as a marine?

Travis 11:10
I served as a marine I didn't serve in combat this accident happened right literally

a week before we shipped out so which are you know was pretty hard to find our unit lost some guys I lost some friends that are real close to me and I didn't go and that's kind of how I looked at it so I didn't help with the Depression of the stroke you know I was still reeling from the fact of his training to be this you know hardcore warrior and then nothing

Bill 11:44
Yeah, I get it. So and this is the thing this is the other thing like in the old days you know when we're talking about Marines or veterans of any persuasion

This shouldn't bother you. You know you're a guy who's trained for war and you're a guy who is trained to survive and all that kind of stuff and you had you had an experience that didn't take your life but I know it almost it or whatever but, this should be anything for you like you should be okay and there's this big perception of the guys that came back from war they were different but they never spoke about anything so you never really knew what their issues were until, you know, decades later when you know anniversaries occurred and celebrations occurred and then you got a glimpse some of the braver what I would call the Bravest Warriors were the ones that started to speak about what happened when they're away at war, etc.

And for me, this podcast, I've said it a couple of times is cathartic. I've never experienced a traumatic I've never had a traumatic life. I've been blessed. I've never had to train to go to war, I never decided that I, you know, sign up for the Australian Army or anything like that. But this thing that happened to me has been life-threatening and all that type of stuff. And it made me question everything. And I didn't. And it changed my life. But it didn't change it in the way that it changes in that everything that you were training to do, and everything that you were attempting to make meaning of and, you know, create a reason for why you are on the planet.

You know, you're going to go and serve, you're going to go and protect the nation, you can go do all these things. Well, that was also taken away from you, not just who you were not just your ability to move your arm and leg and speak and so people don't realize that stroke doesn't just take away you know, movement and abilities. It takes away so much and depending on who you are, and how passionate you are about certain things and how your identity is built into one aspect of life up until that point in time, you might be alive but it could have taken

that person’s life entirely.

Travis 14:09
Sure. Sure. Yeah.

I think part of you know I looked at it internally you know when I when I argue with myself in my head about why I should feel a certain way or why am I feeling a certain way is that you know, I I was I wasn’t marine and I was a marines marine you know, I was locked on and I had a meritorious career up until that point and it was something that I had to come to the realization that when you know when I was a marine and I was doing all this training and and I was bettering myself, I looked at it as I was in control, you know, I, I did this and then stroke there, there is no control and stroke it you know, it takes everything and in a in a matter of just falling asleep, waking up and it’s gone.

So I think that you know people need to look at it that way is as even you may get your former life back but you know there’s. Don’t be frustrated if you don’t if it doesn’t come back right away mind you know like I said I’m still mentally I’m still not there. So you know, I hope that this helps me and I hope it helps others.

Healing the heart after a post-traumatic stress and stroke is key

Bill 15:22
Yeah, look, I think it will help you, man. Every time you talk about it helps a little

more just to heal the heart and to ease the burden in the brain and to you know, release that tension away from you and out into the world because you know, people don't stroke people don't get more depressed by listening to your stories. They can relate to your story and I can and then what it does is it makes you feel not alone. Even though we're on the other side of the planet while we're speaking to each other. It still makes us feel less alone. You know, you can listen to previous episodes of the podcast, and pay attention to what other people have said. And you can reach out to those people because they're all lovely they all want to connect so

Travis 16:04
and I'm and I'm open to that

Bill 16:06
Yeah, so how good is that right? So now what people realize it's also should with stroke it's a lifelong journey it's not just, it's not like a broken leg if you had just broken your arm you know your wrist you know all the things that happened to you after the tree fell on you man and this sound like a massive tree

Travis 16:26
it was large enough to do some damage

Bill 16:30
and then although that was traumatic I imagined still there was a heap of healing because you became you know a wrestler you become a fighter in the ring type of guy even though your injuries went they were away and you don't talk to me about those as if they're long-lasting, emotional challenges that you feel that stroke is this long-lasting emotional thing. It makes you question your mortality. It makes you question everything you've ever done, so you will, you'll feel better about doing this and continuing to share. And that's why I do it to get people on to help them share because it makes me feel better at the same time. And I hope that it does that with them

I suppose one of the big deals about dealing with stroke for me is to have found another why, like, why am I on the plan? another what's good about this? you know, what can we teach other people about? You know, how can I become, you know, so focused as I was as a marine but now in a new light? Have you started to notice in your life now that there are these new avenues of passion and focus,

perhaps not to the intensity of your marine training and your time as a Marine, but have you seen a shift in yourself after all these years? Because it's been nearly 12 years right? Sure.

Travis 17:52
Yeah, yeah, it has over 14 But, no, it's

Bill 17:57
Yeah,

Travis 17:57
Yeah, it's a, to be honest, it when I, right after I had the stroke I tried to get involved with YES which is out here so young enthusiastic stroke survivors I started a foundation called the Cowsert Foundation and I you know for the purposes of helping stroke, I needed to help myself first. I wasn't. you know I wasn't ready for that and I needed to go through everything that I've gone through in order to get to the point where I am ready now I see the things that I'm doing and I wish that others stroke survivors you know at one point in their recovery can experience just a glimpse of what I've been able to experience in you know the five K's the 10 K's of triathlons that I've done the Spartans the rag NARS you know it's I'm not I'm you know, at the race was going backward I would be the first place every time

Bill 18:59
yeah

Travis 18:59
and the sense of accomplishment that comes with that is it's life-changing it is?

I'm not the fastest guy on a course I'm just out there and I'm going to get it done

Bill 18:59
yeah

Travis 19:03
and the sense of accomplishment that comes with that is it's like changing it is

Bill 19:11
Yeah. And that's the thing with me it was I remember going to rehab and at one point after about six or seven months of doing various types of rehab you know

they asked for so what do you want to do now and I just said look I want to be able to run and that's okay. What for? Just to get across the road so you because coming I don't get hit. That would be great at and that's it that was as small as my yeah, that was as small as my my my need was I just needed to be able to get across the road and I achieve that and what was great is I thought that I wasn't going to be able to achieve that and I thought that I run really badly because I tried a few times.

So what they did was they first you know that allayed my concerns and they said to me look you're not running badly. Let's record this on video, they recorded and showed me and said see, look your foot is actually landing properly. I said but it feels weird because, it feels weird yeah I feel like I'm running really badly and I'm concerned so this to me know you're pretty good so we started doing a one-meter sprint you know two meters you know in feet it's about six or seven feet, two meters about six or seven feet and we started doing really small sprints and then we got to that point where I was able to do you know quite a large distance so that it was a typical road I was you know, standing on the other side of the curb and then getting across and not being concerned that cars coming to past I felt really good about it and that was it.

And then one of the main things that I used to do as I began my recovery initially which I lost the ability to do after my surgery started to get on the bike and ride the bike because that was a very those are way more gentle ways for me to exercise. And after surgery because of my balance, I couldn't walk and had to learn how to walk again I also can't balance on a bike so one of my biggest challenges is being on a bike two-wheeled because I can't feel my foot on the pedal and it falls off the pedal and then the pill ends up scraping my, my, my shin my left Shin

Travis 21:23
sure

The challenges of riding a bike after a post-traumatic stress and stroke

Bill 21:24
makes it makes a mess of it. So what I did is I went and got a stirrup one of those stirrups where we slide your foot into the pedal

Travis 21:32
strap in or clip in yeah

Bill 21:33
that's it and the problem with that was Travis, I can't feel that the stirrup is on there so when I stopped working on my left leg down and I can't get it out. So I end up falling

Travis 21:45
Yeah.

Bill 21:46
So now I'm looking at another solution. And the solution is going to be a three-wheel bike, you know two wheels at the back and one at the front and it's what you're saying, it doesn't matter how you're doing what you're doing. There is another way to get it there.

Travis 22:00
Oh, yeah, I did. I had. Sorry. Go ahead.

Bill 22:04
No, that was what I was gonna say if you end up last night's race you end up last no big deal.

Travis 22:08
Sure? Yeah. Honestly, I had the same problem with my center kinesis since the stroke is all caddy wampus and I have ridden a two-wheel bike it's not pretty I usually have to have wide tires on it. So my triathlons I did all my triathlons I did on a hand bike so and for the longest time I, that's why I did on you know was hand bike and. But now and not to plug any certain companies. But we have a peleton now, and you know, I can now that I can clip my foot in and it's a stationary bike. I've lost you know, I'm going on 40 pounds over a year, and I committed to it and I'm crossing something off on my pre-stroke bucket list this year and in December, I'll be running a full marathon. So the first time, you know, when I did the half marathon, I ended up with stress factors in my, in my hip my left hip because of my gate is so bad. Yeah. So So this down would do it right, and trained and properly cut weight. So, you know, let's, let's see what happens.

Bill 23:25
It's also, it's also good to have something to aim towards. It's also good to have something to aim towards, right? You've got something that you're planning ahead for something that you haven't been able to master or achieve yet I feel like you're dreaming big and you're going well this is the goal and somehow I'm going to find a way to get to it. Is that how you would describe it? Are you doing are you playing small? Maybe you were playing small where you are?

Unknown 23:59
I think tend to jump in headfirst. And so, you know, I,

Travis 24:03
I think tend to jump in headfirst. And so, you know, I, I knew going into this that, you know, I was going to give 110% from day one and, and that's what I've done. And, you know, and I feel great doing it so. So, yeah, I think I'm more the, just get it, get in, do what it takes, get it done, and then see how long I can do that.

Bill 24:24
Tell me a little bit about your childhood and the parts about expressing emotion and all those types of things. What type of childhood did you have? Were you able to be vulnerable as a kid growing up, your extended family into your family? What was that like growing up?

Travis 24:46

We were, you know, coming from a small town in Missouri. It was we weren't necessarily encouraged to talk about our feelings it was something you don't talk about. You don't borrow money. You know, you don't talk about your feelings kind of like that. I don't, I wouldn't say was a bad childhood, you know, at all. I think things got a little crazy after my mom was not around anymore. So I, you know, I really don't want to speak badly about her but she had a rough time dealing with the passing of her father and things got really crazy after that. So I've been kind of on my own since I was 15. So but, you know, it's like goes back to I just did what I had to do to get stuff done. So you know now looking at things nowadays that's that's my mentality.

Bill 25:40
Yeah, I asked you about that because I wanted to get a bit of an understanding of what it's like now for you to go through the process of a stroke makes you emotional, so you have to express that all almost without a choice list I did I would just cry at the drop of a hat. What was it like being a vulnerable person for you when you had that upbringing I didn't really have that kind of upbringing but with regards to family, friends, and males, you know, there wasn't any sharing and, you know, expressing of emotions and if we cried all the time, stop crying. And it was a little bit difficult in my relationship with my wife sharing my emotions because she couldn't deal with a man sharing her emotions it really and then she also couldn't deal with seeing me emotionally because she thought it was a bad thing, but it wasn't. So what was it like for you to go from this strong upper lip kind of guy and marine to now being extremely emotional

Travis 26:47
To be honest, it was a hit show it was, I wasn't I was never really accustomed to talking about how what I was going through and there was you know, and I was I had this, this tough guy mentality, kind of, you know, going through the Marines and everything and when, Yeah, after I had the stroke and everything it was, you know, what's this crap coming out of my eyes? You know what? Why is my face leaking? You know, why do I feel like this? And then, I never really talked to anybody. So, because I used anger as a motivation for my physical recovery.

My mental recovery became anger. I became an angry person I push people away I ruined relationships. I you know, and I said, I'm not in control I'm not in control and and and in fact, I was I was in control I was the one that ruined the relationships I you know, and I hope that those that you know that I've ruined

those relationships with, I hope they can find solace in knowing that I'm not there anymore mentally. I'm not there anymore. You know, I'm moved on. I can talk about things. Now I don't get so frustrated that I get angry that I resort to the anger because I know that I can just talk about it and that that helps.

Bill 28:13
Yeah, that would help how hard would it be for the people going through that with you on the opposite side because they don't know why you're angry they don't understand all the connections to your background to your training as a marine they're not in your life, you know, that is they're in your life, but they're not intimately in your life and in your space and in your brain and they don't get it and when they see us act out or it appears as though we're acting out but what we're really doing is sort of trying to recalibrate because we used to deal with things like that in that environment. We don't have any skills to deal with things in this new environment and we're kind of trying to recalibrate and we're trying to see what works and what doesn't we act like idiots sometimes and I

Yeah, definitely.

And we piss people off, but it sounds like you're the kind of guy that needed to do that in a strange way because now that you know that that behavior pissed that person off you know that that behavior is not one that we want to continue doing right?

Travis 29:14
Yeah.

Bill 29:15
But how do you know? And it's a really strange thing because we've got to go there to learn that it's not the right way but that pisses people off now

Learning how to behave again

Travis 29:23
it’s almost like, it was almost like I had to touch a hot stove to know not to touch a hot stove anymore It was almost like like I had to remap that that thinking you know, so I don’t blame anybody for having left because you know, like I said it you know, a lot of people were like, Okay, bye. You know, and, and they let you know, luckily, I have a lovely wife now who has stayed with me and she tolerates it and you know, God knows I love her to death for that. So I’m a lucky man, I’m a lucky man.

Bill 29:57
The wives and the partners of stroke patients all deserve medals. I’m telling you,

Travis 30:03
Man, it’s insane.

Bill 30:06
I said to my wife poor love, she was beside herself and she was over the top, you know, in supporting me and helping us out, you know, at a time when I experienced my stroke, my children were 12 and 16. So it was, you know, a really crazy busy time in our lives. You know, she was working, I was working and I remember that she went to the park and I was on some medication that may be even angrier and made it very difficult for me to walk if fatigued me more and all that type of thing. So one day, she took me to an appointment and she parked at car spots further away from the door than I would have preferred and it was

Travis 30:55

It’s weird but set you off.

Bill 30:57
Yeah, it was such a meltdown and she was so hurt by that and it took me it didn’t take me you know 10 or 5 minutes to work out that I was wrong It took me a long time before I was able to work out you know I think I might have overreacted to that but sorry, it was a real serious issue and you had done the wrong thing so she went through a few of those experiences she didn’t leave me or hit me over the head with a pan, so yeah she deserves a middle tell me how did your wife or how does she cope with some of the challenges that you go through? Because our partners don’t have the skills because they’re not therapists? Their wives.

Travis 31:42
Right.

Bill 31:42
How does she go?

Travis 31:45
It’s um, you know, obviously she gets frustrated understandably. But ultimately, I mean, it kind of boils back down on me that I need to say something before it gets there. You know, I need to say not just why I’m upset because there are dishes in the sink. But the reason I’m upset is because, you know of this, you know, this is the reason I’m you know, I’m upset and why I’m making a big deal out of nothing, basically. And that goes you know, not just for my wife but you know, I’ve had to have a sit down with my boss and say, you know, this is why you know, there are certain things that you know that that I may be difficult to deal with on but this is why, you know, like accountability. I have a huge I can’t stand lack of accountability.

And part of that may stem from the Marine Corps of the lifestyle that there and then I think part of it too is I’ve been through the gauntlet, I’ve run the gauntlet and I came out you know, waving the flag. So I don’t not so much empathy as much as it is when I see something, that can be done more efficiently and more effectively. It’s kind of like you know it gets me you know, to the point where sometimes I might take it too far

Bill 33:11
Yeah, I’m similar I had a property I still have a property maintenance business so

we, you know need to be efficient because time is of the essence you know, we only allow for a certain amount of time to get a job done so delays and all that kind of stuff cost money and lose money and all that type of thing and

I think that experience has brought me into if we can get something done today let's do it now so that we don't have to do it tomorrow. That's kind of my mentality and then I think that went next level when I realized that my energy levels to get things done ran out at some point during the day and while I've got energy if it's possible to get that task done, I'll get it done then. So then the end of the day when I'm tired, there are no tasks to do.

Right? And the dishes. It's an interesting one that you brought up.

Travis 34:09
It's just one little thing that it just adds to what, like you said, You know, I know what I have to get done in a day and adds to like if I see that I know it needs to get done. I make myself do it, you know, so and it's just weird peace of mind that I have to have. I know it's interesting,

Bill 34:29
It so is right? So I'm one guy in a family of four people very comfortable with having dishes in the sink

My kids they're teenagers, they're 22 and 18 now, but the last thing on their minds is doing a dish or putting it aside or whatever. And that is a really difficult conversation for me and I come home from work now. And if they've been at home all day and there are dishes in the sink and now they haven't done anything to prepare for dinner. And because my wife gets home way after me with regards to dinner and I've got to clean up before I do the dinner tasks, it becomes a real drama.

It becomes a massive drama and I and I become rude and obnoxious and mean and all sorts of things. And only recently I've been able to bring myself back from the brink of you know craziness and speak to the boys and say listen, blokes, you know, like these are my issues. This is what I need to be done. If you guys get that done, I'll do the rest. But you know, I don't want to be doing 30 minutes of cleaning before I have to prepare dinner. Because that means that dinner finishes way too late. And that means that I didn't get to sit down and rest, It means I go to bed. Being overtired means I don't sleep properly and then I wake up feeling

terrible.

Travis 35:09
Oh yeah.

Bill 35:50
So and then and then the cycle begins so I get where you're coming from, these poor people

Unknown 36:01
Yeah,

Coordination problems after post-traumatic stress and stroke

Travis 36:02
Yeah, exactly. Yeah, I think it really took on that, that mentality, I think really took on a whole new level. Five years ago I started having some really bad problems with coordination and vertigo started coming back really bad. I still, I still get vertigo a lot these days. But, uh, went to the doctor, they did an MRI. It intrigued them. So they called me back they did an angiogram and they found out that my basal artery is completely obstructed. So as as of now I only get blood flow to my brain from my carotid arteries. My basal artery in the back there is completely clogged. They don't want to give me TPA because they're afraid that if they give me a clot buster it'll cause several mini-strokes and being that it's in the area that controls you know, swallowing and breathing they don't really want to mess with that so that that's kind of the run down this that I get sometimes, you know, I do get on down faster but it seems like and maybe that's why I work out as much as I do is to keep my circulation at you know at the level that it is now and to keep myself in the shape that I am to where I actually have energy to do stuff.

so kind of a scare about five years ago but you know, like I said, since I've done a half marathon and you know I weight train, I haven't really changed my life too much I had to quit doing MMA I had to stop training Jiu Jitsu basically stopped doing anything that could obstruct the carotid artery. So change, life's changed a little bit, but I think I'm still trying to make the most of it. Yeah, definitely. Yeah.

Bill 37:45

Tell me about nutrition. Has that been something that you've looked into and made any changes to what do you do differently there?

Travis 37:53
I have toyed around I did the Paleo diet for a while I felt great but it wasn't like knocking your socks off. I had so much more energy. I found that over time I watch what I eat. I try to eat clean, usually no fast food. I think I might have fast food two, three times a year. But, you know, I try to watch what I eat. I try to watch my intake. I you know, I've since I've had the circulation problems that I've been having recently and everything, I've quit drinking beer, you know, I'll have a glass of wine here, there, but nothing major in diet, you know, just dial it back within reason and portion control that's about it.

Bill 38:41
Yeah, that sounds similar on a drink anymore. It feels really bad when I drink I feel you know, I feel drunk extremely quickly. And yeah, the first drink is enough and the second drink is not worth it. You know,

Travis 38:57
Right.

Bill 38:58
How has that been difficult, how's that been different for you in social environments? Because I know for me it's weird there are certain people that won't go out with me anymore because I will go to a bar with them and I'll have mineral water or sparkling water or something and they can't comprehend the whole thing and there's a lot of pressure for me to continue drinking, Aren't you going to drink What are you going to have you have to have something.

Travis 39:32
right

Bill 39:33
It's like I could and I had and I and I'd love to but I can't it doesn't feel good. You know, it feels really bad afterward. Has that affected your relationships have you seen the difference? I certainly have

Travis 39:48
I think Yeah, yeah, I definitely have but I think with me, I keep my my circle very

small given everything that I've been through. So, you know, I've only got maybe a handful of friends that that I would go out with and stuff and you know I'll have a drink or two and I think that mainly most of my friends know what I've been through, and know the history and everything so I don't get it that much but occasionally I get you to know why don't you come out as I usually don't go out and I'm a kind of a homebody I when i get off work, I come home, I train for a couple hours and then you know, relax for a little bit and go to bed and do it again. So that's, that's unfortunately that's about the extent of my social circle.

Bill 40:41
Yeah, I don't think it's unfortunate. I think it just is what it is. You need to take yourself you need to be first you need to, you know, put yourself first and you need to make sure that what you're doing is helping you with your longevity helping you with getting up in the morning and going to work and you know, providing and doing that efficiently so your boss doesn't say get out of here, you know and that's the thing with it. That's what it is with me. You know, the extent of our social experiences is, you know, done during the day, the majority is done during the day.

It's very rare that we go out really late at night because no matter what happens, and how late I go to bed, I can stay asleep. And at 6 or 7.30 in the morning when the sun comes up, I'm up. So if I get to bed at two or three in the morning, I'm definitely going to be up at 6.30 or 7 in the morning. And that's not enough hours for me when I was, before the stroke. That was not enough hours for me to sleep, you know, and now Well, certainly not in that regard. That's

Travis 41:45
Yeah, especially now

Bill 41:47
you know, my balance gets affected, and my leg stops working properly. You know, my arm starts to hurt and I feel I feel safe on my feet. You know, let alone do any physical tasks that involve ladders or any of that type of stuff so, what type of work do you do?

Travis 42:06
I work for the government work for the Department of Navy on the civilian side so it a very reading intensive it wouldn't have me to come into work slowly and

sometimes you know if I go out you know before when I would go out and maybe tie one on you know and have a hangover the next day I would be slow mentally the next couple days so it was like this stasis that you know it took a while for my body to come back to you know stasis to where I could actually live normally you know without because if I get tired and I get cranky and if I get cranky I rely on the anger and then out comes angry Travis and you know, it's just a vicious circle.

Bill 42:54
familiar? Very familiar. So I find that some days, you know when I'm doing a lot of computer work, it's really difficult for me to stay focused. Can I get a lot more exhausted? Did you find that when you went to work in this capacity? Did you find that your tolerance started to grow? Did you go from being able to do only a small amount of that type of work to it getting better and better? How did that pan out for you?

Travis 43:26
Yeah, in the beginning, I think directly after I had the stroke, I didn't want to slow down, on the path that I had pre-stroke I had, you know, I was three years out of the Marine Corps. I was in college at the time and I was taking a fast track to get my bachelor's degree. So it was and I remember going back to school while I was in a wheelchair and I couldn't think, I mean growing up I had arguably a photographic memory. I could sit down and read 50 terms and definitions in a matter of 15 minutes and no them verbatim backward and forwards you know it was school was very easy for me growing up.

Post-stroke not so much it was very you know, a lot of frustration and then there we go again I get frustrated I get angry. I know I've had some professors looking at me in class wondering why I'm passing out a test

The difficulty with numbers

Bill 44:40
Yeah, so you would you're the type of person that was able to really pick things up at school quite well your studies were okay, etc. Now what part of it? So for me, numbers are the real issue, you know, looking at spreadsheets and all that kind of stuff really just fries my brain, and almost immediately when somebody tries to explain, I've got a friend of mine who tried to explain to me this real in-depth

concept on a spreadsheet, you know how to get the formulas to work and all that kind of stuff. And he's really good at it. And he's tried to explain that explain it to me. And I got to the point where I was like, Dude I'm done. I'm not interested in listening to you talk about this stuff.

I don't care how important it is. It is just not ever something that I want to sit and listen to. You don't understand my brain is physically hurting when you start speaking about numbers. Where are you? Where are you sort of out with numbers and what are the things that you're struggling with?

Travis 45:40
Fortunately, unfortunately, how you depending on how you look at it, my job is very numbers intensive. So I'm usually okay with it's the concepts when someone's trying to explain a concept that if I can't grasp it, mentally, it it's not like it sinks in and I had that aha moment like oh, I get it. It's, it's not going to kick in it just like a block there. You know, like a door that doesn't open they just not going to get through.

Bill 46:08
Yeah.

Travis 46:09
So there's an you know, then we go again frustration, anger and then so it, I guess, it's definitely there 10, being 10 years outside of stroke, I tried to have these dealing mechanisms, mechanisms to let me deal with it go to a quiet, quiet place, you know, try to block everything out something that I've become better at is being able to block out everything that's going on around me to focus in on what's going on right like you'd be talking to me and I wouldn't hear you I'm you know, trying to to comprehend something when I try when I apply myself it's usually like everything around it goes away.

Bill 46:52
Yeah, I love what you're saying. That's a really good point. So you know, we hear about quiet rooms and people going into you know, there's a whole world now about, you know, going into quiet rooms where there's no external noise, etc. And in one of my earlier episodes, I interviewed a doctor, Dr. Michael Merzenich you know. who's one of the leading guys in the field of neuroplasticity and the brain changing and, you know, creating new structures for tasks that were lost because

of stroke or some other neurological condition. And in one of his presentations, and I'm pretty sure one of the books he talks about how noise actual, just noise in the environment cars going past, etc can be, can cause interference and the ability for people to learn.

And they did a study wherein a school I'm pretty sure it was somewhere in the US that the children that were near the windows which were the closest to the road we're not as intellectually advanced as the ones that were on the other side of the room, which was a way from, from the noise of the road. So they call it white noise, and that white noise interferes, with the creation of new structures just simply because it gets in the way. Just at the key moment where where learning is about to happen and about them these structures are about to, you know, take hold noise gets in the way and causes an interference just like it would if somebody was talking to you right now. You wouldn't hear some of those things and you wouldn't be able to make the connection. The same thing happened there. So what you're describing sounds now like noise is something a little bit that you're more sensitive too

Travis 48:52
Definitely, definitely, it is yes, I think it's difficult sometimes, and because I may come across as a daydream or someone you know something like that it's not that's not necessarily what's going on you know I can be thinking like thinking in my head and I block out you know not necessarily daydreaming I can have the task on hand but I can block everything else out.

Travis 49:25
It's weird that nobody can see it and it's hard to vocalize I guess and it's weird that nobody really sees that and you hit on it and one of your podcasts that I listened to that event like an invisible disability that I even when I do sporting events, I look normal. I look, you know, like this beefy guy out there who could do you know hold his own but what it all boils down to it, you know, unless I have my AFO on when I run, I get this tone problem in my leg to where, I don't know if you've had to, like, electrolysis before and the doctor tells you, oh, let me know when you feel pain and then they stop it. So that's kind of what it's like. It's like it doesn't hurt. Sometimes it does. But it usually doesn't hurt. It's just like my leg is locked in a certain way. So I can't run. So I end up tripping on myself and falling over. And I don't know why I got on to that point. But

Bill 50:28
you're talking about interference and in then yeah you were talking about the interference and being able to explain it's very difficult to explain its the invisible disability

Travis 50:42
that I that's a lot of people who either don't want to listen, either will not listen, don't want to listen, there are those people out there that will and it's getting to the point that I should have been talking about this a long time ago talking to people about this. And it would be easier than it is now. I mean, it's hard just for me to voice it to you right now. Because I can't come up with the words, you know, to explain it, or I lose my train of thought and trying to do that. So I'm glad that I'm talking about it now, you know, and I'm glad that I'll be talking about it, you know, in the future. So, and, you know, I thank you for, you know, reaching out and saying, Hey, you know, let's set something up.

Bill 51:24
Yeah, well, you're doing a really good job of explaining it. Even when you don't have the words that's the perfect way to describe it. Because when we get stuck, that's it. That's an example of where we go wrong. You know, where things don't happen for us, so I get it yeah look. I think the invisible illness for me is a daily issue, the invisible disability, my wife and your lovely wife, no matter how much you describe something to them, they just don't get it, and it's because they haven't been through a difficult experience like that. And you know what, you never want them to go through a difficult experience just to know how you feel or what it's like, you know, so, you know, you kind of

you cop it on the chin, you know, it is how I say it you just copy it, it's what it is, they're not going to know. So I think that's, you know when I talked to some of my wiser friends and when I say wiser, wiser with regards to emotional intelligence when I talked to that kind of people they tell me bill you to know, you're being given this experience so that you can become better for it, better not as a person, not better compared to the other guy but that I learned from it and understand that you know what, it's not about me, this is what this whole thing is not about me.

It's definitely about my experience, but my wife not understanding that it's not about me to get emotionally upset with that and it's about me to learn how to

accept the fact that she doesn't understand that right? Because that's where the lesson is for me. It's and it's letting go of that little control bit, which is the part where she must understand. She needs to understand that it's important that you understand now that's all rubbish. It's no need for her to understand me because I heard understand mission is to go through a difficult time and I don't want that. I don't want that for anybody. So yeah, yeah. So then it's what do I need to do?

Who do I need to become to become comfortable with the fact that those people don't understand send them love and, and compassion and send them all positive vibes so that they're okay with not understanding me because they're also I imagined struggling at times because they don't understand me and it's difficult for them. So now we find these two people I desperately want them to understand me. They really want to understand me. We can't get to that middle ground. We both just got to grow and accept it and go, you know what, something we are not meant to understand.

Travis 54:10
Definitely, I think I was sometimes I, attain it to the fact that it's almost like we're speaking different languages, we're trying to carry on a conversation, but we're speaking different languages. And it's, it's wanting to learn that other language, you know, both parties, you know, needing to learn and wanting to learn that other language so that they they can comprehend and understand each other what no one's going through. So but getting you know, getting there is hard.

Bill 54:43
That's a perfect analogy, and the international language the not the international one, the universal language is love, right?

Travis 54:56
Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

So if we can just, you know, in that time, we don't understand what each other is saying if the different country you got no idea what the other person is saying to you, but they tried to help you and you asking for directions and then you realize that I didn't know what the heck they're on about they realize you don't know what the heck you're on about the best thing to do you give them a high five give them a hug, say thanks, smile and they understand that you know,

Bill 55:19

that’s enough. That’s enough. We don’t need to get the other path. So look, I get it I know where you’re coming from. And I’m also wondering, you know, what have you done to help yourself mentally? Have you been and seen a psychologist have you done counseling Have you gone to therapy groups, What have you done other than try to get through this by now starting to be open about it and starting to share about it

Travis 55:45
To be honest and candid is not enough. I have spoken to, you know, some psychologists and that helps. But there’s, there’s that you know, at the time that I was doing that there was that that marine voice in the back of my head that that that childhood up, bring a voice in the back of my head of what are you doing, talking about your problems? you know, and, but I understand now, that’s what I need to do. And what I’ve done since then, as you know, I’m here now speaking with you and I, and as well as, you know, I, I,

I’ve tried to inject myself in the stroke community, and the stroke survivor community recently, where, you know, before I looked at it, as, this is my problem, I don’t need to talk to other people about it, I’ll get over it on my own. And it’s, you might be able to do that. But I wouldn’t recommend it to anyone, because I know what hell I’m in now, at times, and it’s no one wants to be there. And no one wants to be where I’m at sometimes, and

I will continue, to seek, you know, conversations and, and, and, and, and opportunities like this, too, to be able to talk about it. Because, like you said, you know, talking about is, is, you know, is half the battle, you know, to to the road to mental recovery. So, and, you know, I’ll gladly accept some pointers on what today was serious, because, you know, like I said, I haven’t been doing enough.

Proving yourself despite post-traumatic stress and stroke

Bill 57:23
Yeah, so you know what I did, then I'm a bit of a problem solver. I'm not sure what your personality is, like, I know your personality is to immerse yourself into tough experiences, and all that kind of stuff, just by the sound of, you know, potentially your upbringing, you are alone at 15. So, you know, there's a lot of at 15 you know, in those formative years, there's a lot of, well, you know, let's just get through this, let's just find out what life's about. Let's just, overcome all this stuff.

And it sounds like you took the hard path in that you chose the most difficult ways to prove yourself. You know, MMA is certainly one of those things, Do you know why somebody wants to get in the ring and get belted by somebody else I don't get it, but you know it, I get it. So I was always the kind of guy, who would try and find the easiest solution to my problem. The one that took the less effort made, you know, cost me the least and hurt the least so.

So when I experienced my first bleed and was released from the hospital seven days later, the second So, so literally 14 days after I was admitted to the hospital, I was in a counselor's office. And we had this real massive conversation that was just literally about oh, my God, like, I'm not bulletproof. I had this thing that happened to me I could die, I could leave my kids behind. I'm only 37 and all this weird stuff that I never ever thought I would have a conversation about.

And I think that got me onto a really good path early to not have any of that stuff still with me seven years later. So that really early trauma got dealt with really quickly. And I didn't realize I was doing this, it's just what I was doing. And then

as I got to the next episode, which was six weeks later, which was really dramatic. I couldn't remember my wife, I didn't know she was, you know, I couldn't type an email, I couldn't do all sorts of things drive all sorts of things.

The only thing that was constant in my life was counseling. So again, the trauma that I experienced, then isn't with me here now, seven years later, he was left in the past to deal with them. And it may have taken two or three sessions or more to deal with that particular trauma. But at least now, I'm not dealing with a whole bunch of traumas, all at the same time. And now I don't know where to start,

Travis 1:00:09
right.

Bill 1:00:09
And often, the challenge that people face when they get when they experienced overwhelm is dealing with a lifetime of trauma in one city. And if you haven't got a really good counselor that understands that they're dealing with a complex set of traumas, then what they could do is you could go to counseling and feel worse when you leave. And this was one of the challenges that I really didn't want to experience didn't want to go there and harp on all the problems and then leave and go.

I feel a lot worse what I found was the counselor who was able to coach me out of myself, coach me away from being myself the self that was causing my discomfort and she had to first make me aware that maybe Bill you're the guy that actually causing yourself all this grief, and the sink full of dishes is not the issue and, and the cat litter not being empty is not the issue. It's maybe it's you and I remember her asking me this really amazing question. And I was complaining about my brother and my parents, my wife, everybody. And then she just said to me, just quietly said to me, if you think is there any possibility that if all these people have the same thing in common with you, maybe you're the problem?

Travis 1:01:51
it's, it's very interesting and honestly, Bill to tell you the truth when I did go to try to talk to someone about it, I was guarded I didn't it was almost like a maybe not a fear of judgment, but I didn't want to be judged. So I didn't want to say what was driving certain behaviors. I didn't want to say what I the fact that I didn't want to talk about certain things about the stroke there there's something rather

personal about having a grown adult have to wipe your backside.

There’s something personal about not you know, being told you can’t drive anymore when you know you’ve driven for the last 14 years having your driver’s license taken away. I felt almost like less of a person if I did try to talk about it I would feel like less of a person and that was. You’re right. It was me but I was the one that because I was guarded I wasn’t being honest to you know, the counselor and I wasn’t being honest to myself and you know, as I said, That’s why my mental recovery really hasn’t got past you know, stage two it’s been lacking.

How to manage post-traumatic stress and stroke

Bill 1:03:15
Yeah, look, it’s a recovery from everything is not you know, this, if it was just do this and do that and then get to the end, then you’ll great. It’s so not there, but I think I think recovery from stroke is what, what, for me worked, what eases the mental state is when I connect to my heart, When I connect to my heart, as difficult as that is. And as much as my identity gets challenged. And I’ve got to do a bit of tearing up and what I call sooking, what happens is, as my identity enables me to become a more emotional, emotionally intelligent person, by crying, expressing, and being all that, that the mental fog in my head just seems to dissipate.

The solution is not in the head, we can’t solve these problems with the head. Because a doctor can solve our problems with the head, all they can do is plug the hole or clear the blockage and get us home. So that as far as the mental capacity to keep us alive, goes in the medical field in any field. But then in becoming a different version of yourself it happens at the heart because that’s where you start to notice, well I’m passionate about this passion doesn’t happen in the head.

You know, when you love somebody doesn’t happen in your legs. It happens in your heart. So if you start to love yourself that, the version of who you are now then you start to get fewer bullshit stories in your head about why your self-worth is this and why you’re not a man, and why you don’t have independence, and why you’re lost and all those things.

So I think I don't have advice to give you but I'm just saying that, you know, my experience and anyone who's listening and watching is that the healing at the heart space just makes the mind quieter. And when the minds quieter.

Travis 1:05:26
Amen. Amen.

Bill 1:05:28
The depression goes away. And when the depression goes away, everything comes back and you just yourself. So you know, you are doing a lot of the right things you're doing exercise, it's shown that it's an antidote for you know, terrible thoughts and bad feelings. And you're watching what you eat, you know, you decrease the amount of alcohol that you drink.

And with stroke, if I could be so brash, and to say, you know, anyone who's had a stroke should never drink again, you know, I don't exactly do that. But that's what I think maybe it should be. But let's not be that dramatic. But what I'm saying to you is, you're already doing a lot of amazing things that you've already supported yourself. And the fact that you've done that and you mentioned that at the beginning that you've taken after you've looked after the physical body I feel like that's what was really important for you

Travis 1:06:20
right,

Bill 1:06:20
because if you didn't do that, I didn't think that your mental state would be better I think it would have been worse so now you're at this stage where you've had an amazing awareness, and some of us guys are so thick that we don't have the awareness to notice that there is another part of the picture that we're not seeing yet. You have just had that you're seeing it now and now you're in the most useful part of your recovery because you've seen the next part if we don't know, what we don't know how can we fix that?

Now you know what you didn't know a little while ago and now you can work towards fixing and all you're going to do is take the first next step you don't have to take all the steps at once just take the first one what's the first next step? Whatever it is for you one little thing that gets the next step going in the direction of you know you're recovering healing and if we take little steps instead of trying

to take massive steps then we get there it's no different to you get into finally enrolling for a full marathon, that you didn't get there by enrolling in that straight away.

Travis 1:07:37
Right. I look at I you know, I look at it as a kind of like dominoes that the next the end dominoes not going to fall unless the first domino hits the second Domino and it's just one thing after another has the you know, everything has to be lined up. But once everything is lined up, it's just, you know, it goes you know, and I, you know, I really do appreciate this opportunity. Because, you know, in a sense, you are giving me advice and I am accepting it as advice that this is what needs to happen. You know, I have I haven't paid attention to my mental recovery. But this is the, you know, the first step is just talking about it, being honest with myself, and being candid about it.

Yeah,

Bill 1:08:21
I would encourage other people to get in touch with you as well. If somebody's listening and watching wants to get in touch with you. And there was a website, where could they go in and read a little bit about your blog

Taking care of mental well-being with post-traumatic stress and stroke

Travis 1:08:34
I haven't, I've been lacking. And I started an Instagram account just for my fitness. And, you know, and being a stroke survivor, I haven't really paid much attention to it. I need to beef it up. And I don't really have a blog out there and kind of a, you know, an everyday guy that had a really bad something really bad happened to him 10 years ago, and I've been pushing to get it going. But if someone wants to reach out to me, please, traviscowcert@gmail. com or look at me on Instagram hit me up, or direct message me @vikingrider619 so that those are those about the news, I guess

Bill 1:09:19
That's perfect man. That's all it needs to be just in case. You know, somebody

might have it might relate to the might be other former Marines going through something similar, you know, veterans, you know, and I think that you know, you're in a unique position to be able to support people that are like you that relate to you. And, you know, I started this podcast and I called it the transit lounge podcast.

The idea came to me because I was in transit in what they call the transit lounge, in the hospital, going to rehab and I've always been really interested I'm in transit I'm not gonna I'm not going on a holiday or vacation I'm going to rehab. And I started talking about all sorts of recovery people for recovering from anything that was dramatic in life, you know, cancer and multiple sclerosis, what have you. But I never really got any traction, nobody really stepped out and went out of their way to contact me and say, Well, thanks for that. That was amazing, etc.

As soon as I changed the name of the podcast, to Recovery after Stroke podcast, well you can imagine the difference now is huge. Because the people that are responding to me are the same as me, they've been through what I've been through, and we can relate to each other, and we can make each other feel better. And that's why I think it's important, you know if anyone out there is gone through something similar, they're a Marine, whatever, or didn't make it into.

Their first tour because of an injury, you guys can relate to each other, and you'll be able to support each other and find common ground and that's what we need. We need to find common ground instead of trying to express ourselves to people who don't get us there was one of the things that frustrated me the most is trying to go to somebody and say, you know, this is what I'm feeling what I'm experiencing, or what I want to achieve in life.

And they go well, you can't do that, you know, you've had a stroke they probably can't do that because they weren't stroke survivors and they didn't understand. Who I should have been speaking to was stroke survivors. And so how can I do this how can I achieve this you did a beautifully you know, with the bike ride, you found a solution you couldn't use a two-wheel bike so you got a hand-wheeled bike, perfect.

So look man, thanks for being so brave and contacting me and approaching me, thanks for being so brave and committing to this episode and you know sharing yourself and being vulnerable I really appreciate it and I think you're going to

make a massive difference to a lot of other people just because they are listening or watching and then what you'll find is while helping other people this is going to help you, it's going to help you in your relationship with your wife, it's going to help you in your relationship with other people and it starts from these little steps so you know often the those first few steps are the hardest then you've taken it now man there's no looking back now

Travis 1:12:24
Again you know I appreciate the opportunity I appreciate the advice it's well taken I set it in my calendar as one of my to do is to get involved with recovery after stroke signing up and everything and continuing you know, maybe our conversations and in the future we can have more and maybe I can help you know others on that on the on in similar situations.

Bill 1:12:50
you will make you will on that note might all the best and I look forward to keeping in touch with you in the future.

Intro 1:13:00
Discover how to support your recovery after a stroke. Go to recoveryafterstroke.com.