

Stroke During Yoga | Abigail Atkinson

Abigail Atkinson was teaching yoga when she started to notice the symptoms of a vertebral artery dissection that caused a stroke.

Website

Instagram: Adaptive Yoga Utah

Instagram: Well With Abigail

Adaptive Yoga Offerings

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Having a disciplined yoga practice for as long as I did helped me, I already was in the habit of sticking to a daily discipline. So I follow through on my physical and occupational therapy. I found that when I did what I call little yoga snacks, I would take the yoga snacks where I would do some of my therapy stuff.

Abigail Atkinson 0:24

And I would go for like five or 10 minutes and then rest and then I would do that several times a day. So I focused on frequency more than just a big long duration. When I kind of switched to that strategy I've made significantly faster improvements. But part of that was showing up every single day and working hard.

Intro 0:48

This is the Recovery after Stroke podcast. With Bill Gasiamis, helping you navigate recovery after stroke.

Bill Gasiamis 1:02

Hello, and welcome to the Recovery after Stroke Podcast. I'm putting the final touches on my book and have made the first chapter available for free for anyone curious to check it out and wants to grab a copy.

Bill Gasiamis 1:15

If you go to recoveryafterstroke.com/book and fill out the form, you will receive the free chapter in your email a few moments later. The book is called The Unexpected Way That A Stroke Became The Best Thing That Happened.

Bill Gasiamis 1:29

I am coming to the end of this project which started as a concept four years ago. So go to recoveryafterstroke.com/book and grab your PDF of the first chapter free today. If you are a stroke survivor with a story to share about your experience. Now is the perfect time to join me on the show. The interviews are not scripted, you do not have to plan for them.

Bill Gasiamis 1:51

All you need to do to qualify is be a stroke survivor who wants to share your story in the hope that it will help somebody else who's going through something similar. If you're a researcher who wants to share the findings of a recent study, or you're looking to recruit people into studies, you may also wish to reach out and be a guest on my show.

Bill Gasiamis 2:12

If you have a commercial product that you would like to promote that is related to supporting stroke survivors to recover. There is also a path for you to join me as a sponsored guest of the show. Just go to recoveryafterstroke.com/contact, and fill out the contact form explaining briefly which category you belong to.

Introduction - Abigail Atkinson



Bill Gasiamis 2:33

And I will respond with more details about how we can connect via Zoom. This is episode 271. And my guest today is Abigail Atkinson, who experienced a stroke while at yoga, aged 35. A few days after a chiropractic adjustment. Abigail Atkinson, welcome to the podcast.

Abigail Atkinson 2:52

Thank you so much. Great to be here.

Bill Gasiamis 2:55

Yeah, thank you for being here. Thank you for reaching out. Tell me a little bit about what happened to you.

Abigail Atkinson 3:01

I had a stroke on January 25, 2012. I was actually in the middle of teaching a yoga class where I was working at the time I was working at ancestry.com and had just started teaching yoga. And right about halfway through the class, I started to feel sick.

Abigail Atkinson 3:20

And I remember feeling like I was getting laryngitis feeling hot, and opening the door going and opening the door to cool it off. And then I just started feeling sicker and sicker. I started to get a terrible pain in my neck.

Abigail Atkinson 3:37

And my right side started to feel numb. I realized that I was significantly sick. So I talked the students down to Shavasana. That's the final relaxation posture in a yoga class. So I talked them down. Once they were down, I went and sat down, leaned up against the wall, and kind of just waited for it to pass thinking that I was just having a moment and it didn't pass the pain in my neck became excruciating.

Abigail Atkinson 4:14

And I was no longer able to get up. So I crawled over to one of the employees. And he helped me out of the room. Fortunately, we were right across the hall from the facilities room at the office. And they called 911.

Abigail Atkinson 4:33

And it was interesting as I was sitting there in that room waiting for the ambulance to arrive. It was looking dead on at a poster that was saying look for the signs of stroke. So I was like, Oh, my gosh, I'm having a I think I'm having a stroke.

Knowing when to follow your instincts

Abigail Atkinson 4:49

There are so many parts of the story and I'm sure I'm not going to tell it to you in chronological order, but ultimately the EMT did arrive on the scene, and I was young at the time, my stroke happened almost 12 years ago, he examined me and said, I think you have vertigo.

Abigail Atkinson 5:15

So I recommend you go lie down and rest for a couple of hours. If you still feel sick, you know, go see your doctor, my wife had vertigo a couple of weeks ago. So that's probably what this is. And before, you know, there was like 10 or 15 minutes before the ambulance came.

Abigail Atkinson 5:32

And I was having difficulty just sitting in a chair, I was like, falling out of the chair, I was throwing up. I had this horrible, awful pain in my neck. It was very dizzy. And I thought that I was dying. I had a moment where I was saying goodbye to my children, I was like talking to God to take care of my children.

Abigail Atkinson 5:53

I was like, this is it, I think I'm dying. It's very surreal to think that you're dying. So when the EMT told me to rest I was "What?" I had a choice to make to either listen to the medical authority, which were taught to do, or to listen to myself. And I felt pretty strongly I needed to go to the hospital.

Abigail Atkinson 6:16

So I made him take me to the hospital. And he did, didn't use his sirens or anything like that he kind of just moseyed to the hospital, which, fortunately, wasn't that far away. So I luckily got to the hospital, within the first hour of the onset of symptoms.

Abigail Atkinson 6:34

And the neurologist at the ER could tell immediately that I was having a stroke, even before I had a CT. And of course, they gave me a CT, they found a tear on the inside lining of my right vertebral artery, the blood had clotted to heal that tear.

Abigail Atkinson 6:53

And that's what caused my stroke. So I just always tell that first part of the story because, if I had listened to the EMT, and not gone to the hospital, my deficits probably would have been far greater. Maybe I wouldn't have ever made it to the hospital, maybe that would have been the end of my life.

Abigail Atkinson 7:16

So even if I had been wrong, you know, even if I hadn't been having a stroke, I think it's important that we learn how to listen to our bodies that we trust ourselves. You know, because if I hadn't made them take me to the hospital, even more than what I might have faced having a stroke was what would have happened to my self-trust, there would have been a huge thing in it.

Abigail Atkinson 7:49

So that's just really an important part of what saved my life and what made my experience what it is. And so, no matter what, if you think you're having a stroke or something's wrong, listen to yourself, go to the hospital get help, no matter what anybody says.

Bill Gasiamis 8:06

Yeah, how old were you?

Abigail Atkinson 8:09

35 years old. Yeah. And so that was certainly part of it. For the EMT, I was very young. My stroke was caused by a neck injury. I had had a chiropractic adjustment four days prior, which was very painful. And I had been having headaches leading up to the stroke.

Abigail Atkinson 8:30

I had been taking large quantities of ibuprofen to kind of get through those headaches. And it was on the day that I that I said, I can't keep I can't keep taking this medicine. I'm not going to take anything today. That was the day that I had the stroke.

Bill Gasiamis 8:45

Yeah. So did the blood clot break off after it had formed? And causing ischemic stroke? Or did it close the deductive form and therefore decrease the size of the blood being able to pass through the artery?

Abigail Atkinson 9:05

I think it was the second option. Because the stroke happened near my brainstem and at my cerebellum. So I don't know if it broke off or not. I don't, I don't know. That's a great question.

Bill Gasiamis 9:22

It sounds like it would have, a lot of medical background and I know all of your situation. So my conclusion. And maybe you'll concur or not, is that it sounds like if it was a vertebral artery dissection, and it happened near your brainstem, then perhaps something broke off and moved up and then caused a blockage a little further up with the blood vessels are narrower.

Bill Gasiamis 9:50

And that might have been it. So you've done a couple of things a little differently. Well, If you ask for help, but more importantly, you go against supposedly medical professional advice, where most people do the exact opposite, they don't get help. And they do listen to the medical doctors because that's fair enough most of the time they're correct.

Bill Gasiamis 10:22

And did you have some kind of a sick feeling? A sixth sense? Was it your gut telling you? What was telling you? Or was it completely obvious to you that

something was going wrong? Well, I know there was. But sometimes there's a disconnect with a stroke survivor having a stroke. And because they're having a stroke in their brain, and there's a disconnect between reality, and they can't see the obvious.

The ability to listen to your body - Abigail Atkinson



Abigail Atkinson 10:51

Yeah. Well, I think part of it was that I truly believed I was dying. I was talking to God, and asking him to take care of my children. And I was, like, very, very certain that this was my death. And the other part of it, I think, is I had just started teaching yoga, and I had a yoga practice for over a decade at the time of the stroke, and something.

Abigail Atkinson 11:23

When you practice yoga, you're in a relationship with your body. And we're constantly spreading the message to you know, tune into your body, listen to the messages of your body. And I believe that because I was getting on my mat every day and practicing listening to my body. When something like this happens. I was ready to go ahead and listen to my body. And I'm so grateful for that.

Bill Gasiamis 11:52

So how long did you spend in the hospital? And what were your deficits when you were released?

Abigail Atkinson 11:59

I was in the hospital for a month. I spent a week in the ICU. You know, it's I love that you asked this question because at first, I didn't know what deficits I had other than visual, I had nystagmus, I had constant nystagmus. I had a horizontal shake of my eyes that you could watch that you could see. And so I knew that.

Abigail Atkinson 12:22

Because when my mom came to the hospital, it bothered her. But I was in the ICU. So I was in bed, I was able to talk, and I had fine motor skills. And so aside from vision, I wasn't sure. I was just so grateful to be alive. It wasn't until about four days in when two physical therapists came up to my room. And they were coming to take me on my first walk.

Abigail Atkinson 12:52

And so one, they sent me up in the bed and one gets on either side of me, and they helped me up to a standing position. So I go to take a step, and my right leg does not respond. It was the weirdest feeling to like, one-day practicing yoga, and the next day, I couldn't walk. So I kind of did this little zombie shuffle down the hall with the help of these physical therapists.

Abigail Atkinson 13:20

I mean, I didn't get very far, maybe 10 feet, exhausting how to turn around and come back. And that was the first time I realized I would have some real deficits to work with. So I had large motor skill deficits. And because of the cerebellum, I had a lot of balance issues I've had a lot I still have vestibular issues, lots of vision problems that I've worked on over the years.

Abigail Atkinson 13:46

I did do tests in the hospital because people who have had a stroke whereas I do often can't swallow or deal with difficulty speaking. And that didn't happen for me I met I might have become a little slower spitting out some words. But aside from that, I was pretty much a cog. I passed all the cognitive tests.

Abigail Atkinson 14:10

So in the hospital for about a month, I did do some inpatient rehab in the hospital, physical therapy, and occupational therapy, and I was sent home with a walker so I used a walker for several months. Even after I wasn't using that Walker, I still had a very toxic gait that caused a lot of hip and knee pain, especially when trying to walk at night or over uneven terrain or you know if there's a lot of movement

happening around me anything sort of stimulating my visual field would make just throw me off balance.

Abigail Atkinson 14:50

So it took a lot of work for me to reach my gate. I was very lucky to have access to it. Physical and occupational therapists, even beyond my hospital stay. And I know that a lot of people don't have that. I also had my yoga practice, which, clearly I couldn't do yoga in the same way I had to kind of figure out how am I going to adapt my yoga practice to fit my poststroke body when I can't even stand. I did have my physical therapist come out.

Abigail Atkinson 15:23

And to my house three times a week, I had an occupational therapist come out once a week and I had a nurse come out to check my INR. Remember, my INR levels were kind of all over the place, it took a while. You're like you're the blood thinning, like getting my blood thin enough.

Abigail Atkinson 15:41

So I was on Coumadin for about six months, and even though I didn't have any blood clotting factor, physically very healthy. They still wanted me to be on that while the dissection was healing. So I did do that for six months. So I feel really, like really grateful that I had access to resources to help me in my recovery.

Bill Gasiamis 16:08

I have a sense that it's a little difficult for you to talk about what happened in the past. Did I get that right? Or is it okay for you to chat about what happened in the past?

Abigail Atkinson getting back to yoga after the stroke

Abigail Atkinson 16:19

It's okay for me to chat about it. I have shared a lot. I've shared this story. So many times. And certainly, emotions still come up, you know, when you go back there. And remember, I told you yoga was part of my recovery. I was so determined to get back to my yoga practice while I was at the hospital.

Abigail Atkinson 16:42

I had my sister bring a picture of me in a challenging yoga pose, and hang it up on the wall. So I could just be, motivated to work hard, because those first, those first weeks and months are challenging.

Abigail Atkinson 16:59

For me, brain fatigue was severe, like I had to sleep a lot. I also had nystagmus. So that's akin to feeling like you're on a constant spinning ride. So I was always throwing up. It was it's just your whole world becomes disoriented. When you have something like this happen to you. And I yeah, I'm grateful that I had access to all the things that helped me.

Bill Gasiamis 17:32

Yeah. How did you manage the home situation with the children? How old were they at the time?

Abigail Atkinson 17:38

Okay, so you're gonna love this. I was living in Salt Lake City, Utah at the time. And I had the stroke in Provo, which is like 45 minutes south. And I never went back to my house in Salt Lake City. I moved into my boyfriend's home. And three weeks after I got home from the hospital, we got married, I had a hospital bed proposal, the sweetest thing ever.

Abigail Atkinson 18:04

He had four children, I had three. So we had a lot of kids. And again, super grateful that we had a lot of help. We had a nanny, help us for a long time my mom used to come out I knew because I needed a caretaker for a while after as well. She helped take me around to all the various appointments because they revoked my license in the hospital.

Abigail Atkinson 18:27

And let me tell you what, I'm so grateful for all of the caretakers in my life like being chauffeured around to all It's really hard to lose your freedoms, you know, to not be able to drive yourself anywhere, to have somebody have to go into the bathroom with you when you're using the bathroom. And so it makes you very, like humble, like humble.

Abigail Atkinson 18:51

And for me very grateful, grateful that I had people willing to help care for my well being grateful for my life. Yeah, that's what it was like on the homefront. So

we had helped with the kids, and it was not easy. Like we all had to adapt. And especially it was a new marriage. So we were not just adapting to my situation, but blending a family, which was challenging. We can laugh about it now.

Bill Gasiamis 19:26

Yeah. I mean, you have to laugh about it now because there's no point in doing anything else about it. That's the interesting thing about stroke. I've said it before, but life goes on around you. So life doesn't stop because you had a stroke or because something happened to your leg or whatever it just goes on.

Bill Gasiamis 19:46

And that's often the hardest part people often felt times with conditions I felt like I wished everyone could just pause all of the drama. I wish everyone could pause all of the problems that we had before. and all the things that we need to fix and solve and do because I just need time to myself if I could just go away.

Bill Gasiamis 20:06

And everything else that I had to deal with just wasn't there, I could just work on getting better and resting and then not being too fatigued. And then sleeping as long as I needed and, and doing all that stuff. Of course, that's not possible. But I had lovely periods to myself when the kids went to school and when my wife was at work, and there was no one coming over to visit or do anything.

Bill Gasiamis 20:32

And I could have 3, 4, 5 hours a day where it was just me in my house and the cat. And it was really good, even though then there were often days where I missed all of the other things, which were being able to drive, being able to be independent, getting out and about, and doing the things I needed to do.

Bill Gasiamis 20:54

And then there was a little bit of a situation with my balance as well that there was a fear around, not by me, but by other people, there was a fear around the fact that I might fall over and hurt myself because my walking wasn't perfect. I did not get sent home with a walking frame or anything like that, because I was rehabilitated enough so that I could walk at the end of inpatient therapy.

Bill Gasiamis 21:19

But, I did take a couple of tumbles inside the house, getting up from the couch, not realizing that my left leg was still sleepy. And not being used to the new way

that I had to let it know, so to speak, that I was about to get up. And it needed to hold me up instead of collapse.

The advantage of Abigail Atkinson having years of yoga practice



Bill Gasiamis 21:42

So I took a few tumbles, but it was really lovely to have space and seven kids. Yeah, that's amazing, a lot of space, not a lot of space. That's amazing and I know, you just get through it, and you find a way, I think that your discipline of yoga played a role in your ability to be able to get through all of this stuff.

Bill Gasiamis 22:12

I've got a couple of suspicions as to why and then you might tell me some of your own because I think the ability to do the poses that somebody has practiced, for example, for 10 years in yoga, and to be so Intune. Understanding the movements of the body and the way limbs work, etc, I would say creates a massive additional number of neurological pathways towards movement, balance, strength, and the process of just moving your body.

Bill Gasiamis 22:48

So I feel like people who do yoga or something like that a discipline like that have got an advantage physiologically recently. Man, I'm not sure how long it's been in the last sort of 12 months, not even, maybe nine months since a friend of mine's daughter had an arteriovenous malformation burst in her head, same condition as me almost in the same place.

Bill Gasiamis 23:15

And she was a diver before that. So as she goes through the process of diving, she has to be aware of how her body where in space it is, and how it moves. And, I feel like that's helped her in her recovery because she's had an amazing recovery, although she still suffers from fatigue and all the stuff that all stroke survivors experience.

Bill Gasiamis 23:37

She has deficits in her sensory neurons. And she has some motor neuron challenges. But I feel like one of the best things I could do to encourage them to feel good about the possibility of recovery was her age. She was 17. And also, she was a diver. And I felt like she already had a massive advantage over the majority of just upright standing and walking kind of people. Does that make sense?

Abigail Atkinson 24:10

Yeah, absolutely. And I would agree. First of all, I have to say, I'm so glad you mentioned the whole like needing space and time for yourself because it was challenging and still is sometimes being overstimulated, like it just wears you down. And even now, I appreciate having some alone time, some nonstimulation time.

Abigail Atkinson 24:34

So I relate to that part of it for sure. And I do agree. I think that that having a disciplined yoga practice for as long as I did, helped me helped me in all the ways that you said plus, I already was in the habit of sticking to a daily discipline. So I follow through on my physical and occupational therapy.

Abigail Atkinson 24:59

I found actually that when I did, what I call little yoga snacks, I would take local yoga snacks where I would do some of my therapy stuff. And I would go for like five or 10 minutes and then rest. And then I would do that several times a day. So I focused on frequency more than just a big long duration. When I kind of switched to that strategy, I made significantly faster improvements. So I thought that was kind of interesting. But part of that was, yeah, showing up every single day and working hard.

Intro 25:36

If you've had a stroke, and you're in recovery, you'll know what a scary and

confusing time it can be, you're likely to have a lot of questions going through your mind, like, how long will it take to recover? Will I recover? What things should I avoid? If I make matters worse, and doctors will explain things that, 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.

Intro 26:06

If you're finding yourself in that situation, stop worrying, and head to recoveryafterstroke.com where you can download a guide that will help you 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, but they'll help you take a more active role in your recovery, add to the website now, recoveryafterstroke.com and download the guide. It's free.

Abigail Atkinson 26:39

Even when I felt tired, and certainly that discipline aspect helped me in a yoga posture, you're in the practice of yoga, you're in all sorts of different relationships to gravity. So you have to like it challenges your proprioception.

Abigail Atkinson 26:59

And so I like to think that I had like, stronger neural pathways, even though it felt like all of that just like went out the window when I had the stroke, because like my proprioception I mean, it's still not 100% the same. But I think all those things were an advantage physically for sure.

Bill Gasiamis 27:23

Yeah, proprioception has the same issue. It has deficits and my body doesn't particularly always know exactly where it is in the world. And that's where the balance issue occurs. And I kind of lean to the left and then I keep going and the body has to kind of correct itself and get back into balance and stop me from falling.

Having yoga snacks throughout the day

Bill Gasiamis 27:46

And what I liked about what you said is how much time for example is allocated to

rehabilitation, like physical therapy an hour a day, maybe twice a week or three times a week. How much extra do you think of those little yoga snacks, I love that the word yoga snacks was added to your therapy because I think more therapy more often is going to support how much additional time yoga yoga snacks add.

Abigail Atkinson 28:24

Oh, probably a couple of hours worth. You know, because I would sometimes it was two minutes, five minutes, 10 minutes, and I would just sprinkle it throughout the day all day long. And like I said, when I started doing that I had the most significant improvements with my walk, especially. I remember I had these four-inch high-heeled boots.

Abigail Atkinson 28:51

And I was like, I set myself a goal I'm going to I'm going to be able to walk in these boots again. And I was able to even though now I don't wear heels at all because I know I can like I had to continue to study to improve my gait and I did this year-long biomechanics course, with Katie Bowman.

Abigail Atkinson 29:08

She's a renowned biomechanist in the US and like everything I learned, I was like never wearing high heels again, never, never worked in any shoe that has any sort of elevation in it again. But I mean, I'm so grateful for the physical and occupational therapy, but I have to be honest, too.

Abigail Atkinson 29:28

It wasn't just the frequency. It was also like I went and studied biomechanics and worked on my walking parts worked on my lateral muscles, stretching my calf muscles, rehabilitating my feet doing lots of standing foot massage with balls, you know, waking up those nerve endings. I also did adaptive yoga training with Matthew Sanford.

Abigail Atkinson 29:52

He's kind of the leading pioneer of adaptive yoga in the US. He's a paraplegic. And I started I kept I after I was in December. literally for a year, but I did go back to work after a year teaching yoga, just teaching yoga. I teach lots of adaptive yoga now. And all of that extra study, I think was very helpful for me as well.

Abigail Atkinson 30:14

Because I mean, of course, the physical therapy was helping me with my walk. And the occupational therapist was helping me with a lot of the visual and vestibular stuff. Even though I threw up on my occupational therapist more than once, I feel so bad for her. But these extra modalities made all the difference for me.

The neuro-vision therapy program

Abigail Atkinson 30:34

And I have to tell you this one thing, I just wish everybody knew about this who has a stroke, especially if you have balance or visual issues with your brain injury. That was when I did a neuro-vision therapy program. And it wasn't until eight years post-stroke that I did this program. No doctor ever told me about it. Nobody in the hospital no neurologist I ever saw.

Abigail Atkinson 30:57

Even the ophthalmologist I went to was one of the best in the country at the Moran Center at the University of Utah. Nobody was like, Hey, you might benefit from a neuro-vision therapy program. It was at my stroke support group that a neurooptometrist came and did a presentation on his program. And of course, he was trying to sell this program, but oh my gosh, I was like, everything he said is everything I need right now.

Abigail Atkinson 31:27

It was a six-month program and wasn't easy. My vision significantly improved after I did this, my depth perception increased, and my peripheral vision got so much better. I was able to start hiking without feeling like the mountain was trying to pull me off, I had less anxiety driving.

Abigail Atkinson 31:51

You know, after eight years I had been driving again. And like I was like, why didn't nobody tell me about the sooner? Why did I just randomly come across this? I feel like there's just so many therapies out there. And, you know, beyond physical and occupational and I just wish everybody knew all the options.

Bill Gasiamis 32:11

Who is the person who provided that neuro-vision therapy program?

Abigail Atkinson 32:18

It was Dr. Devin Duvall. And he's in Provo, Utah. six-month program, phenomenal program. Now there's also there's a place called cognitive effects here in Provo as well. People are traveling to from all over the world to come and do an intensive program with them. And I teach yoga there. That's how I know about it. It's only been around since like 2014, I think when it started.

Abigail Atkinson 32:49

So it wasn't available for me back when I had my stroke. Even adaptive yoga wasn't something available to me. I remember going back to my first yoga class and having to take my walker with me. And it was hard. It was lonely. I miss my yoga community. Now, adaptive Yoga is spreading like wildfire.

Abigail Atkinson 33:11

I'm teaching eight adaptive yoga classes a week and I get all sorts of folks. People with Ms. Parkinson's, stroke, TBI, amputees, you know, just I get a wide variety of folks in these classes. And I'm like, Yes, yoga is for everyone. And it can supplement your other recovery efforts, it can complement your physical and occupational therapy. And here's the thing about yoga too, I just want to say this is all of the physical benefits for sure.

Abigail Atkinson 33:44

But when you have a major trauma like this, maybe you can relate you it feels a little bit like you get betrayed by your body, like your body is just suddenly not functioning like it used to, it's a really hard thing to come to terms with. Yoga was something that helped me repair my relationship with my body, strengthen that mind-body connection, and just like feel a hole in the body that I have now post-stroke. You know, it gave me it kind of gave me that space to grieve my, you know, pre-stroke, Abby, and make myself open and available to this new life post-stroke.

Bill Gasiamis 34:29

I don't doubt it. Look, this was weird. Many people will come on the podcast and they will talk to me about grief and their old life and their old stroke body and all that kind of stuff. And I get it. I get it. But I didn't go through it. I've never done yeah, I've never done it. And, weirdly, I've never done it and I don't know maybe I don't have to do it.

Bill Gasiamis 34:54

But my body's different than what it was half of it feels like somebody else's body, and the other half feels like my original body. And I suppose because I'm capable of doing all the things that I was doing before, the important things, I can't play a sport like I used to play or anything like that. But I suppose also because I look, quote-unquote, normal, according to everybody else.

Bill Gasiamis 35:23

I didn't experience that. Why did my body do this? Or why did this happen to me or whatever? And I suppose my condition was something I was born with. So when it bled, I discovered what it was why, why these things bleed, and how they bleed, etc. And, I think I created some of the I created the perfect storm around the bleed so that I wasn't looking after myself, I wasn't doing all the things that I was doing.

Bill Gasiamis 35:56

So all I did was just take responsibility for the stuff that I'd done before that caused the perfect storm to exist. So the bleed can occur and the blood vessel can burst. And then, and then I just moved on with what I needed to do to get better. And I don't focus necessarily on the past, although I forever talk about the past. But I talked about it in context, to the stories that people share on my podcast, and so that we can make a conversation of this whole thing.

Bill Gasiamis 36:31

But I feel like the fact that I've talked about it so much has put it in the past, in a part of my life that's so far away. 2012, as well, it started for me. And, and, I reflect on it as something that happened to me. And I don't reflect on it as something that I'm reliving every day of my life when I talk about it, and I share about it. But I do truly appreciate the fact that there are people who will have to go through the morning phase.

Bill Gasiamis 37:09

And if they haven't done that yet, they will still be stuck in some kind of a weird space of not knowing how to respond to the condition that caused the stroke and then the deficits and how it's changed their life. I did a few extracurricular activities to show you how you found a way to access different parts of your body so that you can rehabilitate and do more therapy, I did visualization and meditation.

Bill Gasiamis 37:46

I found that what the visualization helped me do when I was in my hospital bed waiting to go to physical therapy for the first time, I imagined myself walking, and I would see myself walking down the corridor of the hospital with a perfect gait, imperfect strides, and perfect planting of my foot. So that the neurological pathways that we needed to recreate or wake up, I feel like we needed to both recreate them and wake them up.

Bill Gasiamis 38:18

I gave them something already, like a possibility of what it could be like and if you just know what that looks like, then you can work towards it. And I saw myself doing that. I also used the kind of guy with whom I needed information, the more information about my condition, the better I understand it, the better.

What is the next step?

Bill Gasiamis 38:44

And then once I understand it, I can come to terms with it. And I can feel like I can do the cognitive part of the acceptance, which is our Okay, so I was a guy who was born with this, this thing does that. And then the fact that that did that. Sometimes it causes these things. And now, I've found myself here.

Bill Gasiamis 39:08

Okay, what's the next step I've got to take responsibility for my recovery because the doctors have done what they can. And now it's up to me, it sounds like you're an up-to-you kind of person. It's like, you know, I'm going to take this on, I'm going to do my bit because I've got the skill set.

Bill Gasiamis 39:27

And what I'm also going to do is hopefully lead by example, and show other people how they can still, even though they have deficits and missing a leg or an arm, they can be active members of a community. They can still participate. They can turn up, they can learn, they can grow. They could do all the things that they used to do before in this new body or different body.

Abigail Atkinson 39:55

Yeah, I couldn't say it better myself like you're changed by what happens to you, and to be able to live whole in that body and in that life is something that we all

deserve access to, which is why I really love adaptive yoga and yeah, definitely, with you on taking responsibility and doing more, yeah, to be more, because I was like I said, that mindset is the mind is so powerful, right?

Abigail Atkinson 40:24

I love that you were doing those visualizations. I know that for some people, it's like, hard to get out of bed and hard to do the work. But like, truly believing that you have the capability and that your body and brain want to heal is something that will change the whole experience for you, even if you don't heal all your deficits.

Abigail Atkinson 40:50

And I'm very fortunate, I would say that I'm like, 90%, you know, I saw as I said, I still have some vestibular and some visual stuff, that nobody like you, nobody looking at me could ever tell that I had a stroke. You know, if they didn't know, my history.

The importance of emotional healing



Bill Gasiamis 41:06

And the other thing I wanted to mention about healing was emotional healing is important. You know, I feel like it's overlooked. And mentally, they're both overlooked and people need to go there, and tell me about my healing. I feel like my healing also had another benefit. Before I was 37, before my first blade, I was probably in therapy for about 12 years.

Bill Gasiamis 41:34

So I had dealt with a lot of those things that people grow up with and have to overcome and whatever, in therapy for 12 years. So by the time I got to stroke, I was dealing with stroke stuff, I wasn't dealing with past emotional traumas, and burdens and all that kind of stuff. What was your did you go through an emotional healing as well?

Abigail Atkinson 42:00

I think so, I had already started that path not quite as far along as you were, but I had, like hired health coaches. And, you know, part of that is dealing with emotional well-being as well. So had started that and really, the yoga practice gave me the space to allow me to kind of move emotions through as well to take a look at emotions.

Abigail Atkinson 42:27

, one of the things that surprises me now, but I can see that joining a stroke TBI support group being in support group was huge for my emotional well-being because I feel very alone, it's very hard for your loved ones, and your friends to truly understand what you're going through.

Abigail Atkinson 42:48

Like you said, life is going on all around you and you're like, wait a second here I just had this major stroke my whole world is turned upside down. So going to a stroke support group was just incredible. I made lots of connections with people with all vast kinds of different stories but who could understand where it was coming from?

Abigail Atkinson 43:12

I gained access to resources I wouldn't have found otherwise. You know, I found that a neuro-vision doctor I found was in Adaptive Sports, they took me skiing for the first time when I went skiing. And it just made it I just made it fun. So that was that was huge for me for my emotional well-being. Yeah, I was I was reaching out and having a support group, I still I still go to that support group.

Abigail Atkinson 43:44

And kind of along the lines of what you said about how you've shared your story so many times, it allowed you to put it into the past, I feel the same the more I share my story. It's like each time I share a little part of me like hills. And you

know my life now compared to what it was like before I had the stroke is completely different.

Abigail Atkinson 44:07

I find that even though I would never wish something like this on somebody, I have benefited from the experience. I'm a much more empathetic and compassionate person. I'm a healthier person emotionally. I enjoy life more. It's like when you're faced with a mortal crisis. You see and feel viscerally what's truly important and what just silly things that used to bother you don't matter anymore. And that particular I think mindset also helped me heal emotionally.

Bill Gasiamis 44:47

Yeah, it's benefited me. I mean, the guy before the stroke, didn't do stuff like this didn't talk about emotions, didn't have a podcast, didn't meet people from all around the world didn't coach people didn't encourage people didn't do any of that stuff just went about life. One track, work, work, work. And, you know, more work and angry and unhealthy and eating unwell and just not the right kind of version of myself that was going to sustain me for many, many years to come.

Bill Gasiamis 45:25

It was going to be short-lived, whether it was short-lived, because of the AVM bleeding or because of some other condition. I'm sure I was manifesting other conditions and stuff that weren't going to be useful. I've had so many friends that lived my lifestyle, that are not with us anymore. Because they didn't have a stroke, they had some other condition that, you know, in their 40s were it was enough for their condition to finish them off in their 40s.

Bill Gasiamis 45:57

And I see myself as being that guy. And if it wasn't for this thing that bled in my head, I probably would have continued down that path because I didn't know any better. And that was my circle. That was the people I hung out with. They were great people. We just had habits that we thought were okay when we picked them up in our teens and 20s.

Bill Gasiamis 46:22

And we thought we should just keep going with them for as long as possible. Because once upon a time they served us all. Well, they didn't really but we thought they served us in the we enjoyed, for example, smoking and drinking

excessively and eating unhealthily and it kind of made me grow up. I feel like this stroke made me grow up even at 37. I felt like I was I reflected down and felt like I was naive and nonworldly.

Post-traumatic growth after stroke during yoga

Abigail Atkinson 47:00

Yeah, yeah, I can relate to everything he said, got rid of some unhealthy habits for sure. After there's, you know, you hear of post-traumatic stress disorder, PTSD that people get when they have these traumas happen. And I came across the term post-traumatic growth. And for some of us, yeah, it is the trigger the catalyst that helps us turn our life into something more beautiful, healthier. I mean, look what you're doing, creating this platform for people to share these stories to talk them through and to help inspire and coach people. And yeah, post-traumatic growth is definitely how I would describe my stroke for sure.

Bill Gasiamis 47:45

Yes. So this post-traumatic growth concept came to me as well, probably about five or six years ago, somewhere online, I read about it, someone had written an article or a story about it or a book about it. And I thought, yeah, that relate, I relate to that that relates to me, that's what I've had. And I remember early on in the Podcast, the podcast has been going up, not since about 2017, properly, where I have been interviewing people on and off about different things.

Bill Gasiamis 48:19

And at some stage, I think, before the 100th episode, I was talking to people in the podcast, and we both sort of said, lock strikes the best thing that happened to me. And I thought, well, that's a bit weird. I mean, how could that be? And then you unpack that a little bit, and you start to see similarities in people.

Bill Gasiamis 48:39

I reached out to the people who follow me on Instagram and asked if there were people there who agreed to that. And some of them would say that I haven't been there yet. I haven't got there exactly yet. But there were some benefits, etc. And we're talking about people throughout the stroke spectrum with all the different versions of deficits or not.

Bill Gasiamis 49:00

And then there were at least 12 people who reached out and said, the extracts were the best thing that happened to me as well. So I interviewed them. And that became the pattern that we revealed in all the things that we did that got us to be able to say that stroke was the best thing that happened to us became the basis of the book that I just finished writing that's going to be published in a few months.

Abigail Atkinson 49:27

Oh, cool. I can't wait to see it.

Bill Gasiamis 49:30

Yeah. Right. And, that's the thing about it. I hope that what the title does, which is *The Unexpected Way That A Stroke Became The Best Thing That Happened To Me*. I hope that what it does is jolts people so that they can now get curious about what we just said, what his post-traumatic growth thing and whether am I doing it. Am I in it? Is it happening to me at the moment, or is it still to happen? You know, where where is it? For me, where is what phase of the post-traumatic growth part am I in? And hopefully, what that does is inspire them to go after post-traumatic growth.

Abigail Atkinson 50:11

Yeah, that's so beautifully said, I love all the questions that you asked because it is about getting curious. And you're investigating just like you're investigating your new body and trying to help it heal. You're also investigating your life, your thought patterns, and your choices. And yeah, it gets to be a pivotal moment where you get to turn things around for yourself if you want to. And that's a beautiful thing.

Bill Gasiamis 50:38

Yeah. And you get to turn things around for yourself if you want to. My God, what a comment what a statement. That's so true. Because if you don't want to, you'll get those results, you'll end up having post-traumatic stress disorder, which, you know, might even be something that some people are facing right now. And what they might need is they might need a path out of it.

Bill Gasiamis 51:06

Because a lot of the times when you hear about post-traumatic stress disorder, it's kind of like they're talking about I have, I'm in it, I'm experiencing, I'm living it, it

comes up. But there might be a path out of it. And now maybe you can experience post-traumatic stress disorder, and then, and then grow out of that, and then be able to reflect on your situation. And rather than it triggering you, you're like us remembering it as something that happened in the past. And you're using it to inspire people and share possibilities of recovery and growth and overcoming.

Abigail Atkinson 51:47

Yeah, because it's all there for the taking, like you said if you choose it if you want it. And of course, there are lots of little practices that can help you from sharing your story. I mean, I can't imagine how healing having a podcast and talking to how I don't know what episode you're on, but you're well over 100 how many people.

Bill Gasiamis 52:08

This will be about 271 I think.

Abigail Atkinson 52:10

So amazing. And I know lots of stroke survivors if you want more people to talk to you.

Bill Gasiamis 52:17

Well, yeah, I encourage people at the beginning of every podcast episode is the invitation. If you've had a stroke, you want to share a story in the hope that it will help somebody, inspire somebody, even if it helps you the stroke survivor sharing, get off your chest. That's it, you're qualifying. I don't care what your race or religious background is. I don't care about anything.

Bill Gasiamis 52:39

All you need to do to qualify is be a stroke survivor, care for a stroke survivor, or you're one of the amazing people on the planet that helps stroke survivors. And that's it. You're going to be a guest on my podcast Dr. Devin Duvall. You can give me his details. I'm going to get him on the podcast.

Abigail Atkinson 52:58

Yes, I would love to do that.

Bill Gasiamis 53:01

Because I've never heard of that therapy.

Abigail Atkinson 53:04

Oh my gosh, neither had I and it changed so much for me eight years post-stroke. I was like, people got to hear about this.

Bill Gasiamis 53:15

And I have so many people on the podcast, who experienced the stigmas because of this struggle, visual field loss, and all the things that go along with it. And I feel like this is exactly what I need from my podcast guests.

Bill Gasiamis 53:38

I need their story, their information so that we can disseminate it, and we can get it out there and we can help people get better. That's what I was missing. I don't know what it was like for you in 2012. Was there anything that you came across that was related to stroke recovery in this kind of way?

Lack of stroke support information for Abigail Atkinson



Abigail Atkinson 53:59

No, it was only physical and occupational therapy that was offered to me. That's it. Everything else I found through doing my research, the biomechanics, the adaptive yoga, the neurovision, the balance therapy, I just feel like yeah, this information and the possibilities do need to get disseminated out there.

Abigail Atkinson 54:27

I think that our social media world today helps to spread that knowledge more whereas you know, in 2012 I think Instagram was just barely a thing. So you know, there's a lot more opportunity for thing for things to be shared in this way. But that's why I love that you're doing it so people can feel into you know what might be something that works for them because our body and brain are always malleable till we take our last breath Even almost 12 years post-stroke, I see small improvements.

Abigail Atkinson 55:07

You know, the big improvements happen that those first couple of years, right, and the longer I go out, the more subtle those improvements are. But if I stop, and I pay attention, and I watch, and I'm mindful, I can see those little improvements, little improvements in strength, little improvements in balance. And I know that I'll continue to recover until my dying day does recovery, even if it's, yeah, even if it's just like with mental health to be I wish mental health was part of the therapy. Why not?

Bill Gasiamis 55:44

I think that's the biggest thing for me. Honestly, my mental health practice now has been, oh, man, it's probably been 20-plus years. And I do not know where I would be if I hadn't done that for 20 years. Because I have a complicated mind, and some things that are obvious to me, bother me. And I need somebody to bring me down off the ledge, so to speak, every so often, once a month, you know, and I go there.

Bill Gasiamis 56:21

And people think that it's, you know, strange and difficult to talk to somebody about your feelings, and I talk about my feelings, or just talk about general things that drive me bananas. And I need somebody to not judge me and just give me another perspective and change the thought into something constructive, rather than destructive.

Bill Gasiamis 56:41

And it's not that I'm dysfunctional in the world, it's that I would have been dysfunctional in the world if it wasn't for the therapy. And then it helps me deal with serious life issues like friends passing away. And the last thing I need to be carrying is all the trauma of all the things that have ever gone wrong in my life, into the next decade in the decade after that, and after that, I'd rather just settle

them and then leave them in the past so that I can take on the next challenge with as many resources as possible so that I can again, deal with that, and then kind of try and move forward and leave it in the past.

The hardest thing about stroke for Abigail Atkinson

Bill Gasiamis 57:26

So I completely agree with that. As we approach the end of the episode, I'd like to ask you three questions that I've started asking my stroke survivors whom I interview. And the first question is, what's the hardest thing about stroke?

Abigail Atkinson 57:47

Okay, well, for me, I think the hardest thing was feeling. Gosh, this is such a great question. I was a yogi, and the hardest thing for me was losing my physical ability to practice yoga, that motivated me to get back to my yoga practice and to feel reconnected to my body. It was devastating for me not to be able to go to yoga me not to be able to do a standing posture. And that may sound silly to some people.

Abigail Atkinson 58:22

But, you know, like your therapy practice before helped you. That's how my yoga practice was, for me my outlet for stress relief, it was, you know, for physical well being Yes, it was mental and emotional health for me. And when that changed, it was hard for me to come to terms with that.

Abigail Atkinson 58:45

And it also transformed my yoga practice and helped me realize that yoga truly is for everybody, no matter what your physical deficits are, or what you've been through. It helped my yoga practice become even stronger, even deeper than it was before. So even though that was the hardest thing, it turned out to be one of the more beautiful things as well.

Bill Gasiamis 59:10

It sounds like what it did was help your identity evolve, but yoga doesn't look like this. I am still a yogi, even though I can't do it the way that I was doing it. And therefore my identity doesn't have to be left behind.

Abigail Atkinson 59:28

Yeah, identity-based. And I didn't have to leave my identity behind but I had to be willing to let it transform. And that's the beauty of life. The more you allow things to transform, the more you can carry on just like you did be able to move on.

What has stroke taught you?

Bill Gasiamis 59:46

What has stroke taught you?

Abigail Atkinson 59:51

Where do I begin? Stroke has taught me that now is the time. Now is the time to do the thing you love. Now is the time to take care of yourself. We don't know, if we get to tomorrow, the time on our planet, even though it's hard for us to put it into perspective is so short.

Abigail Atkinson 1:00:20

Stroke has taught me to slow down and be present with what is right now what's happening right now the sun filtering in through my window, the conversation we're having in this moment. And truly enjoying the richness and vividness of life in the moment.

A message to other stroke survivors

Bill Gasiamis 1:00:39

Yeah, perfect. What do you want to tell other people who have had a stroke who might be listening to this and I have not moved as far along the recovery path as we might have?

Abigail Atkinson 1:00:54

Giving up is not an option. I would say, keep showing up, keep showing up, and you winning, reach out, and get into a support group. You know, take it one day at a time and for me in the beginning. You know, take it just this morning. And then just this afternoon, you know, split your day up however much you need to, to make progress. And, you know, be ever so gentle and tender with yourself. practice compassion for yourself just as much as you would for somebody else as you as you figure all this stuff out.

Bill Gasiamis 1:01:33

That's a cool one, I love that practice compassion for yourself as much as you would for somebody else. I love that people do. Struggle with self-compassion and self-loathing is a bloody thing. And I don't like that self-loathing is a thing. But I can appreciate why sometimes perhaps it's a thing.

Bill Gasiamis 1:01:55

And if it's motivating somebody to move from behaving in a way that causes self-loathing, and to change the way that you go about your own life and then you start to love yourself, then I can accept self-loathing. But yeah, self-compassion is such a beautiful gift. It costs nothing to give it to yourself.

Abigail Atkinson 1:02:19

And it lets you, like you said, have those moments of self-loathing and frustration and anger and whatever difficult emotion arises, but then you get to have compassion with that as showing up. And not let it take you down.

Bill Gasiamis 1:02:33

Yeah. You know what I love about this podcast episode, amongst everything that we've discussed. It's a fabulous conversation that I first reached out to you, for you to join me on the podcast in 2019. On the 28th of September in 2019. And somehow, you found the message a year later, and then you said, Yeah, I'd love to be on the podcast. And then I responded, a year after that.

Bill Gasiamis 1:03:14

That's the longest lead-up to a podcast ever. And, more importantly, we were good at responding and getting back to each other a year after each message somehow.

Abigail Atkinson 1:03:35

It is kind of funny how that happened. And you know what, I think it's just so cool that we still responded, oh, it's been a year. Oops, I'm still gonna respond. It's okay. So it was just meant to be now.

Bill Gasiamis 1:03:46

It was absolutely. So thank you so much for joining me on the podcast. I appreciate it.

Abigail Atkinson 1:03:51

Such a pleasure getting to know you and being here. Thank you for holding space

for my story. I appreciate that.

Bill Gasiamis 1:04:00

Well, thanks for joining us on today's episode. Remember, to grab a copy of chapter one of the book *The Unexpected Way That a Stroke Became the Best Thing that Happened* just visit recoveryafterstroke.com/book. Take a look around and discover what the book is all about and click the Download free chapter button.

Bill Gasiamis 1:04:19

As always, to learn more about my guests, including links to their social media and other pages. And to download a full transcript of the entire interview. Please go to recoveryafterstroke.com/episodes. To all those people who have already left the review. Thank you so much. It means the world to me and you are helping others in need of this type of content to find it easier, and that is making their stroke recovery just a little bit better.

Bill Gasiamis 1:04:45

If you haven't left a review yet and would like to. The best way to do it is to leave a five-star review and a few words about what the show means to you on iTunes and Spotify. If you're watching on YouTube, comment below the video I love seeing your comments and I try to respond to all of them. Like the episode and to get notifications of future episodes, subscribe to the channel and hit the notifications Bell. Thanks again for being here and listening. I appreciate you see you on the next episode.

Intro 1:05:15

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Intro 1:05:32

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Intro 1:05:49

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Intro 1:06:10

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Intro 1:06:34

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Intro 1:06:47

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