

# The Similarities Of Recovery From A Stroke And A Traumatic Brain Injuries

Christopher Dittrich experienced a TBI (traumatic Brain Injury) as a result of a single-vehicle collision when he was 18 years old. He shares the same challenges experienced by stroke survivors.

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Christopher Dittrich 0:00

Well, right after injury soon after my injury, I suffered from severe I guess disinhibition, I would say, somewhat, not normal. 18-year-old conversation, I just wasn't in thinking, you know, I had no filter in my head. So I would say things that weren't necessarily proper or made sense or was right for whatever conversation and you know, so I lost a lot of my old friends.

Christopher Dittrich 0:27

They don't get that I'm mentally disabled now. Yeah. So they just thought it was like, yeah, what's going on? So that ended up becoming a huge benefit for me. As I moved into college, I got a little bit better my filter came back a little bit, but at the same time, I still had very little social filters, which made it easier for me to

talk to people to make new friends.

Intro 0:58

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

Bill Gasiamis 1:11

Chris Dittrich, welcome to the podcast.

Christopher Dittrich 1:15

Thank you very much. I'm excited to be here. You got my last name correct. Not many people do so well. It's a good start. Yeah.

Bill Gasiamis 1:23

Every once in a while I do get names correct. But you're not a stroke survivor, but you are somebody who has a traumatic brain injury. And when you contacted me about whether or not I speak to people who are not stroke survivors on the podcast, I don't often because they often don't get in touch. And then when you contacted me, I knew that we were going to share a lot of similarities about how our particular brain injury has impacted our lives.

## **When Christopher Dittrich crashed his car**



Bill Gasiamis 2:00

But I know that we're going to share a lot of things in common and I know that people with traumatic brain injuries do have similar challenges in the same challenges that stroke survivors have. So why don't you tell us a little bit about

what happened to you first?

Christopher Dittrich 2:13

Correct. Yeah, exactly. That's why I was interested in talking to you as well, because many of the people I've discussed injuries and whatnot with our stroke survivors, seem to be a little more common in the young survivor community. I am from the Princeton area in New Jersey, in the United States, I suffered a traumatic brain injury in a car accident when I was 18 years old, on March 3, 2008. What, over 15 years ago now as crazy as that seems.

Christopher Dittrich 2:52

It's been a whirlwind, but was just trying to beat my friends to lunch in school. And flipped my car over slid across the road and didn't break any bones. But I hit my head hard enough to not wake up for a month. And then when I did gradually started to recover. I went from a coma to a vegetative state. So it wasn't just like one of the Oh, you're awake again, you can do this.

Christopher Dittrich 3:25

No, it was another month of change before I could even grasp any sort of intellect from where I was or what had happened to me. But ever since then, you know, it's been Go Go Go. It's never been a where we're feeling bad for ourselves. But it's always been about what can we do to start getting better to start living life again, you know what I mean?

Christopher Dittrich 3:53

I think from the beginning when my brain was still in really bad shape. You know, I had heard doctors saying, after one year are going to be mixed reviews. One after one year, you're going to be good to go or after one year, there's no more recovery. So from the start, it was okay, I've got to do as much as I can as quickly as I can.

Bill Gasiamis 4:20

Tell me about what you will do in a rush to get to. So I know. In America, it's a bit different than Australia In Australia. We didn't get our car license till were 18 and very few of us have our license at 18 our car is related but in America, they start at 16 Right? Yeah,

Christopher Dittrich 4:41

I believe that state-by-state changes but in New Jersey, where I was from, I got

my learner's permit. I got my permit at 16 and a half, I'm pretty sure and then got my real license when I was 17. And then when you are rewarded for being a senior in high school where I was living, we were allowed to go out for lunch.

Christopher Dittrich 5:07

Instead of having instead of being stuck with the school lunches in the cafeteria, we were able to go out to have lunch around the town, it was a small town. So I was, again, I can't remember this now. But from what I surmised and what I was told by other people, I was trying to beat my friends to Taco Bell. And obviously, I lost that race.

Bill Gasiamis 5:32

Just being irresponsible in speeding I imagine and not paying attention to the road.

Christopher Dittrich 5:40

Right. Yeah, that's exactly what it was, and ended up hitting a tree and breaking the tree in half on the other side of the road. But thankfully, I was the only person in the car. You know, usually, I would have gone to lunch with other people. We had a carpool, we were 18-year-old high school students, trying to save gas, money, whatever it was.

Christopher Dittrich 6:08

But for some reason, I was by myself. And it was a single-car accident. So I didn't injure anybody but myself, you know, and that means something to me because through the 15 years, and through all the fortunate successes I've had, everything would have been kind of hindered or drawn back if I had injured somebody more severely than myself or killed somebody.

Christopher Dittrich 6:35

Or at the same side, you know, if they were okay. With no injury whatsoever you know, cuz I, you don't mean to be competitive or what, but you always want to be the best and I would have been, let's just say it was good that it was a single car accident.

Bill Gasiamis 6:57

I know what you're saying. It's brave of you to be that honest. And to say that it would have been difficult if there was a collision, there were two people involved, and the other person got away with it was doing well. And you weren't, you would

have cried why me?

Christopher Dittrich 7:16

Exactly. You know, and you don't want to feel that way. But, yeah, it goes both ways. Because at the same time, I could use that as additional motivation if necessary. You know what I mean? Because there's always somebody that you can look and be like, Oh, if I keep working hard if I keep on the path, I can get there, too. Yeah. So are you up to in a way?

Bill Gasiamis 7:43

Yeah. Yeah, I hear. So when, when you had the collision and you hit your head while you're wearing your seatbelt. Or there was no seatbelt.

Christopher Dittrich 7:52

Thankfully, I had my seatbelt on. And what the EMTs told me is that I was sitting in the car normally, but um, knocked out of course, so I think the car flipped. I hit my head on the top left side of the, again, Australia, you guys drive on the left or the on the right, steering is on the left or the right, on the right. Alright, okay.

Christopher Dittrich 8:19

So we're, it's on the left in the state. So I popped my head and hit this side of my head. And, again, other than that, it was smooth, with no broken bones, nothing that would paralyze me that couldn't be recovered. Again, I was paralyzed. When I woke up, the right side of my body was paralyzed. But again, it was, little by little, that I started to be able to move again.

Christopher Dittrich 8:50

And that's what the doctor said, that's what my dad who did ours in the days of research saying, hey, Neuroplasticity, if you want to get better, you got to start moving as much as you can move your fingers, move your leg, move your hand, whatever. And that's where the stroke and a brain injury start to come together.

Bill Gasiamis 9:12

Yeah, so with your brain injury recovery, yeah. So you hit your head, but what did I say happened to your brain? Like what was the damage done? Was there a specific lesion or a specific was there internal bleeding? What was there?

Christopher Dittrich 9:26

No, no bleeding it just, hit my left temporal lobe. And again, this is where I guess

it goes a little bit different than a stroke is that it was just I know internal bleeding. Just I hit my eye. Yeah, just brain trauma. Yeah, to my left temporal and then they said that a little bit of repercussions in my right frontal lobe because my head was shaking.

Christopher Dittrich 9:54

My brain was shaking inside my head. But yeah, and then No hemorrhaging no nothing like that. Fortunately, you know, you see several people with brain injuries or with strokes as well that they need to have. When if their brain swells too much, they need to have parts of their skull cut, to allow the brain to continue to swell until it starts to heal.

Christopher Dittrich 10:20

Thankfully, I just have a little bit of a scar only from where they put the monitor to check in to ensure my brain was not swelling to the point where I had to have anything cut off to read. Yeah, exactly.

## **The impact of having half your skull removed?**

Bill Gasiamis 10:42

Yep. So it's a common thing in stroke is in one of my coaching clients is just had his scalpel back in. And my god has, you know, had one-half of his head pulled back in just a couple of weeks ago. And it's amazing. He looks far happier. Do you know?

Christopher Dittrich 11:02

It seems I could imagine. Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

Bill Gasiamis 11:05

Right. Seems like there's a lot of progress that he's made in that short amount of time. Everything is looking on the app, you know, so it's a big deal. But what an amazing life-saving procedure to be able to cut half the skull off, and then put it aside for a little while while the brain does. Oh, yeah.

Christopher Dittrich 11:23

Well, well, when what they told me because I would always be when they would, people who had their skull off, they always be wearing some sort of a helmet. It was always a blue helmet for at least where I was at Kessler at the rehab. It was I remember wearing a blue helmet. And they said that they would have to keep

their skull in their stomach. Yes. Like it was sewed in to keep it alive and keep it. Yeah, hey,

Bill Gasiamis 11:52

yeah. So this particular amount of skull, because it was half of his skull. It wasn't alive when they put it back in. So they take it out. They put it aside, they store it, but it's not alive. Now, if the sculpt flap is small enough, yes, they do put it in the person's stomach so that it contains that remains receiving blood.

Bill Gasiamis 12:18

And yeah, and all the things that are necessary to keep it healthy. And I interviewed a stroke survivor on the podcast that I'm going to find the episode, her name is Leanne, Carla Begonia, and Leanne had her skull flap removed, and it's in her belly. And what happened was, she ran out of the timeframe that they wanted to do the surgery in to put the skull flap back, which kind of elapsed.

Bill Gasiamis 12:51

And as a result of that, she wasn't able to have it put back in. And what that meant is that now it's permanently going to remain in her skin, above her belly. And Leanne was on episode 105. And she had an amazing story to share.

Christopher Dittrich 13:24

When I hear stories like that, when I hear you know, it just I our injury, my injury was severe, whatever and I was in the coma, paralyzed, whatever. But you know, I'm so fortunate I'm so grateful to be able to be where to have been able to recover to this point, you know, that it gives me so much gratitude and feeling of hope and wanting to continue to improve even further. Because I feel like I have the opportunity to.

Bill Gasiamis 14:01

So then in your head from the collision and hitting your head on the car frame I imagine or the car roof what happened Did you get some cell death is that what happened in that location with a trauma?

Christopher Dittrich 14:15

Yeah, it must have, exactly. Just millions of brain cells were killed instantly the ones that control thought rates on the right side of my body. So again, when any kind of movement that I could get from the beginning right there back after my injury in 2008. It starts to generate new cell connections between them again, as

many of your viewers will know the beauty of Neuroplasticity is that other neurons are recruited over to the injured part and they can restart and theory retrain so that we can get better we can start moving again.

Bill Gasiamis 15:05

So when you come out of the hospital, you need rehab to get the left side is that the left the right side, the right side, the right side, and the right side up and running again. What else were you dealing with? You're dealing with deficits. What else? Were you dealing with fatigue? What other issues did you have?

Intro 15:24

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. How long will it take to recover? Will I recover? What things should I avoid? In case I make matters worse, doctors will explain things, but, if you've never had a stroke before, you probably don't know what questions to ask.

Intro 15:48

If this is you, you may miss out on doing things that could help speed up your recovery. If you're finding yourself in that situation. Stop worrying, and head to [recoveryafterstroke.com](http://recoveryafterstroke.com) where you can download a guide that will help you, it's called Seven Questions to Ask your Doctor about Your Stroke.

Intro 16:07

These seven questions are the ones Bill wished he'd asked when he was recovering from a stroke. They'll not only help you better understand your condition. They'll help you take a more active role in your recovery. Head to the website now [recoveryafterstroke.com](http://recoveryafterstroke.com) and download the guide. It's free.

Bill Gasiamis 16:26

Hello, and welcome to the Recovery after Stroke podcast. If you are a stroke survivor with a story to share about your experience. Come and join me on the show. The interviews are not scripted, you do not have to plan for them. All you need to do to qualify is be a stroke survivor, or care for someone who is a stroke survivor or you're one of the fabulous people that works in a space that helps other stroke survivors.

Bill Gasiamis 16:50

Go to [recoveryafterstroke.com/contact](http://recoveryafterstroke.com/contact). Fill out the form and as soon as I receive



your request, I will respond with more details on how you can make and choose a time that works to meet over Zoom. In episode 260 of the Recovery after Stroke podcast, I'm joined by Christopher Dittrich, who is not a stroke survivor but a TBI survivor, and traumatic brain injury survivor. And in our discussion, we discuss amongst other things, the similarities in recovery from a TBI and a stroke.

## **Suffering from disinhibition**

Christopher Dittrich 17:27

I have everything Yeah, fatigue, executive function issues, a whole lot of everything. But again, the biggest thing for me was physically well, right after my injury soon after my injury, I suffered from severe I guess disinhibition. So I would say more through messaging through texting old friends from high school and stuff, I would say, somewhat not normal. 18-year-old conversation, I just wasn't in thinking, you know, I had no filter in my head.

Christopher Dittrich 18:03

So I would say things that weren't necessarily proper or made sense or were right for whatever conversation and you know, so I lost a lot of my old friends because of that because at 18 years old, it's you don't understand, necessarily even I'm looking at it from the other person, my old friend's side that like they don't they don't get that I'm mentally disabled now. Yeah, so they just like yeah, what's going on, keep them off to the side.

Christopher Dittrich 18:37

But um, that ended up becoming a huge benefit for me as I moved into college. Because I got a little bit better my filter came back a little bit. But at the same time, I still had very few social filters, which made it easier for me to talk to people to make new friends. When I moved to Cohen, I went from New Jersey, I spent 18 months in rehab in New Jersey after my injury just to get well enough to go to college.

Christopher Dittrich 19:16

And I moved to Miami. And I knew everyone on campus because I was the friendliest guy. After all, I would just start talking to everyone. Didn't matter whether you were a lot of football players that were very popular football players out there were all my good buddies. Anyone else it was so I used it to my advantage still until today even meeting new people and being friendly and being

social and getting things done because of it.

Bill Gasiamis 19:51

Yeah, it's the way to be. Do you feel like that filter is still not there?

Christopher Dittrich 19:56

I have to actively put it back on. So there was the time in two in 2008, and 2009. I had no filter. And I didn't even think about what I was saying or what I was doing. But now it's there. I don't have it. But I can put it back. I don't have it naturally, I guess. But I can put it back on myself. I know I know what I shouldn't be and should not be saying.

Bill Gasiamis 20:24

The response of people that you've said or done the wrong thing.

Christopher Dittrich 20:28

All right. Yeah, exactly. Yeah. But thankfully, we've moved forward in gotten a lot better with all of that. Yeah.

Bill Gasiamis 20:38

Wow. It's interesting because you hear about some stroke survivors, who experienced a condition called the pseudobulbar effect. And for some people, it makes them cry. I had it, for a few months, weath for a few years where I'd cry uncontrollably for no reason, every so often, right?

Bill Gasiamis 20:59

And a lot of stroke survivors say the same thing. One of the other versions of the pseudobulbar effect is to laugh uncontrollably, and usually at the wrong time. So like at a funeral or, you know, at a mass or somewhere where you're not supposed to.

Christopher Dittrich 21:16

Not good.

Bill Gasiamis 21:20

So it's interesting how people with brain injuries have that kind of level of altered ability to respond according to you know, the appropriate way for society, you know, what is normal for society? would normally you would avoid it and you would go out of your way to do it? Was it difficult to find yourself having done or

said the wrong thing? And then to try and to try and sort of backpedal out of it? Was there any opportunity to get out of it? How does that weigh?

Christopher Dittrich 21:55

Some Sometimes there was sometimes not, you know, I still have a few of my friends from back then people who are understanding, you know, it all came down to the other person, whether or not we would remain friends and stuff. But we, more importantly, if they didn't understand we move forward, we keep going, you know, I made a mistake. But if they're not understanding, then I don't need them, I guess, or just not a match. But I figured out, you know.

Bill Gasiamis 22:29

So but when you got injured at what part of your schooling was that? Was that near the end of your high school?

Christopher Dittrich 22:38

I was. I had just started while it was my second semester of senior year of high school. So I had already finished applying to all my colleges, you know, how it is in the US. And, you know, my parents, unfortunately, they were the ones who had to open up all my acceptance letters, because I was in a coma at the time.

Christopher Dittrich 22:59

So, thankfully, I had already taken my standard, my SATs, I had already applied to all the colleges, so I'd done all that stuff. Second semester of senior year in the US in high school, it's just late Elisa, it's yours. Yours. Extended spring break, if you could say you could call using the phone. Right, exactly.

Christopher Dittrich 23:24

And so I was still in some of my videos if you've seen I still participated in high school graduation. That was my first. I call it my coming out party because that was the first time I walked. I mean, everyone knew about my injury, but they didn't know if I could walk I was in a wheelchair and wheeled up to the stage.

Christopher Dittrich 23:50

And with my dad helping me I limped with a four-prong walking cane across the stage to a rousing standing ovation, to get my diploma. And that was kind of my like, let's go, let's go. Let's go kind of a moment to set up for the next year when my friends went off to college and I stayed home to get well enough to go to college, hopefully, the following year.

Christopher Dittrich 24:19

Which I did and then college that freshman year of college was another huge undertaking. I had vastly underestimated the amount of physical strength I would need. So, freshman, I was in really bad shape. Hard to walk and hard to do anything because I moved down to Miami, it was the summertime. It was hot. It was humid, it was very challenging.

Bill Gasiamis 24:50

So do you find the weather impacts you differently now than it did? Say beforehand, do you recall if there is a difference?

Christopher Dittrich 24:59

At all? Hot is hot, you know? Yeah, I, if it's too humid, it sucks, but I can get through it, it won't tire me out too much. But I will, I'm more apt to sweat than I was before my injury from what I remember, just because it takes just a little more effort for every step that I take.

Bill Gasiamis 25:22

Right. And, with regards to your schooling, when you were at college, we were able to get through all of the things that were required of you as a student cognitively.

Christopher Dittrich 25:38

It was certainly much more challenging. I because when I was in high school, before my injury, I was very good at taking tests, I was intelligent, and my memory was really good. So when I went off to college, I just assumed it would be kind of the same way. And it was not I couldn't remember anything. I would try to read the textbook, I'd get through like a couple of pages.

Christopher Dittrich 26:06

And I forget what I had just read. So I went with the strategy just didn't know any reason to read the book. Well, if I can't remember it anyway, what the hell am I doing wasting my time reading the book? So my grades certainly weren't as good as they could have been. I went to Miami. As an honors student, I was x I was given a big scholarship and I was supposed to keep a certain GPA.

Christopher Dittrich 26:39

And I couldn't keep, that above-average GPA like I would have had I not suffered my injury. However, I learned the value of asking for help and becoming friendly

with my professors and not to the point where I'm asking for unfair treatment.

Christopher Dittrich 27:01

But I got the professor to get to know me. I wanted them to know about my recovery and my injury, and I certainly feel like I got graded better because of the individual relationships I built with my professors. I was no longer they were no longer just grading a name on a piece of paper. They were grading me personally.

Bill Gasiamis 27:26

So that was a little bit leniency.

Christopher Dittrich 27:30

Oh, certainly helped me get better. Better. I got a lot of minuses. It was always Oh, that was my favorite grade to get because I always felt like I got an A minus I deserved a B. But they wanted but I earned the B they wanted to but they couldn't give me an A but they wanted to so I just got an A minus. I always laughed. I got a lot of minuses in college and it was always that I was like, Oh, yep, for sure. 100% should have got a beer a B plus but oh, a minus for him. That's okay.

## College Life after a Stroke And TBI



Bill Gasiamis 28:07

Now college life in the United States is notorious for its wild parties, big drinking sessions, and all that kind of stuff. Did you partake or did you have to sit aside?

Christopher Dittrich 28:19

I didn't partake as much as I would have imagined. I started in a fraternity but I

couldn't do the fraternity I wanted to be fraternity life. My father was a big fraternity guy so through my childhood, I was always like, oh, I want to do the same frat thing. But it didn't work out for me just because I couldn't.

Christopher Dittrich 28:45

It was too much on the side, I had to concentrate on school and I had to concentrate on physical therapy. Those were the only important things in the end. I still spent two years living on campus and then when I moved I moved off into the actual city of Miami for my junior and senior years and then I would have said it's a fun city to live in.

Christopher Dittrich 29:10

Especially when all your classes are not until the afternoon so you can you're welcome to stay out as late as you want because it's not waking up early in the morning. So had a lot of fun times just at the bar nothing crazy but meet a lot of met a lot of people again with the same strategy just start talking to people you know, just make friends and it was good. Yeah, Miami has fun.

Bill Gasiamis 29:40

Did so tell me a little bit about frat life because as an Australian, I don't understand what frat life is about what are the expectations or what are the over-and-above things that you have to do and add to your routine.

Christopher Dittrich 29:53

You spend time with your frat brothers you know you got we didn't have a house but we had a Sweet over there and it just for a lot of people it works out but it just didn't work out for me just didn't again have it's a big commitment for meetings after school in the evening time, then you're going out drinking with your buddies and things of that nature that I just couldn't prioritize when I had so many other priorities still two that were more important to me. Again, my continuing physical recovery was the largest one.

Bill Gasiamis 30:33

So the fraternity isn't necessarily the extracurricular activities associated with your studies.

Christopher Dittrich 30:42

Oh, no. It's for fun, it's for brotherhood. Yeah, it's part it's party time. Yeah, it's not for at least most schools. I again, was only in it for a little while. It didn't last

for me.

Bill Gasiamis 31:00

Yeah, I hear you. So you don't mind meeting people said, so. Are you the kind of person who struggles with these spices? Did you have any issues with sensory overload? Any of that stuff while you were in that early days of recovery? And how did you manage?

Christopher Dittrich 31:23

Fortunately, that was never an issue. For me, the only problem that I had socially was that I would meet people, and then I would forget that I would meet them. And I would, again, that was just because my short-term memory was very poor. Still, I wouldn't remember names for anything. But um, I would just meet a person one day, and then a couple of days later, go up and say the same thing and meet them again.

Christopher Dittrich 31:53

And they were like Yo, we just met and it would make me feel rather bad. I would feel stupid. I feel oh, gosh, yeah, this sucks. So again, I had to adapt. And instead of meeting people, for the first time, when I wouldn't meet somebody, I would just go up and pretend we already know each other. You know what I mean? So I wouldn't be Oh, hey, what's your name? What's up? And just pretending that if we had met before, and now you're not going to know that? I don't remember you.

Christopher Dittrich 32:29

If that you know, and now if we haven't met before, it's just me being friendly. But if we have met before, and now you're just like, Oh, yeah. Hey, it's nice to see you again. So it was a strategic kind of shift. Yeah, and again, that's the big thing with I think both stroke, recovery and brain injury recovery. It's all about finding where you can make a change that starts to impact your recovery and your life in general.

Bill Gasiamis 33:03

It's about adapting, isn't it?

Christopher Dittrich 33:06

Yeah, adapting is exactly great. I've been forced to become a king adapter physically and mentally and everything, because of our newfound skills are what we no longer possess and what we now possess stronger than before.

# Identity of Christopher Dittrich after the TBI



Bill Gasiamis 33:26

Were you the same kind of guy before the collision? Is it a different version of you? That I'm speaking to now? Do you know what I mean?

Christopher Dittrich 33:39

I again, was only 18. I was still young. I mean, I still have some of the same friends. And I still think I'm mainly the same guy. But yeah, again, I was younger still. But I think so most of the mostly my personality itself didn't change, I got more outgoing, because of the filter, the lack of filter or just more of a much more so have zeal for life. And now because of everything that I've had to overcome everything I've had the opportunity, the life that I've been able to live, it makes me more excited for every day.

Bill Gasiamis 34:24

So a lot of people have an injury like yours, and it's visible because they have a deficit on one side of their body. A lot of them tend to get the opposite of more outgoing. They become more introverted because of their injury. They're afraid of how people will judge them or what they'll think of them, etcetera. Does any of that stuff pass through your mind Did it ever?

Christopher Dittrich 34:50

Maybe when I was younger, but I used it to my advantage because when I'm going up to meet somebody new, you know I don't come off as a threatening figure. And in a way that helps out, you know, because it immediately throws off



any feeling that the other person has to put up a protective shield or anything.

Christopher Dittrich 35:16

No, I'm me, you know, I'm coming to you with everything that I have to offer. And I'm very confident in myself, it's going to be to your benefit, the person that I'm coming to meet, it's going to be to your benefit, if you're going to give me the up the time of day that I'm going to say something or just by being around me and my zeal for life passion, that you're going to have a better day than to because we've had a good conversation. And that has helped me to meet people and to build better value self-value as well.

Bill Gasiamis 35:58

That's brilliant man.

Christopher Dittrich 36:01

For anybody that's going to listen to this that's feeling very shy or very whatever from their injury, think of it exactly like that, you know, everything that you have had to overcome, that's all part of you that other people have, hopefully, they'll never have to face it. But we can teach them we can share, our experiences with other people to make everybody a little bit more knowledgeable, a little bit more understanding and hopefully motivate them to be a better version of themselves as well.

Bill Gasiamis 36:38

Yeah. It seems like you take it all in your stride the dark days did you have difficulties and times when things were really bad?

Christopher Dittrich 36:49

I'm back more so towards the beginning, I guess there were times when the back when I was in my acute recovery first year or so because I didn't This was before it's a little bit but this was both Facebook was here, but Instagram was not there. I didn't have a community yet. You know, I didn't have anyone to look forward to and be like, Oh, well, I can still get better.

Christopher Dittrich 37:17

You know, yeah, I can still live a whole fulfilling life. I was stuck there. I was lying in my bedroom in New Jersey with the right side of my body wasn't working. And occasionally in our rehab, our outpatient rehab, they would bring back success stories. Like they would bring back old, old patients, and what I experienced I

didn't they weren't doing that.

Christopher Dittrich 37:48

You know that the people that they would bring back and like parade around like, Oh, look at he was in our he would He's a proud veteran of our outpatient therapy. And I'm like, they're physically there. Okay, but mentally, it wasn't always all the way there. And I'm like, Wait, is this it? Do you know?

Christopher Dittrich 38:07

So that's why I've taken so much pride, I guess, and effort in starting to build the page on Instagram and things like that, because I want to be the person that I didn't have in 2008 and 2009. Or I or I could have had them if Instagram was around. But it wasn't. So I didn't have the opportunity to look and see people like living overseas and living abroad and living a life like there's no, disability. I'm disabled, but I'm not disabled.

Bill Gasiamis 38:47

Yeah. Look, I think what you're saying is common for people like you and me who had an incident that was say, around 10 years ago, plus, because everything was fresh. All the socials were very, very fresh. But still, I'm meeting people now who are saying that they left the hospital and they kind of fell into the gap after the hospital what do I do? How do I go about my new body or my new brain or my new whatever? And they struggle a lot.

Bill Gasiamis 39:19

And at some point, they do go, I know, let me jump on the socials or Google and let me find out what's available. And the way that I get found the lies people will search for stroke podcast, you know. And then the podcast comes up and then and then they go, Oh, wow, there's 250 episodes.

Bill Gasiamis 39:42

And then it's like, oh, wow, all of a sudden they don't feel like they're doing it alone. Now there are at least 250 people that have done this before them that are all going through different phases of recovery and have different challenges, but they're all moving forward.

Christopher Dittrich 39:58

And right. Yeah, and it's a nice thing. And that's it's a very cool thing you know. And another reason that I didn't fall into a gap like that after my injury, I've had

phenomenal family support. Both my father and my mom and my dad, my dad especially were the ultimate patient advocates that always there from the beginning, they were in, and they spent every night with me when I was living in the rehab.

Christopher Dittrich 40:31

They didn't have a very comfortable bed to sleep in, but they stayed with me, you know, it was always having someone there. So I'd never had the opportunity to fall into that rut. And for anyone, that's, again, going to watch this, that if it was someone in your family, or your close friends that suffer an injury or stroke, or brain injury, or any kind of injury, that your support for them is equally as important as how much I can do physically, I've been far more motivated, because I've got people in my corner.

Bill Gasiamis 41:12

Community and people in your corner are important, especially when, you know when a lot of people don't understand you. That's where the community aspect of it is really important. When you meet people that are like you who understand what you're going through and can relate. Right, and, and then you don't and then you don't feel so strange or weird or different. You feel like a different version of yourself. But other people know what I feel like I can explain it to somebody get it off my chest, and they and they know exactly what I mean.

Christopher Dittrich 41:46

Yeah, it's, it's very helpful. It's yeah, it's very motivating for me and anyone overcoming an injury.

Bill Gasiamis 41:56

Did college go smoothly did you end up graduating and finishing off that chapter?

Christopher Dittrich 42:05

I did graduate in four years, I took summer courses to have a reduced course load instead of five courses. I took four courses every semester so that I had a little more time for exercise. And then in the summertime, I'd go to community college back home, and I got some extra credits from there than I but and I went, I was able to go abroad. I went abroad to Beijing during one of the summers and spent a month in Beijing.

Christopher Dittrich 42:38

And it was amazing. That was my first real overseas travel. I went with my family before my injury. But that was when I felt like yeah, I could do this. I can live anywhere in the world. Because I survived that trip to Beijing that summer in Beijing, which was crazy and amazing. And then the following year, I did another study abroad in the summer in Ecuador, the Galapagos Islands.

Christopher Dittrich 43:11

So I took advantage of every opportunity to go to different places. And in the end, was able to graduate after four years again, not with a GPA not as high as I would have been before my injury, but I was able to graduate.

Bill Gasiamis 43:30

Was it? Did you have reservations about going overseas on your own and being independent?

Christopher Dittrich 43:37

Not at all. I had to work hard to convince my teachers, and my professors that I was capable and that I was able to go. And then when I got there, I realized, oh, shit, maybe I should have thought about this a little bit more. Especially that first trip to Beijing, because we were going we were going to class a little bit. But then we were going on tours to the Great Wall and Hide. Fortunately, I had been there already with my family before my injury.

## **Christopher Dittrich - The importance of not overthinking**



Christopher Dittrich 44:07

So I wasn't there to tour I was there to learn and to get college get credits. But I had vastly, again underestimated the amount of physical effort it was going to take. I couldn't do it. So after two weeks, we were going leaving Beijing to go to Shanghai, and I said Hey, Professor Chen Lau sure is what you would say, Professor Chen. I not going to continue. I'm going to stay here. I can't continue with the class. I'm going to stay here.

Christopher Dittrich 44:42

My dad is going to come out we're going to Yeah, so I ended up staying in Beijing my dad didn't come I stayed in Beijing on my own for those additional two weeks. And that was when adaptation was 100% You know, I was able to continue with a private tutor made friends had the best two weeks ever just not having to walk around too much just being able to go to class going back and forth staying on the campus.

Christopher Dittrich 45:15

It was incredible ended up being incredible. Right? But um, but again, like, with reservations Never, never. And that has, it's made life a little more made experiences a little more challenging for me, but it's made me much stronger. Because I was it's a common thing. Oh, do I want to do this? Yeah. Is there any thought about maybe not? No, no, no, no, no worries at all, no concerns until I get there and like, oh, oh, shit. Maybe I should have thought this through a little bit more.

Bill Gasiamis 45:55

I like that approach. If it's a calculated risk, and you're just going overseas, and you're stretching yourself a little bit. It's no big deal. And I like that and not overthinking it. I mean, if you overthink things, to convince yourself out of amazing opportunities, and you commit yourself out of opening new doors and experiencing new experiences and meeting new people, and that's the thing about, you know, not putting too much thought into it.

Bill Gasiamis 46:18

I think it's great it's a great personality trait to be able to if it's about experiencing having a new experience, I think it's a great thing not to overthink, if it's about, you know, should I invest? My last \$100? Alright, yeah, a little different. Yeah, yeah, you should think about that a little bit more, you know, if

there's nothing else.

Christopher Dittrich 46:40

We made some mistakes on that side, too. But, I agree with you and that's what led me to Bangkok as well, where I am now. You know, I mean, after college graduation, I started working at a banking institution because, before my injury, finance was the route. And so I went through college and got my finance degree. Then I realized sitting in an office for 10 hours a day by myself. It wasn't right, I couldn't do it.

Christopher Dittrich 48:39

So I went back to graduate school for hotel management because I liked the traveling all the traveling that I had done in college, um, and being able to speak Mandarin and learning some Spanish when I was in Miami, you know, I want to leave, I want to be able to live talking to people and being able to live around the world potentially. So I went back and got my master's degree in hotel, Hospitality, and Tourism Management. I applied for a job.

Christopher Dittrich 48:39

I interviewed for a job with a worldwide posting. didn't hear anything back for two months and then one I think it was December 23, 2015. I still remember waking up to an email from a hotel in Bangkok. Chris, we got your information from the Alcor portal we'd like to interview you did an interview the next day via Zoom or I think it was Oh no, it was only Skype back then in 2015 no Zoom had we hadn't gone through COVID time yet so zoom didn't exist.

Christopher Dittrich 48:39

And then they interviewed at night and then woke up that next morning? I think it was now yeah, it was Christmas Eve now I'm on a job offer in Bangkok we want you to start your first day of work on January 18 or something like that. Like only in three weeks. They wanted me to move in like three weeks. And right away.

Christopher Dittrich 48:39

It wasn't even a thought, Okay, we're doing it. You know, again, I've got phenomenal family support. They trust my decision-making for the most part. Yeah, they realize that I can adapt and do whatever I don't put myself in too much danger or risk. But I was like, Yeah, we're doing it. So three weeks later, boom. I was here in Bangkok. And I've only been I've been home a bunch of times, but

I've been living here now happily and free since 2016. I feel incredible about life in general.

Bill Gasiamis 49:34

Yeah, that's great, man. Well done. Yeah. What's the position involved? What does it do you have the hotel manager's role what does it involve?

Christopher Dittrich 49:44

Oh, well, I'm no longer working at the hotel. This was a couple of years ago now in the element of a private craft beer business entrepreneur. I went back to the business side a little bit, but the hotel was awesome because I was A guest service manager, I was just talking all day I was using it was all the new skills I'd picked up since my injury.

Christopher Dittrich 50:08

Because I was I was unrivaled. With my approach in the hotel lobby with meeting guests. Speaking in Mandarin speaking in several different Asian languages all at one time tie, of course, Korean and Japanese, didn't matter where you were from, I was going to be able to connect with you, just like I had done. In college, I used the same skill set that I had adapted and picked up when I moved to college. When I moved to Miami, I was doing that same thing now working in the hotel in Bangkok. And it worked exceptionally it worked well.

Bill Gasiamis 50:46

Customer if you can't talk and you're a customer-facing individual, yeah, you're going to struggle a little bit.

Christopher Dittrich 50:53

You know, and again, it was a little bit of a struggle more of a struggle here in Asia, people will stare much more so relentlessly than in the United States. But again, I used it to my advantage because I'm confident in myself and I'm able to if the hotel guests are going to give me the time of day to do more than just saying, Oh, hey, how's your stay with this? How's your room?

Christopher Dittrich 51:21

I was having real conversations with these guests. They weren't expecting it, but they ended up getting a whole life-altering life-enhancing storied experience when they were staying in my hotel. Yeah, so it worked out well.

Bill Gasiamis 51:38

So do you feel like culturally there's more of a stigma around disability in countries? In Asia, for example, compared to the United States?

Christopher Dittrich 51:48

Yeah, I did an internship in Hong Kong in China and Hong Kong. Big time here in Thailand. I shouldn't yeah, here in Thailand. No. In Thailand, this place is amazing. Everything is. Culture is incredible here just like everything is everything. My primary cop is Oh, never mind. No problem. Nothing wrong. Yeah, it's cool being here.

Christopher Dittrich 52:13

Yeah, everyone is open and easy to talk to. So I've found my stride and found myself here in Banca in Thailand in general, and able to travel from country to country incredibly, efficiently, inexpensively, and have had awesome opportunities living here in Asia for the past now, seven full years, which is awesome. And again, makes me proud because of where I am looking back to where I was in 2008 or 2009. stuck there in the hospital. And now living the absolute dream out here.

Bill Gasiamis 52:58

Yeah, absolutely. Man, good on you. Do you feel like perhaps when you were 18, and you come out of it, and you're out of the hospital, and you're sort of in rehab, and you're doing all the different things that you're doing? And you're kind of trying to get back to, "normal life" Right? Did you feel like you got away with it, and that you shouldn't be around? And this is a second chance, like, how did you? How did you mentally deal with that side of the equation?

Christopher Dittrich 53:31

I just always continue to do the best that I can. I was given I was given another opportunity. Certainly, I feel that way. And so I it's, it's, again, I don't know if you are religious or what but I feel like I'd be doing whoever a disservice if I do not continue to make the most of every opportunity in life. You know, even not, you know,

Bill Gasiamis 54:02

More religious that's important.



# Living life to the fullest after Stroke And TBI



Christopher Dittrich 54:04

You know, it's because I know so many I've experienced just through meeting other people that some people have suffered injuries that are nowhere near as serious as my car accident, but they're not able to live the same life that we can now and of course I feel that and I always have given an incredible opportunity that I need to live life to its fullest to enjoy it and appreciate it.

Bill Gasiamis 54:42

It's a lot of people do say you know that they were looked after or somebody was looking out for them or this is their second chance. This is the kind of make the most of it that's you know, there's there is a lot of that you do hear a lot of that in the stroke survivor community. And I especially feel that way. For me, I'm a completely different person. I'm not the same person that I was before the stroke. Yeah, I have a podcast for God's sake. And I wrote a book.

Christopher Dittrich 55:10

Yeah you have thousands of viewers Yeah, it's incredible.

Bill Gasiamis 55:15

Yeah, there are 250 interviews, there's coaching that I do, there's a whole bunch of stuff, it has changed my life for the better, so much, and I still live with all of my challenges, you know, and my challenges are mine. And they're not as bad as some of the other people, for example, when I say as bad, they're not the same as some of the other people were, but I live with them. You know, they still bother me, they still annoy me, they still do all that stuff. I still wake up every morning.

Bill Gasiamis 55:45

And you know, have to be careful the way I get out of bed and all that kind of

stuff. Right? But it's so much richer, my life so much richer because I took a similar approach to you. And their approach was that what I'm going to do first is I'm going to help other people. How am I going to do that I didn't know at the time. But I just started to volunteer with the Stroke Foundation here in Australia.

Bill Gasiamis 56:08

And I just started to talk to people about raising awareness about stroke, and then how to prevent stroke. And that's all I was doing. And that was helpful. But that led to public speaking. And that led to me doing some gigs and speaking on an annual basis at a university where we talk to third-year occupational therapy students. And I go through the process of, you know, my experience with occupational therapy and the good and the bad.

Christopher Dittrich 56:40

Trying to shape the future helpers.,

Bill Gasiamis 56:45

So it's like, the guy before stroke, didn't do any of this stuff. Just boring, old, you know, tradie go to work and work and then come home and then catch up with some friends. And the old me was just mundane, just, you know, pretty, pretty mundane. And not, not that I was bad. I had a terrible life for anything. But this is far richer. What I'm doing now is far better. So you know, I know, I know where you're coming from.

Christopher Dittrich 57:14

Yeah. And, you know, I often think that same thing, like what would be the most different and I will be living an exact ability in a different life. I've given a speech in front of a couple of 100 People in single, you know, in freaking Singapore of all places, and yeah, it's, I would have gone abroad sometimes, but I would never have been living the incredible life that I am now here in Bangkok.

Christopher Dittrich 57:42

I've got a wonderful girlfriend, Sue, yeah. And for a couple of years now, and again, I'm going all over the place, and no chance it would have been like this. Had I been living in the US? Or I'm sorry. I don't want to say that had I not suffered my injury? Had I not been given the opportunity and overcome everything in the experienced life? Much more so it's inspirational that Hotelling is a great word.

Bill Gasiamis 58:11

Do people tell you you're inspirational?

Christopher Dittrich 58:14

When I was working in the hotel, I was sharing my story. You know, I've gotten to the point now where I don't other than podcasts, you know where I've got my people I don't need to share it as much anymore which is which I think is a good thing I just continuing with the life you know, it's nice I've found people that understand me and don't even look at me at all about my injury whatsoever you know, we're just all buddies.

Christopher Dittrich 58:49

I have American friends ex-pat friends your Thai friends here that it's not even brought up and It's because I am confident because I'm continuing to improve physically my walk is continuing to get better I don't come off as disabled so there's been no real reason to talk about it and that's a good thing you know.

Christopher Dittrich 59:15

That's what we all we are always people with injuries fight to get to the point where they're not seen as injured or seen as disabled anymore. And it's fantastic. I couldn't tell you the last time I had a full conversation with someone about what I'm, I've had to deal with, which is a good thing.

## **The reason why Christopher Dittrich is on the Podcast**

Bill Gasiamis 59:38

Yeah. So the purpose of coming on the podcast and what's the reason behind that? No, I'm glad to have you by the way. But just like you're not talking about it on a daily but why now, because what I want to do is encourage other stroke survivors to come on the podcast and share and talk about it right? What's your reason?

Christopher Dittrich 59:58

Well on the podcast for the help of other people to share my experiences because I feel that I've, again had incredible opportunities, worldwide opportunities and to be I want to be that person that wasn't that I didn't have in 2008 when I was living in the hospital and I didn't have any idea that what I'm doing now is even

possible. It gives other people hope it gives people who have just had their injuries hope to continue to keep moving forward.

Christopher Dittrich 1:00:39

And you're going to have an I spent a year 18 months in therapy, you know, mundane, doing nothing every day, physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy every day. And I'm so it's good to be able to come on here now in showing that it helps out that don't get discouraged. No matter what level you are, and what stage of your recovery you are you can always continue to improve.

Christopher Dittrich 1:01:09

It's what we didn't with the stroke. And with brain injury, both you know, the beauty of the brain is it can fix itself, but not just a snap of the fingers. Because you say Oh, fix me fix me because we work for it because we've had to work towards it. And if we can continue to do that, then we can live whatever life we want to live.

Bill Gasiamis 1:01:33

On that note, thank you so much for joining me on the podcast.

Christopher Dittrich 1:01:38

Yeah, thanks for the opportunity. It was great.

Bill Gasiamis 1:01:40

Now thanks for joining us on today's episode. To learn more about my guests including links to this social media and other pages. And to download a full transcript of the entire interview. Please go to [recoveryafterstroke.com/episodes](https://recoveryafterstroke.com/episodes). If you would like to support this podcast, 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.

Bill Gasiamis 1:02:06

If you are watching on YouTube, comment below the video, like this episode, and to get notifications of future episodes, subscribe to the show on the platform of your choice. Thanks again for being here and listening. I appreciate you see you on the next episode.

Intro 1:02:21

Importantly, we present many podcasts designed to give you an insight and

understanding into the experiences of other individuals. The opinions and treatment protocols discussed during any podcast are the individual's own experience and we do not necessarily share the same opinion nor do we recommend any treatment protocol discussed.

Intro 1:02:38

All content on this website at any length blog, podcast, or video material control this website or content is created and produced for informational purposes only and is largely based on the personal experience of Bill Gasiamis, the content is intended to complement your medical treatment and support healing.

Intro 1:02:54

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Intro 1:03:15

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Intro 1:03:40

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