

Kelly Fuchek:

I woke up on a Sunday morning and I made my way to the closet and as I was putting on my pajama pants, I noticed that I was kind of jogging a little bit to the left and my pants wouldn't come on. And I thought, "Well that's kind of odd. I don't remember having anything crazy to drink last night or whatever." So at that moment I felt a really sharp pain in the back of my neck and I kind of panicked a little bit, made my way to the sink because I thought if I could wash my face off and I could just kind of snap out of it. And as I was trying to make my way to the sink, I remember the water going, I had the pain down in my neck, and I had a lot of issues with feeling like a warm sensation at the top of my head.

Kelly Fuchek:

When I looked at the mirror as I was splashing water on my face, I just really noticed that my face wasn't casting at all. Like I was not there. And that moment I felt like I was spinning in the room. Severe vertigo was not even like a really good way to describe it. It was more like a feeling that I was spinning in the air sideways while 18 men were trying to pull me down to the ground. And I remember yelling out for my husband, I crawled to my bed, I yelled and yelled and yelled, nothing, no response. I have a severe neck ache, the top of my head was warm.

Kelly Fuchek:

Well my husband finally came into the room and he was looking at me kind of crazy, not understanding what I was saying and I was yelling, but my voice was not casting. And so for however long I thought I was yelling. At that moment, I told him, "Give me some Tylenol," because I'm of Latina descent and Tylenol fixes everything and I said, "Just give me some Tylenol. I'll be fine. I'm just going to go back to sleep." I had severe nausea, the vertigo was just unreal, the pain in the back of my neck was crazy. It wasn't until that night that I felt another round of those same symptoms. So I felt again, the vertigo and everything. And I at no point called 9-1-1, I never called my doctor, and I waited two days before I saw any medical attention. And it still gives me the chills to think about that because I was testing my luck and I'm blessed that nothing severe happened in those two days.

Kelly Fuchek:

And so I am ... Sorry I get emotional with this. I finally called the doctor two days later, they allowed me to get in really quick, and when my doctor found that I could not lift my head up to look at him, and when he asked me to squeeze his hands, my left side, I was squeezing so hard, but he said that I wasn't. And so that's when they immediately called for scans and everything. I was admitted to ICU and it was diagnosed as a spontaneous vertebral artery tear. They do believe that that night there was a second incident, another stroke. So that's why, by the grace of God really, that I was able to, with the doctor's help, 10 days in ICU and some physical therapy outside of the hospital.

Kelly Fuchek:

Things really were just crazy, I was a mother of a toddler at the time and had no will had no ... I just was dumbfounded when they told me that I had had a stroke because I had thought that it was elderly people only and I wasn't elderly. Although I was 70 pounds heavier and a smoker, it just didn't cross my mind.

Carey Pena:

You just heard a powerful story directly from two times stroke survivor, Kelly Fuchek, who knows firsthand why physical activity after a stroke is very important for preventing another event. The COVID pandemic is making it even more difficult for many stroke survivors, like her, to attend physical therapy appointments or to get physical activity while practicing social distancing.

Carey Pena:

Hi there, I'm Carey Pena and here's a power bite of what you'll learn in today's show. This podcast will discuss why physical activity is important for stroke survivors and share tips and resources for staying active even while staying at home. You'll hear more from Kelly about her personal wellness journey of recovery and weight loss. Plus, we'll be joined by Dr. Rani Whitfield, who will share how physical activity can aid in reducing symptoms of depression and help with mobility, which can prevent a fall. You'll also learn how caregivers can support their stroke survivor in being physically active and much more.

Carey Pena:

But first, Kelly Fuchek was 32 years old, severely overweight, and a smoker with no fitness regiment, when she suffered two strokes on the same day. Now age 41, she has worked hard since then to lose weight and live a healthier, more active life. She now owns a wellness company called A Size Strong, that assists companies, schools, and households in making the lifestyle changes needed for wellness. Her physical transformation has better enabled her to weather the COVID-19 pandemic. Kelly, thank you so much for joining us today.

Kelly Fuchek:

Thank you, appreciate it.

Carey Pena:

You have talked openly about being 70 pounds overweight and a smoker at the time that you had your stroke. So how have you been able to make the lifestyle changes that helped transform you?

Kelly Fuchek:

Absolutely. After I got the all clear from my doctor, about a year later, my doctor said to get on the treadmill or give him two minutes a day of walking activity and eat healthy. And so I really didn't know what that meant. Honestly, I was not a cooker, I didn't know how to cook. I did have a treadmill and I'd always call it my wardrobe helper, it was just holding my clothes. And so I took all the clothes off and I did two minutes on the treadmill and that was the most horrible two minutes I'd ever had, but that one small step grew into so many positive things. It was the catalyst and it was my lifesaver in my wellness journey because two minutes led to a 5k and has led to several things, seven half marathons, and a love for fitness. Really, it was just learning different ways how to cook and taking that one small step.

Carey Pena:

You have such an inspirational story. As a stroke survivor, physical activity can obviously be so much more difficult due to mobility challenges and fatigue. What advice do you have for other stroke survivors about how to overcome those difficulties?

Kelly Fuchek:

Yes, so the first, honestly, year to 18 months, the fatigue was severe and I found myself very frustrated that I couldn't do certain things or have the stamina that I thought that I should have. And so I sought a lot of help with mental health. Don't be afraid to seek outside help and get some thoughts written down, start a journal, that helped me a lot as well.

Kelly Fuchek:

After seeking out mental health help, I've learned a lot of different tools on how to channel my fears and my survivor's guilt and a lot of different depression issues, anxiety, emotional wellbeing. I noticed that when I would start walking that I would feel more confident and I would push it a little bit further and I found things that made me proud of myself. And that little bit mentally helped me with my wellbeing because I then felt, "Okay, I survived the stroke. I am on my way to losing weight." I think as the scale would drop, it didn't really determine my worth, but as the scale dropped and the miles added on my shoes, I felt invincible. And I really want other stroke survivors to realize that it takes time and it takes hard work and dedication. But take it one step at a time and anything physical, one step at a time, will help you.

Carey Pena:

Kelly, how are you staying physically active during this pandemic when stroke survivors need to stay at home as much as possible to protect themselves from getting the Coronavirus?

Kelly Fuchek:

So that has been a challenge. I also coach a fitness class at night, so I have found that it's hard for me to get in my normal activity. I always love to invite people to look for a program online, apps, and videos. I know AHA has the Move More movement and Go Red Get Fit is amazing on Facebook, so much inspiration. I also encourage and love to advise that people maybe take a walk and listen to some music or a podcast and really help clear your mind as you're walking and that'll help. I like to say, you're not stuck at home, you're safe at home, but definitely moving your body is most important.

Carey Pena:

And before I turned to our expert, I just want to ask you, how are you doing? This seems to be a very emotional journey that you've been on. How are you doing today?

Kelly Fuchek:

Today, it's a lot of ups and downs if I'm being honest, and I really am always honest. The first four years of my stroke I didn't even mention it to anybody. I was ashamed. So coming up on 10 years now, a lot has changed and as of right now, I feel like the best I've ever felt in my life. I'm coaching people with fitness, I'm helping households, I'm helping my family and my kids learn how to cook. I'm very blessed. I try to make the most of my second chance and I try to make an impact and help others the best I can because I am so grateful.

Carey Pena:

Kelly, thank you so much for sharing your inspirational story with us. And I want to turn now to Dr. Rani Whitfield, a Board-Certified Family Physician with a Certificate of Added Qualification in Sports Medicine. He is currently in private practice in his native Baton Rouge, Louisiana. He's been a long time volunteer of the American Stroke Association earning the ASA Southeastern Affiliates Service Award and

the American Stroke Association Legacy Award. Dr. Whitfield, thank you so much for hopping on with us today.

Dr. Rani Whitfield:

No, thank you Carey. This is a great platform and obviously I don't have a whole lot to do when hanging out at home, so why not talk with you today?

Carey Pena:

We really appreciate it. Let's start by talking about why physical activity is so important for stroke survivors.

Dr. Rani Whitfield:

And I love that you used the word physical activity and not so much exercise. For some reason people are intimidated by the word exercise, but physical activity is so, so very important for preventing another stroke. It's associated with a 10 to 30% reduction in the incidents of stroke. And so again, after a stroke, it's important to start making physical activity a part of your routine. And I'm just so proud of Kelly and what she's done. Being inactive is a risk factor for stroke, so exercising can help prevent a recurrent stroke, in addition to the other physical benefits that you can have. Cognitive recovery in strokes, you'll hear us often refer to brain health is just as important as heart health and they're directly connected. And so people sometimes neglect one or the other. You can't live without your brain, you definitely can't live without your heart.

Dr. Rani Whitfield:

If you look at some of the research as well, and this is something that many people don't realize, many of my stroke patients and survivors become depressed. And so physical activity and exercise can help [inaudible 00:12:04] the depression. You see that in over a third of the post stroke survivors, so it's also very, very important. So we need to get at least the recommended amount of physical activity. There's some stats about probably 15% of every adult in most States are not active, it's probably higher than that, but we need to get at least 150 minutes of moderate to vigorous activity. 75 minutes of vigorous activity or combination of the two to help strengthen our bones and muscles, improve our mental health and cognitive function, and most importantly, reduce our risk of heart disease and stroke.

Carey Pena:

And why is the physical activity even more important right now during this COVID-19 crisis?

Dr. Rani Whitfield:

Carey, we're stuck at home. So what do you do? You're snacking, you're watching TV, and you're just not moving. So got to get up, you got to be active. It's just one of the best ways to keep your spirit, your mind, your body, just healthy during this time period, a lot of people are stressed out. I think one of the most beautiful things that I've seen during this period, I have neighbors that I had no idea lived in my actual neighborhood, so I'll be seeing folks in the streets and we're walking to the park and of course we're social distancing, but we're waving at each other like, "Hey man, I didn't know you lived out here."

Dr. Rani Whitfield:

So again, being physically active helps our mood, our spirits, improves the overall quality of life. And think about this, one in four stroke survivors will have another stroke. So if we can find a way to reduce that incidence by increasing our physical activity, eating properly, you know we talk about Life's Simple 7, if you're smoking, not smoking, all those bad habits, getting your blood pressure and blood sugar checked, if we can do those things and reduce our incidence of stroke and we've done a great job. [Inaudible 00:13:34] American Stroke Association, reducing those numbers, but we still got a lot of work to do. And since I have the free time to talk to you, Carey, we are going to keep talking.

Carey Pena:

All right, good. Because I have a few more questions for you.

Dr. Rani Whitfield:

Oh wow, okay.

Carey Pena:

Whenever I get someone like yourself on the line, I like to get through as much information that's so valuable to people as possible. So on that note, what can stroke survivors do to stay physically active even while sheltering in place and self quarantining? Because a lot of people might be listening to this thinking, "What do I do? What do I do to keep moving?"

Dr. Rani Whitfield:

Move. And [inaudible 00:14:06] one of the biggest misconceptions with COVID-19, Coronavirus, SARS-CoV-2, whatever you want to call it, came a lot of misinformation. And so we've got to dispel some of these myths. There is nothing about the virus that limits you from getting outside of the house. Now we want a social distance of course, six feet or greater from individuals, and masking up if you're going to be around folks, but the key to remember is that any movement is better than none at all. And so especially for our stroke survivors, if they have the option to do virtual health, the TeleVisits, telecommunication with their rehab or physical therapist, continue those. Maybe if there's one in-person visit, using the safety precautions that we talked about, hand washing, sanitizing, masking, but if there's one visit, then they could put a regimen together that you could take home.

Dr. Rani Whitfield:

And then of course, like I said, using the virtual options to have that done, and many trainers and physicians ... I'm doing a lot of telemedicine at the office right now. What's really cool though is on the stroke.org website is 29 post-stroke exercise videos, demonstrated by physical therapists. So I'm giving you guys all the options, there's no excuse, and this can help the survivors stay active while quarantined. So check out stroke.org to view those videos, there's some really cool videos. They also have some resources available to help you move, it's called Move More during the COVID pandemic. And you can find those tips at heart.org/movemoremonth. So there's no excuses, I'm a guy about minimizing excuses, no days off.

Dr. Rani Whitfield:

But again, please before you do this stuff, so again, we're giving advice and I'm not everybody's doctor, I wish I could be, I just love people, but talk to your healthcare providers, your physical therapist, before starting any new physical activity or exercise program. But if you're cleared to do it, you really don't

have an excuse. We've got the stroke.org 29 post exercise videos, there's tons of resources out there for you guys to stay active.

Carey Pena:

No excuses.

Dr. Rani Whitfield:

None at all.

Carey Pena:

Dr. Wakefield, can you talk to me about how family members or caregivers might be able to support their stroke survivor in being physically active?

Dr. Rani Whitfield:

Yeah. A lot of times the caregivers get left out of the conversation and as I always tell people, the caregivers need love too, but you have to embrace that time being spent together. You're stuck in the house with the same people all day, every day. I'm still working, so work is my escape from my 22 month old, who's getting in trouble like every five seconds. But if you are quarantined with your loved ones, and I have to put emphasis on the word loved ones, you got to still love them, you might not like them today, but you got to love them all the time, walk, get out of the house and walk together. That's a great exercise for both individuals.

Dr. Rani Whitfield:

And we've had some really nice weather, I'm in Louisiana, so we have some nice weather here lately, so get out and walk and use that family time to talk and FaceTime somebody. Maybe start a stretching or workout routine together and progress that together. Record your videos and share them on social media. I used to record my workouts and share them on social media. So again, just embrace that time together and remember you don't have to like your loved ones all the time, but you got to love him all the time, so spend some quality time to get to know them again.

Carey Pena:

I love that. And if a stroke survivor is currently receiving physical therapy either at home or on an outpatient basis, should they continue?

Dr. Rani Whitfield:

Without a doubt. But again, making sure that you are cleared by your primary care doctor, your neurologist, whoever your primary care team is. Make sure that they know what you're doing, that you're clear to do it again. The limitation of telemedicine is I'm a touchy feely guy and I think COVID-19 is going to change our new normal about how we interact with patients. It's always much better to examine somebody through telemedicine or telehealth, but just make sure you contact your providers to say that, "Hey, I'm going to continue with my programs. Is there anything I need to be looking for?" Of course, remember those warning signs of stroke, F A S T, face, arm, speech, time, fast. And if you're really [inaudible 00:17:47], I got a music video I did with Dee-1 talking about the warning signs of stroke, is really cool. It's Hip Hop Doc in his essence, so check it out. But get the list of exercises together, make sure you know your medications.

Dr. Rani Whitfield:

I mean, pretty straightforward and simple stuff, but I can't emphasize enough to make sure that your doctors know what you're doing, that you stay in touch with your physicians, taking medications as prescribed. And any home modifications that are needed so that you can exercise and there's tons of ways to get exercise in. I do refer you guys back to those 29 exercises on stroke.org, some really good exercises that you can do at home.

Carey Pena:

Dr. Whitfield, just as we close things out here, Kelly's story is so inspirational. I mean, just one foot in front of the other each day fighting through the mental part of it, the emotional part of it, and she's so honest about it. What do you think we can all learn from her story?

Dr. Rani Whitfield:

I mean, I'm actually not very happy with her right now because I didn't plan on tearing up during the interview. But that's what she does, so I'll just deal with it. But yes, I mean, it takes a lot to recover and some people give up and I see it. I mentioned depression early in our interview. And so what we learned is that it just took a lot of strength and support. Her husband was there for her and she was able to get through this. But it's not easy and we're not telling anyone that it's easy, but if you can lock into your caregivers, your family, and your support system, that will get you through these tough times. And so I just really applaud her for all her efforts and can't wait to meet her. And we're going to do some sprints or something together, I'm going to challenge her on something.

Carey Pena:

She sounds like she's quite the runner these days. And what final word would you like to leave the audience with? You sound like such an inspirational person and someone who, I'm sure, your patients all love. What final word would you like to leave the audience with?

Dr. Rani Whitfield:

This too shall pass, everyone. I'm a praying guy and I know this is tough times for us all. A lot of folks out of work, it's tough, but this too shall pass. We'll get back to some sense of normalcy, but until then, let's continue to lean on each other and on those downtimes just reach out to one another and just stay connected. I mean, we're blessed with the social media and ... You know, I was sick of it at one point, now I'm so glad that we have it because now I can connect with folks and FaceTime and what have you. And don't give up and let's put the confidence that we have in ourselves and I know it'll be better on the other side. If you don't come out of this pandemic better, stronger, faster, better looking, that means losing weight because you got some extra time, then I'm going to be very disappointed in you.

Dr. Rani Whitfield:

So I want all of us to take advantage of this extra time, if you have it, and for those of you that don't, we really applaud our first-line folks, all the healthcare providers that are out there busting their butts. We've lost some to this pandemic, so thank you guys for all that you're doing for us, keeping the stores open that we need, necessary stores. Our nurses, our blue collar workers, we love you guys. We just really appreciate everything you're doing.

Carey Pena:

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No, I loved every word. Dr. Whitfield-

Dr. Rani Whitfield:

You got me emotional Carey. You and Kelly are not helping this thing at all.

Carey Pena:

Dr. Whitfield, AKA the Hip Hop Doc, thank you so much sir. Really appreciate you being here with us today. And Kelly, thank you for sharing your inspirational story. I know that you will continue to get out there and inspire all those around you, and thanks to all of you for joining us. And please remember to share this show with someone who needs it. Wash your hands often. Stay home as much as possible. Learn more at stroke.org or call our Stroke Warmline at 1-888-4-STROKE. That's 888-478-7653. I'm Carey Pena, thanks for being here.