Nikolai Pivcevich, 64 years old

For years I worked as a chief technical officer in the oil refinery. I had a very responsible and restless job. I had many subordinates and each of them had their own character, degree of responsibility and willingness to do the job. I was able to get along with everybody. I was responsible for almost everything: safety measures, gas supply, water supply and electricity. You would think that I would not have problems with a lunchroom or canteen, but even there I had to ensure the safety of the workers. Everything had to work properly: the sewerage, gas, electricity and so on. My phone wouldn’t stop ringing day and night.

I had a huge sense of responsibility and I couldn`t leave the plant to be cast adrift so that I could have a proper vacation. Of course, I had days off. And I spent those long-awaited holidays with my family at our summer house doing things like gardening, building a greenhouse, growing vegetables and doing chores. And then back to work. It continued for four years without a proper vacation.

Eleven years ago, when I was 53 years old, I had a stroke. It happened on the 1st April, 2004. That’s the day fate pulled a stunt on me.

I never knew anything about a stroke. I could never have imagined something like this could happen to me. If I had known just a bit about strokes, nothing like that would have ever happened to me. And even though the doctor told me to take my pills, I never listened to him! So it happened. I accepted my fate. I clawed my way back with the help of my willpower and my tenacity. I worked hard and moved on. I am not lying in my bed and complaining about my fate. I don’t allow myself to be a pessimist.

The stroke happened at the summer house. As usual after work, I went straight to the summer house and had a meal. There was a world hockey championship match between Russia and Latvia on TV. I was definitely rooting for our team. During the break, I decided to drink some tea. I stood up and walked towards the sink, opened the tap to pour some water into the tea-kettle… and suddenly a jolt went throughout my body. I tried to close the tap and I couldn`t do it, my hand refused to obey… When my wife was passing by the kitchen, the only thing I managed to tell her was that I had been paralyzed. That instant my wife dragged me to the couch. I remember that my arm and leg refused to move. The ambulance arrived quickly. The doctors told us that we needed to go to the hospital immediately. They put me on a stretcher, carried me to the ambulance, placed me in it and shut the door. That was all I remembered. I woke up the next day in the ICU.

The plant`s director called first. I managed to tell him the horrible news before I passed out. After a certain period of time, I woke up to find my friends, family and co-workers standing by my hospital bed. Most of them had sad faces; some of them were crying... I was really hurt and unhappy that I turned out to be in such helpless state... I’ve seen happier corpses... And then I saw my family: wife, kids and my brother. I tried to stand up, but I couldn’t.

After a while I was taken to the railway hospital. Unfortunately, neither my arm nor my leg moved like they used to. My ability to speak was also only coming back slowly. In such condition, I was discharged and brought home from the hospital. I was brought home in a wheelchair and laid on the couch. At home I cried, realizing that I had become an invalid and couldn`t even go to the bathroom on my own. Life was suddenly divided into “before” and “after”. It’s hard to even remember those first days after having the stroke. There was a feeling of complete helplessness and loss. It takes my breath away. It felt like I had lost everything and life was over. At that moment, I felt a sharp feeling of uselessness. It was impossible not only to go to work, but also to get out of bed. “Who would need someone as helpless as me?” – this question bothered me all the time.

It was a sunny day outside, the birds were singing, the lilac bloomed. Spring came. While sitting in the wheelchair and looking at the lilac, I decided that I need to do something. I came to realize that crying wouldn’t solve anything, life goes on and you need to live it! Enough is enough! Yes, it would be difficult, but even this distress could be, and needed to be, overcome. It was very painful and difficult to realize that it would take me a very long time to recover and I would need all my strength. This illness wouldn’t go away in a day or two; I would have to fight it a very long time...

I started thinking of what to do. And in a few weeks I left for the “Jaunkemeri” health centre for rehabilitation. I stayed there for 2 months and every day with my tenacity and persistence I exercised to restore my ability to walk. It is there that I took my first steps. I am very thankful to my physiotherapist Alexander Romanenko who helped me to learn to walk again. I remember how it happened. It is difficult to forget such a thing!

In the beginning I didn’t walk at all. First of all I just needed to stand up. It took a lot of effort to do that. Then Sasha gave me a tripod, which was my assistant for some time. I was scared to walk on my own, without anyone looking after me. Sasha was within call when needed. He kept his hand on my shoulder. It calmed me down and gave me strength and confidence that someday I would be able to do things on my own once again. Finally, I managed to take the first step. I felt I had never been so happy before! This was a victory! Soon, I took the second step. I was on my way to success. I started to walk with a walking stick and Sasha tried to help me any way he could. And one day Sasha let me go off on my own. I didn’t notice it straightaway. I went a few metres, stopped, looked back and saw that Sasha a long way away from me. I realized that I was walking without any help. That's how Sasha saved me from my fear of walking. It was another victory over my illness: I clearly understood that it would require a lot of time and effort from me to recover. And all the difficulties no longer frightened me.

With the help of a walking stick, I began to move around the flat. I was able to walk to the kitchen and bathroom. At that time, I thought that if I was able to go to the toilet, then why I couldn’t go out for a walk. I did want to go outside and soon I was sure that I would manage to do it. I began thinking about things I needed to do, of body therapies that would help to restore body movements, and about procedures I should get...

Once again, I am in a sanatorium, but in another one, in Vaivari. I met a wonderful physiotherapist Vitaly, who showed me how to walk with a crutch! “Life goes on!” - I had to hope for the best. Finally, I could move myself more easily, leaning only on the crutch. This was another victory for me! This was a victory over my very difficult life situation.

It was a good start, but the wins had just begun! Bit by bit, I recovered my ability to speak. I began to go out on my own, got acquainted with my neighbors who I never met before due to work. Actually, before my illness, I came home from work only to sleep. I made new friends. I regained new interest in life. I am grateful to my work colleagues, especially to the director of the company, Vladimir Ivanovitch Oderov! They did not forget about me, they visited me, told me about how things were at work, asked for advice in case something happened unexpectedly. I thought about these things as much as I could and then gave them my advice. And they listened to me very carefully. For me, this was extremely important. Relatives, friends, co-workers — everyone believed that I would be able to get up, to recover, because my mind was working and, thank God, is still working.

I recall my experience after the stroke when I began to walk. I went to visit my neighbor in hospital. When I arrived home, I opened the door and went into the flat, and then ... blackout. It turned out that I had had a mini-stroke. While I was in the hospital, they woke me up, and it looked like everything started returning to normal. I realized I was scared of losing my memory! Yes, God was merciful. At that moment I thought that the most important thing was the brain. That is really scary, when you lose your memory, mind. After I got to my feet, I immediately went to church. After all the hardships I had been going through, I began to believe in God. I am glad that I am not someone without hope. After all, I can go to the toilet, take a bath, dress, go out and walk all by myself. It is true, the arm and leg significantly limit my movements. I would like to move, get up, and walk quicker.

I recall how my daughter took me to the mini-bus station. I got on the minibus because it was way more problematic for me to get on the train and went to Jurmala to the “Belorusija” sanatorium. I returned home on my own. In the sanatorium, I got met Volodya Starostin, then Vladislav. Volodya told me about Vigor, that there is a kind of a society of psychological support for people who have suffered a stroke as well as their relatives. This is how I found myself in Vigor. Marina Pavlovna, a wonderful person, never let me get upset. With her attitude toward the illness, she showed me that everything would be all right, that it was possible to overcome everything. I was not allowed to give up and be in despair. So still I do not give up.

After the stroke, I had and still have a desire to live a normal life not as a handicapped person; I just want to be myself. As soon as I felt better, I immediately started driving my car. Some of my arm and leg movements were limited but it did not bother me much. I drove my car well, no one complained. I recall how I got behind the wheel. One of my friends came to visit by car. Suddenly, I thought: "I wish I could start driving!" And my friend said: “Kolya, if you want to sit behind the wheel, you can try. It is an automatic car.” I sat in the car, and I managed to do it! That is how I started to drive by myself. My friend helped me, because he trusted me with his car. I remember how we, with Marina Pavlovna and other “vigorians” from Vigor, went berry-picking and looked for mushrooms in the forest, visited my summer house, went to Jurmala to the “Belorusija” sanatorium. And I went to work by car when there was a difficult issue, which my colleagues were not able to answer. Yes, they were surprised when I went there by myself. I am glad that colleagues from work did not forget me, their director. Even today, they come to me or ask me to go to the factory so I can give them some advice. After all, the knowledge and experience I gained over many years would not disappear. Positive emotions are very important for me, especially when everything seems to be difficult, when I start to think that life does not make any sense anymore! In my opinion, it is really valuable to bring purpose to your life. No matter what, I worked for 40 years. And being out of work was unbelievably difficult. My comrades did really well. They helped me to believe that I was needed. The most important event after the stroke was when the chief called and asked me to help make a line for draining the oil. I told them what I thought should be done. They did what as I said and it worked out. They pumped the oil without any efforts. It was a pleasure! I managed to move on. I was able not only to eat and sleep but I was also able to help others. That was when I realized I had reasons to live. Thoughts about my paralyzed arm and foot finally stopped bothering me. I realized that I did not need my limbs in order to talk about my work, give advice or suggest let’s say how to re-route a pipeline, which valves suited which capacity, i.e. give full consultations on safety issues.

My children make me happy, too. I have two grown up daughters. I was very happy when my first daughter married and then gave birth to my first grandson who was born before the stroke. I managed to babysit him a bit before my illness. Now he has grown up, he’s 13 years old, bright boy. He brings me joy when he visits. Then my second daughter got married. And she gave birth to a grandson, too! I did not spend much time with my own children because my job took all my time. But now I have spare time for my grandsons. I played with them, filmed them. Grandsons are the bearers of our family name. Now my elder daughter lives on the Canary Islands and the younger one lives in Italy. It is sad that they are so far away. But what can you do? That is how life works. But they do not forget us old folks. They visit us and help with the work around the flat and country house as well. They visited us this summer, too. It made our summer. My younger daughter has invited us to Italy. She lives with her husband not far from Verona on the shore of a lake. But for now, we cannot go there. My wife is waiting for some eye surgery, and I do not want to be a burden. Although I think about visiting them. I would like to go for a walk along the lakeside and breathe in some fresh and warm Italian air. I would like to look at beautiful yachts from around there. And the lake is clear – you can see swimming carp and everything down below! Staggering!

I would have visited both of my daughters if only I had not come apart. I would help my wife with the housekeeping and everything else she has to do. I came apart literally when I was on my way to the social services. I got to the automatic door and, as I approached it, it closed and it hurt me really badly. I was shocked and fell over. I broke my leg and arm because of that unfortunate fall. Fate was cruel but it prepared for me one more trial - I needed surgery. I was broken.

It made me unhappy, even angry. I mean, why me?! You know, I got these injuries not just anywhere but in the social services building, where many people go every day, including disabled people too. I did not expect it. I could never have imagined that I would be injured in that building, that I would need to go under the knife in order to start walking again. Well, I’m now walking much worse after that surgery than after the stroke. My arm almost stopped listening to me and started reacting to weather changes. It was hard for me to handle this accident, especially psychologically. I guess the mental pain has stayed with me, at least partly. I was really laid low. I lost my confidence after I broke these bones. I acquired “precariousness complex” and started to be afraid of falling over and breaking bones again. Now I play it safe. I find it hard to accept my limitations. I wish I now still had the previous sensation. In my hand I started to visit Vigor less often and I miss my friends there. I get in touch by phone with my friends Volodya Starostin, Volodya Kartopolycev and Stanislav. We also do meet up but not often. We talk about our achievements. Actually, I thank God that I can walk. Slowly but steadily. I know a man who survived a stroke 12 years ago and still can’t walk. It would be a pure nightmare if that had happened to me. That is how I take heart. Sometimes I feel sad and hopeless; sometimes these feelings just overwhelm me. I want to do things, let’s say, something in the kitchen garden, but I can’t because of my disabilities. But there is no way I am selling the summer house. Hell no! That is a perfect holiday place for my children and grandsons.

Now, as time passes, I know that you should never hurry. But I hurried. I always hurried to live. Before and after the illness. I had to hurry. I had to. Thank goodness, I still have some energy. My energy and will to walk are what make me keep going. Systematic exercises. I guess my stubbornness helped me to get through those. Stubbornness made me take the first step after the stroke, going out and driving a car. I achieved all these milestones thanks to my persistence and positive thinking. Do or die. I’m 65 now and I feel that I have less energy now but not less optimism. It is a good thing that I am not sorry for myself. I’m not lying in my bed and crying. My wife helps and motivates me as well.

Material values have lost their meaning since the stroke. For example, I do not care much about my clothes now. I do not care whether something suits me or not. The key point is to feel warm and cozy.

I remember my youth. I wanted to get a big house and a car, bigger than the average. But for now, I just want to be it clean.

Now I understand that the most important thing in life is health. You should care about your health. You need to be meticulous about it. If I do not feel well, then I try not to strain myself. When I do my exercises, I ease off. I stay inside because the simplest walk is potentially very demanding and it takes a lot of energy from me. I stay at home, read newspapers, watch TV, do crosswords and call my friends. In short, I am looking for other hobbies that are less energetic. Now I think about taking care of myself. If something does not work out, I don’t take it so hard. I put things off until tomorrow. If it doesn’t work out tomorrow, I do not worry, but I start thinking how things can be done differently.

When you do not work, there is a lot of time. Staying at home, I fix everything. For example, recently I mended the door-handle in the bathroom. I got my thoughts together and decided to take the lock apart. And I fixed it. I taught myself to repair sockets.

This spring I found myself an exciting occupation: I walked upstairs to the ninth floor completely by myself every day (I live on the first floor). It is not for nothing, so I can keep watching over the crow. Then I went downstairs backwards without any assistant. There is a tree next to our house; the crow nested high up in the tree and hatched the nestlings. So I kept watching the birds until the chicks flew left the nest. I have become a natural scientist in my old age and my wife is happy with my new hobby.

At home, I sit in a boring room; I watch the foolish moon. I waste my time. I have nothing to do so I’m just hanging around. But nothing ever happens and it drives me up the wall. So I have found myself some new activities, hobbies. After all, the motto of my life was and is: “To live, not to exist.” I got up even after such severe fractures, because I have a lot to do. We still have to go to Belarus and fly to see our daughter. She lives in the Canary Islands and I want to see it… It’s a miracle – we fly to the Canary Islands! And Italy is waiting for me - my other daughter is calling. Recently I met up with a friend who had been to his grandson’s wedding. He told me: “God grant you to live until the wedding of your grandson, because there can be nothing better in life!” So I want to live until the wedding of my grandson and check the truth of his words.

Long ago, I had an idea to create a museum of steam engines. I shared it with the director of the plant and he approved. Now I am the director of the steam engine museum. That is what I am doing now. There are already 4 steam engines. There are also rooms for the museum, which will be located on Tvayku Street, 35. In order to move more easily, I go to the Hospital of Traumatology and Orthopedics for rehabilitation. I still develop my joints.

Books also support my belief in myself, the belief that everything will turn out OK. I like to re-read the novel «The Favorite» by Valentin Pikul very much. I have already read it several times. I like Potemkin very much. I even imitate him in some ways. As Potemkin said, “Money is rubbish, and people are everything”. When Potemkin died, Suvorov said, “The man was great, both in body and soul.” “The Count of Monte-Cristo” is also my handbook. I read it and it strengthens my faith. My wife prefers books by Dontsova. But I don’t like her very much… I read church books. I remember my mother reading the Bible. My mother had a very strong faith. I remember her always saying to me, when I left home, “Kolechka, you should pray to God before going on the road”.

I realized what is required for a successful recovery is faith, self-confidence, the faith of people close to you and the faith of friends. It's also important to have faith in people. “We must believe and love free of charge! Only this way can you find happiness.” Not only do you exploit a person’s kindness, but you also need to give him a part of your soul.

*The conversation was lead and recorded by volunteer Jelena Mozgova*

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