**Vladimir Starostin, 47 years old**

It is three and a half years since I suffered an ischemic attack in the spring of 2003.

The motor functions on the right hand side of my body and my speech and memory were disrupted. At that time, I was 43 years old. I didn’t go anywhere for a long time and didn’t talk to anyone, but just spent my time thinking. I thought about my never-ending work, but now there isn’t any place to go. I was just lying there, thinking. There was a time when all I wanted was just to die. Then time passed, and I started to think about something else.

It took a long time until I started to feel better. When I had had the stroke, I was very depressed. Now time has passed and I feel completely different.

It took a long time to recover. I was unconsciousness for several days. Then I came round but I could neither speak nor move. It seemed to me that I was speaking. But my speech was so quiet that nobody heard anything. I just opened my mouth. It was like this for the first year. In my mind, I had already said everything, but my tongue didn’t obey. I couldn’t move it. It was awful when I couldn’t talk at all.

Later, when I had begun to speak, I started to explain right away to people who weren’t able to speak. Sometimes, I didn’t try to talk at all because I could only envisage long explanations. Now I speak much better than before. I still try to explain what I want to say in different ways. I am happy that I have made progress. I start to speak faster. When I speak calmly, then everything is alright. When I start worrying, a “breaking mechanism” turns on again. I start to speak slowly and it is difficult for me to find the right words.

After the stroke, I had thoughts about death. Although I think people go through that in different ways. There are people who try to recover through that from the first day. And thoughts about death never come to their minds. But it seems to me that at some time most stroke survivors want to die. May be in a month, two, or three... it goes away.

What did I feel at that moment? During the first days of my illness, I tried to keep my spirits up all the time. I thought that my hand would be alright. I hoped that recovery would take not a long time. And then, when I realized that I wouldn’t recover quickly, I felt into despair. And I also thought that I couldn't do anything and wouldn’t be able do anything for the rest of my life. At that time, I just wanted to die. Summer came. All around me everything was so green, but I was still not able to walk. And that period lasted almost three month. I wasn’t even afraid of staying helpless. If I don't know how to drill I can’t be a builder, it was obvious. I was more worried about my family and private life. It turned out that my wife believed in me. She believed that I would fully recover. Maybe not now, but some day. And if you don’t know about the natural time frame for recovering dysfunctions, you begin to worry about that. Now, from my own experience, I can tell you that you must be patient. Not everyone recovers quickly.

It was hard for my wife and children to live with me. They take care of me, love me. I have always felt it. But I had very negative thoughts. All that matters to me right now is doing everything that I can for them. And eventually I won’t think that anything is wrong. I appreciate time. If I have three days, I will be able to do this and that. If I have twenty years, I will keep trying to work.

For those who have suffered a stroke and are desperate because they want to talk but are not able to, I would give them this advice. The most essential thing for them is to keep occupied as much as possible. I know that there are people who are not able to get up. I also know people who can’t talk. Happens the other way - one can talk but the hands don’t work. I encourage them do physical activities or read books. Everything improves gradually in time!

I am happy that I can share my experience and maybe that will help someone. I hope that my story will help men, women and children.

Before the stroke I worked as a builder. Since the stroke, I can use only one (left) hand, so I can’t work as I used to. Although I don’t regret about the loss my ability to be a builder, today it is not so tangible for me that I really regret it... Today I can again do some metal work with my hands (metal brackets, fastens, rots for fences, balconies) and I enjoy that. I also draw. It is my hobby. I began to draw before the stroke. After the stroke, I started to try to draw with my left hand. I still draw with my left hand. I give my paintings mostly to my good friends. Recently I gave some paintings to the medical institution.

If I tell you what I lost after the stroke, I can tell that I want to do a lot of things today but I'm still unable to do them. When the stroke happened, the guys from my construction crew continued to work for me for some time. And then they left. I had to close my company because I wasn’t able to work But a year and a half later they told me every time we met: “If you return to work, we will quit our jobs and come back to work for your company.” That made me feels so good! However, I knew that I wouldn’t be able to work as I had been able to before. Now, if somebody asked me to make something from metal parts, I could do something. Sometimes I make things, but it is very difficult to do something with one hand... And sometimes I get really angry and start crying when nobody is nearby… And then I keep working!

Another lost dream is sailing... My youngest son used to sail with me. When I had the stroke, he spent a lot of time with me and gave me a lot of his attention. My wife had three jobs and my older son was upper-year student. But my 14-year-old son helped me a lot and that is why he didn’t have time for hi training programs. And he finally dropped sailing. It was a shame. I bought a sailboat a year before the stroke. I sailed that summer and bought a diving suit in the autumn. I had always wanted to sail in my spare time. I even taught my wife to sail. And I was going to buy a second boat the following year. But my dream didn't come true... Honestly, I still dream and hope about it. And I remember that boat. I don't tell anybody but I hope someday my dream will come true.

Sadly, I’m not so good at using a computer... I used to be able to type, to draw, to read. I could freely read Latvian. Now I forgot the Latvian language. I still have reading problems but now I can read a little beat better. I play computer games and type simple texts. It’s hard for me to do anything more complex.

What have I gained since my stroke? Firstly, I started to draw again. I draw with my left hand now. Secondly, I have become calmer and more patient. I’m still a maximalist. But before the stroke if I didn’t have time to do anything or to go, I got angry. But now I do not worry in the same situations. And I try to use this time for something useful. For example, when I wait for a trolleybus I do eye exercises.

I learned much more about the recovery of organisms during this time. Now I know about different directions of recovery. I can give advice to people and help them.

In addition, I have discovered the importance of relations in my family. My relationships with my children have changed. We have become much closer to each other now.

And I pay more attention to people with disabilities. Before the stroke I didn't pay them any attention but now, when I see a person with disabilities, I think about him or her all day. I think I was lucky because my children were already grown up. Now they are 18 and 23 years old and they were less affected by my stroke.

What would I like now?

I guess I would like to work again soon I would like to make something with my hands, to the best of my ability. And I want to be healthy again.

I want to work in the construction industry as before, but now in a different way. I want more orders from private customers. I want pay more attention to the small things, the details, than I did before. But it is hard for me to do it alone and maybe I would like to have a teammate, maybe someone who had a stroke too. For six months to a year, I couldn’t make metal frames, but I can make more and better metal products now.

I am very glad that I have been able to use my second hand (my right hand) for work in recent months. I can handle devices, hold something, my skills are improving.

I want to learn to read, but it’s still hard. And I want to learn to write, at least with my left hand. If I could read, it would help me with my work – plans, texts, documentation. I want to master the internet but it’s still hard because of my reading problems. I still can’t read long words but I believe I will be able to do it and gradually I’ll read better.

And I want to travel the world with my wife. Now we try to travel everywhere. We were in Russia and we often go on the countryside in Latvia.

*October 2006*

*The conversation was lead and recorded by volunteer Natasha Sedochenkova*