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The Beat - Episode 7 Final Transcript

Heart disease, stroke and your mental health

[00:00:01] **Kathy** And for me, the very first indication that I wasn't myself was when I had a meltdown in Walmart. That was the first time publicly. And, you know, afterwards thinking about it, I was like, what was that? I know how to handle myself. I know how to behave in public. What happened there?

[00:00:22] **Caroline** Chances are you or someone you know has been personally affected by heart disease and stroke. They can devastate lives, sometimes suddenly. But there's hope. I'm Caroline Lavallée, and you're listening to The Beat, a podcast by Heart & Stroke with support from our generous donors.

In each episode, we're joined by Canada's leading physicians and experts to discuss the most pressing issues related to heart and brain health. And you'll be inspired by the real stories from people living with heart disease and stroke. Thanks for listening. Now let's get into the episode.

After being diagnosed with heart disease or having a stroke, or in my case, being diagnosed with a heart rhythm disorder, you can become intensely aware of the fragility of life. Modern medicine has the ability to repair our physical bodies, giving us a chance to continue enjoying what life has to offer. For some, physical recovery and rehabilitation is all that's required. But for others, it's only the first step. I was terrified after my diagnosis, and like our guests, Kathy and Paul, it impacted my mental and emotional health. Sometimes people are suffering mentally without any visible signs of their physical trauma. I was one of them, and it can be a dark and lonely place until you get the support you need.

In this episode, we'll hear from Dr. Gayla Tennen, a staff psychiatrist at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre. We'll also hear from Kathy Isaac, who suffered a stroke, and Paul Goldberg, who had a heart attack.

Kathy Isaac, a happily married mother of two, was getting used to working from home when the COVID 19 pandemic first hit. As a cybersecurity professional, she still found time to exercise in the morning, take her dog for walks and prepare meals for her family.

[00:02:40] **Kathy** It was a very busy life. I mean, I'm a typical wife and mother with a full-time job. So even though we were locked down, I was always having something to do.

[00:02:49] **Caroline** In March of 2021, Kathy contracted COVID-19 and pneumonia, which led to treatment in the ICU. If things weren't bad enough, she then had a stroke, and it went undetected for six days.

[00:03:07] **Kathy** My initial reaction to learning that I had experienced a stroke was denial. I had already been in the hospital for about two weeks. I had survived COVID-19, pneumonia in the ICU. And I was feeling so much better than I had been feeling just days before that. So when the doctor came and told me that I had had a stroke, I was ready to go home. So once it finally sunk in, I went straight into work mode. I just wanted to know what I needed to do to get better. What are the next steps? How do we move forward? At that time, I didn't really take the time to process what it meant.

[00:03:44] **Caroline** Like Kathy, it took a while for me to accept what was happening. When I first found out that I needed a procedure to treat my heart condition, I had so many questions running through my mind.

[00:03:59] **Kathy** The actual "you've had a stroke" message took a long time to sink in. I think I was probably home by the time. It was like, wait a second, did somebody say I had a stroke? That's long term. What now?

[00:04:12] **Caroline** After a traumatic event like a stroke, the first goal is to recover physically. But in the background, mental health issues can exist unnoticed.

[00:04:25] **Kathy** So after working on the physical recovery, I started to notice some other challenges that I later learned could be tied to having a stroke, like difficulty multitasking, difficulty understanding what people were saying on TV. Then there were some more serious or impactful issues like sensitivity to noisy environments and just a low tolerance for frustrations. Along with that came a bit of impulse control issues and just not feeling like myself.

And for me, the very first indication that I wasn't myself was when I had a meltdown in Walmart. That was the first time publicly and afterwards thinking about it, I was like, what was that? I know how to handle myself. I know how to behave in public. What happened there? And it's over time, more meltdowns, a couple of them public, that I started to realize that this isn't just me losing control. Something's happened. I'm recovering from a brain injury, and there's some impacts to that from a mental health perspective. For me, that's heavier lifting than the physical impacts.

[00:05:38] **Caroline** What Kathy was experiencing is not uncommon, according to Dr. Gayla Tennen, who works in the field of medical and geriatric psychiatry. She focuses on post-stroke psychiatry.

[00:05:52] **Dr. Tennen** So there are several impacts of heart disease and stroke on patients' mental health, including depression, anxiety, cognitive impairment as well as apathy. We also see other emotional changes. For example, some people have trouble regulating their emotions after stroke, and some people have PTSD from their medical experience as well. There's also fatigue, which can have an interplay with all of these issues.

Psychiatric or mental health issues occur quite commonly after a stroke. We know that about one third of people who have stroke develop depression. So that's over 30% of the entire stroke population. Anxiety is also very common at about 25%, and the two often occur together. We also see cognitive impairment, which occurs in about 25% of the post-stroke population, as well as other emotional changes or apathy that occur in about 20% of patients following stroke. And it's important to note that one or several of these issues can coexist.

[00:06:53] **Caroline** Paul Goldberg, a 54-year-old father of two and the owner of a construction business, had a heart attack in April 2018.

[00:07:05] **Paul** About 10 o'clock at night, I was getting ready for bed and all of a sudden I felt excruciating pain in my chest and radiating into my left arm. I wasn't too sure if I was having a heart attack, quite frankly. I didn't know what it was, but it was excruciating.

[00:07:23] **Caroline** Paul had a lot going on in his life at the time. The demands of running his business were plenty of responsibility.

[00:07:32] **Paul** I have to say, I was a fairly intense guy — a type A personality, juggling a lot of things at work and I like to be very responsible, so I take everything in my life quite personally.

[00:07:46] **Caroline** Paul received a life-saving procedure to open his blocked artery. Like Kathy, it took a few days at home after leaving the hospital to process what he had experienced.

[00:07:59] **Paul** It took a while before it really set in, when I really realized that I actually needed other people's help. And that was tough for me because I'm, quite frankly, one person who really doesn't feel like I need a lot of help and I'm very independent to a fault. This was a hard one, to get home and then realize that I needed other people's help.

Well, first of all, I was angry, post heart attack. I'm sure I had a little bit of anger even before, but after my heart attack I did feel angry and I did feel life is not fair and so forth. But the biggest problem I was having was with my medications. So I was on several different medications, and I guess the doctors were just trying to get the dosage right. And, you know, I was on heavy beta blockers, which really slowed down my heart rate. You know, I couldn't walk half of the block down the street without being winded.

And I was a few weeks post heart attack, listening to people that are getting further ahead than I was. So I was again getting frustrated, getting angry. And I think the meds had a huge role in my lack of recovery. Eventually, the doctors did get it right and they took me off some of these strong beta blockers and that was almost like a switch going off. I did feel much better.

As far as my mental health goes, until they got those medications correct, I was really struggling. I was struggling with wanting to live. I was struggling with, you know, catching my breath. I started feeling like a really old man. And at 50, I really didn't want to feel that way.

[00:09:37] **Caroline** To Dr. Tennen, Paul's emotions are understandable given the trauma he had gone through.

[00:09:44] **Dr. Tennen** Many people go through an adjustment just in wrapping their heads around the idea that they had a life-threatening event like a heart attack or stroke. These events are often shocking and can cause fear or emotional distress. Patients may be left feeling discouraged about their recovery. They can also feel misunderstood or disconnected from others — now that they've gone through something that other people usually haven't.

And this may be especially true for people who are younger or people who are lucky enough to walk away from the event without a visible deficit because they seem fine to the people around them. But inside they're not feeling fine. Also, there are added challenges of coping with physical symptoms, new medications or lifestyle changes.

[00:10:27] **Caroline** Research has shown that mental health can play a critical role when recovering from heart disease or stroke.

[00:10:35] **Dr. Tennen** Both cardiac and stroke patients with depression have been shown to have worse functional and rehab outcomes than non-depressed patients. They also have higher morbidity and mortality, which means they do worse medically and have a lower survival rate than non-depressed patients.

It's very important for patients and caregivers to be aware of depression and related issues because treatment can make a difference. And though the exact mechanisms are not totally understood, there are likely biological changes with depression. And there are also behavioural aspects which make sense, if you think about it, because if someone is struggling with depression or anxiety, it is less likely that they can work hard in rehab or establish the new lifestyle habits that will be important for recovery and staying well — for example, starting a new exercise routine or taking new medicines every day or modifying their diet or quitting smoking. It's challenging for many people to do these things when all is going well. So we can only imagine how depression, for example, might interfere with people's ability to carry out these important changes.

[00:11:42] **Caroline** For Kathy, recovery has been both physically and emotionally challenging. After leaving the hospital, she was still recovering from pneumonia in addition to her stroke. She would lose her breath going up or down just one flight of stairs.

[00:12:01] **Kathy** So attempting to do any kind of recovery therapy was really challenging and also very frustrating. Because I knew there was work for me to do, I was just completely incapable of doing it. So I would work first on the breathing exercises and really strengthening my lungs and getting to a point where I could maintain some level of exercise for longer and longer periods. Immediately after going home, I started receiving some in-home therapy, physical and occupational therapy, and then I also did some outpatient therapy at the hospital. And then there was medications and visiting my family doctor. I haven't had a lot of treatment when it comes to mental health specifically. The closest I've gotten is when I was in therapy at the outpatient clinic at the hospital; the person who was doing speech therapy there did provide some supports in that way.

[00:12:59] **Caroline** Kathy has recently found some free mental health services, including cognitive behavioral therapy or CBT, a form of talk therapy that helps people respond to challenging situations in a more effective way.

[00:13:14] **Kathy** So we'll see how it goes. I understand what CBT is and I think that might be the most appropriate treatment for me. I'm going to try this one out. If that doesn't work out, I think I'll have to look for something more intensive.

[00:13:26] **Caroline** During his recovery, Paul participated in a group cardiac rehabilitation program.

[00:13:33] **Paul** When I first joined the program, I really, quite frankly, resisted going and did not want to be there. I felt that, you know, I was a 50-year-old man and the majority of the people in the program, I would say, were in their 70s and 80s. It doesn't mean that there weren't some people that were my age, but the majority were much older than I was. And I felt like I didn't belong. But as I've since learned, you know, heart disease doesn't check and see what your age is. And I really didn't want to be there. I felt angry still that I had to go. It took me a while to realize that these people are actually there to help you.

[00:14:12] **Caroline** When Paul eventually gave the program a chance, he started to see some real benefits.

[00:14:19] **Paul** Well, I felt like I had accomplished something. And I felt like I left there, really getting a better grasp of what I needed to do mentally as well as physically moving forward. You know, it's kind of like giving somebody the tools that they have to work with and then sort of setting you on your way. That being said, they made it very clear that they're always there if you need or have questions.

We had one session where a social worker had joined the group. They broke it down into groups of four and five. And you had an opportunity to speak about your life and kind of what brought you to, you know, maybe the stresses that you had in your life, which brought you to being at this rehabilitation program. And some of the other stories were very impactful. And I realized that I didn't have much to complain about. I've heard some other stories from some of these and I'll say men, because I was in a group of four older men. And I listened to what they said with open ears, and it was it really impacted me. I would say in all of my rehabilitation, it was a very impactful session that we had, you know, to understand that other people are going through very similar, if not worse situations than yourself. And understanding that these older men were sharing their stories and sometimes actually looking at me thinking, oh, he's the young guy over there. And maybe he can benefit from what I have to say.

[00:15:47] **Caroline** After my diagnosis and treatment for my heart condition. It took time to adjust and feel normal again. But for others, the mental health challenges can persist long after they've recovered physically.

[00:16:03] **Kathy** So one year out from having a stroke, my mental health is still a bit of a rollercoaster. But now I can call it what it is. I think I was always banking on the fact that things will get better, things will improve over time. But now that I'm one year out from having a stroke, I'm recognizing and acknowledging that some of these issues may be here to stay. So I'm moving from recovering from this into living with this and seeking help in the way that I think I need it. I've learned that my mental health is a critical part of my success, whether it's from the perspective of work, life, recovery, whatever. And I've also learned that I can care for it, the things that I can do to make my mental health situation better. I don't know exactly what works for me yet, but I'm committed to figuring that out.

[00:16:53] **Caroline** Four years later, despite his early struggles during recovery, Paul's in a much better place mentally.

[00:17:01] **Paul** I actually feel probably the best I've ever felt in my life. You know, I feel well loved. I feel cared for. And these things are important, I believe. And how we are mentally, I think it's important to know that people love you and care about you. So I'm lucky to have that.

[00:17:21] **Caroline** People like Kathy can still lead a fulfilling life, but their mental health recovery may mean adapting to their new circumstances.

[00:17:31] **Dr. Tennen** So I think that it is a special challenge to deal with the residual effects of a stroke or heart attack that are not curable. And so there are people living with these problems maybe forever. And some of them may not be visible, like some may have some concentration or cognitive issues that will just impair them or exist forever. And it's really challenging, but there are definitely strategies that they can learn to help adjust and adapt to their kind of new normal.

[00:18:09] **Caroline** We are starting to dismantle the stigma surrounding mental health. As awareness and resources increase, more people will be able to receive the support they need after experiencing a heart attack or stroke. The first step is recognizing that they need help.

[00:18:29] **Dr. Tennen** My top recommendations for someone living with heart disease or stroke to manage their mental health would be to first make sure they're not dealing with an untreated depression or anxiety or other psychiatric conditions because there's help available that can improve their quality of life and their health status. And I would recommend they talk to their family doctor or their specialist or rehab centre if there are any questions about this.

The next thing would be to gather support. And if they feel it would be helpful to talk with someone in therapy or counselling, I'd encourage them to pursue it. For those with significant aphasia due to stroke, link with speech-language pathology resources or aphasia centres to help with communication, because that also is about garnering support.

And the next thing would be lifestyle habits. So, get a good night's sleep; exercise in whatever capacity is possible. Follow a healthy diet, modify unhealthy habits like smoking or alcohol overuse, and manage stress as well. So everything that is healthy in terms of speaking to your cardiologist or your neurologist is also good for your mental health, because it's all about keeping your brain healthy. And connecting with others is important and healthy as well. Social isolation has been found to be a risk factor for depression on its own. So finding ways to link to a social circle in ways that are meaningful to them I think is also a strong recommendation.

[00:19:56] **Caroline** There will be tough days during recovery. I know what those are like. The important thing is to not give up.

[00:20:05] **Kathy** You know, we can't always control what happens to us in life, but we can control how we react to it. You're still here. The thing hasn't beaten you yet, so you can still fight back. And it might get worse before it gets better but better days are ahead.

[00:20:20] **Caroline** Paul agrees.

[00:20:22] **Paul** Just to be positive, just to think that you'll get through this. It really will. I mean, it's time. So you just need to allow yourself some time. You know, take the course, learn how to manage your mental health as well as your physical health. And you'll get through it.

[00:20:46] **Caroline** I waited for three months in fear before the procedure to correct my heart condition. And it took time to build up the courage to start training for my first triathlon. For most people, recovery is not a race. The physical and mental impacts of heart disease and stroke affect everyone differently.

Four years after Paul has this heart attack, he's not sweating the small stuff like he once did. While Kathy's life might never be the same as it once was, she's motivated to keep going, to keep improving. She knows she's still capable of accomplishing more in her life, and that's pushing her to get better. To support her and others experiencing mental health issues, we need to raise awareness, provide resources and be compassionate. You can get involved by going to heartandstroke.ca and clicking on How you can help. Because the more we can help those living with heart disease and stroke both physically and mentally, the more likely they can get back to enjoying what life has to offer.

Thank you, Dr. Tennen, for your expertise, and thank you Kathy and Paul, for sharing your stories. Thanks for listening to The Beat and a special thanks to our donors for making this podcast possible. Subscribe now to stay informed, get inspired and rediscover hope. Don't forget to rate and review the podcast so we can reach even more listeners. Stay tuned for our next episode. Until next time. I'm Caroline Lavallée.

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