

How long until I get better?

One of the most frequently asked questions by survivors is “How long until I get better?” Unfortunately, there is no way to predict the length of time it will take to improve or even how much improvement will actually occur. But, clearly, you will have a better chance to recover if you feel that there is some hope, even if that means your recovery process will take a long period of time. Deadlines and discouraging words are in no one’s best interests.

A famous rehabilitation pioneer, George Prigatano, Ph.D., frequently tells his patients “If the brain is alive, it can learn.” If you are an aneurysm survivor, you need to listen carefully to these inspiring and assuring words. Dr. Prigatano teaches his patients that the brain can be trusted to learn new skills for a lifetime. If you believe that you cannot improve further, you will become depressed and inactive. If you give up trying to improve, you may even lapse into apathy and decline.

If you were able to attend a brain aneurysm support group, you would see that other survivors have experienced improvement over many years and expect further improvement. It is important for you to know that improvement can certainly take place over the course of time. There are several principles that are essential for an aneurysm survivor to understand:

- Recovery is a robust process that occurs for the rest of your life
- There are no deadlines for learning new skills
- Patience is critical to the process of your recovery

Some aneurysm survivors believe that they have failed at the recovery process and that they are improving too slowly. It is important for you to understand that you will not improve without experiencing many setbacks. The brain is designed to learn slowly and incrementally from errors. After each error or poor performance the brain makes tiny adjustments and very subtle improvements in function occur as a result. You cannot sense each small change in your brain function that comes through repeated errors, but many accumulated tiny changes add up to significant improvement in function. Over long periods of time, small changes come together to produce big changes.

Many of us were taught to believe that errors are a sign of failure and that failure is a bad thing. We have learned over our lifetimes that failure is embarrassing and shameful, and we’re often self-critical when we fail. Self-criticism discourages and paralyzes many survivors. Brain aneurysm survivors should know that slow progress is the norm and that “failures” are an expected, everyday experience. With proper guidance, you will learn that your “failures” can be seen as learning opportunities rather than shameful examples of weak character or poor effort. Fear of failure stops the rehabilitation process in its tracks.

At brain aneurysm support group meetings, there are almost always survivors who are living proof of the fact that repeated failures lead to improvement and that recovery

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occurs over long periods of time. If you are a more impaired survivor, it would be easy to become discouraged when you learn of the rapid recovery of a less impaired survivor. You can actually develop what might be termed "survivor envy," and suppose that you are inferior to the less impaired survivor who reports rapid progress or complete recovery. You might decide that you are not trying hard enough or that your treatment providers are incompetent.

Above all, you need to be aware that aneurysms affect everyone differently, and that progress is different for every survivor, depending on the location and extent of the damage done by your aneurysm. Long-term improvement will come with repeated practice of new or impaired skills. If you are realistic and expect only slow, gradual improvement over a long period of time, you will be proud of your recovery process. Your hard work coupled with your positive attitude will yield satisfaction and results.