

Tessa's Story

It was just before midnight. When I went to get out of bed and fell to the ground, I realised I couldn't actually get myself up again. It turns out I wasn't too young to have had a stroke.

The impacts from the Stroke that I felt were as follows: no use of my left arm or hand - and my left leg was pretty useless as well. I could talk and understand, so that was positive. And I could eat - even if everything kept falling out the left-hand side of my mouth. I spent five days in the Intensive Care Unit and was then flown back to the smaller hospital for rehabilitation. The rehabilitation took the next 10 weeks, so it was a very long period of time. I had to learn to walk again, and to use my arm, and to do basic things such as butter a slice of toast, make myself a cup of coffee, dress myself, and wash myself. All those things I had to learn from scratch. Not easy when you're 61 years old!

Within a month of coming home, a friend who was a volunteer at RDA suggested that I should apply for a place on one of the riding sessions. Which I did.

When talking with the coach prior to starting, we made the decision not to ride with a saddle but to ride with just a sheepskin as I really wanted to concentrate on my balance particularly, and to strengthen my core as I knew that that was really important for me going forward. So for the whole first term, I was riding on a sheepskin. And I have to say that it really did help. I did feel my core had strengthened to the point that when I got down on hands and knees, I could actually push myself up to an upright position if I had something to put pressure on, such as a chair or a table.

My balance was immensely better, especially around uneven surfaces. Whereas before I was very nervous and wouldn't have attempted to walk on uneven surfaces by myself unless I had somebody holding me, I was able to walk around the garden of our property and around other people's gardens without fear of falling.

There were other, more minor, positives. I had not been able to use my left arm after I came out of hospital because I had a sub-located or dislocated shoulder. There was pain in my left arm if I tried to do anything. For example, raising my left arm mere centimetres from my waist was exceptionally painful. So one of the exercises while riding in the arena was to ride with the reins in one hand and my left arm out 90 degrees. It was painful, but it was also strengthening my arm every time I did it and I noticed that markedly. After a few weeks, my whole face was able to turn. I was asked to sit backwards on the sheepskin. And the effects physically were very noticeable.

But I also think that there were many benefits. Sure, there were the physical benefits – that was great. But there were also benefits to me such as confidence and feeling mentally stronger. I had been able to ride before I had my stroke - and all of a sudden I was riding again! It was the only thing that I had done before the stroke that I could still do, and that meant a huge amount to me. It was like a massive injection of dopamine every time I went out to ride. My husband said that I started smiling two days before my riding session and didn't stop for two days after. The riding I did was part of my rehabilitation. The horse does the work for you, but you have to work with the horse. And it's not just the riding. It's brushing the horse down afterwards, or removing the gear, reins, saddle mats etc. All of this requires fine motor skills. These tasks help to strengthen your muscles, and also to reassure you that you are able to do things still.

I can't speak highly enough of RDA. It has changed my life since the stroke for the better. And I will be forever grateful.