

Why this year will be extra special

Many of us eagerly anticipate the festive season, but for these five women, this Christmas brings even more reason to celebrate

'I will be singing to celebrate my recovery'

Daniella Gonzalez, 36, is a volunteer for the Stroke Association. She lives in Bath with her fiancé Chris.

'Three years ago, I was getting ready to visit my parents for Christmas when I suddenly lost my balance and fell to the floor. It was utterly terrifying - I couldn't get up or even ask my boyfriend what had happened. I was rushed to hospital where I was diagnosed with something called Hughes Syndrome, which causes abnormal blood clotting. This had triggered a stroke that left me partially paralysed on my right-hand side and unable to speak.

Although doctors reassured me that my condition would improve, I felt desperate and helpless. Every day I would lie in bed crying, as that was the only way I could express how I felt. I was used to being such an independent person, with my own flat in London and a good job as an account manager. Suddenly I needed help getting dressed and even brushing my hair.

I was in hospital for three months but gradually I began to walk with crutches. I also discovered that,

although I still couldn't say words of more than one syllable, I was able to sing. I would listen to Abba and when I tried to sing Mamma Mia, I was amazed to hear the words come out. My doctor explained that my stroke had affected the left side of my brain, which communicates speech, but that singing and music comes from the right side, which was undamaged.

Since then, singing has been essential to my recovery. Earlier this year Chris and I moved to Bath for a quieter life and I joined the Bath Chorus - a mixed choir based at St Bartholomew's Church. This December we will be performing a Christmas concert at the Bath Forum - something that, since the stroke, I would never have dreamt I could do. Through singing I have also slowly regained the ability to speak, as it helps with pronunciation and exercises my jaw muscles.

This year, we will be spending Christmas Day at my parents' house. I finally have enough strength in my right hand to be able to write Christmas cards and I'm determined to make the dinner. Chris and I will also be setting a date for our wedding. The future looks incredibly exciting and, although my stroke was a big interruption, I'm determined to make the most of every opportunity.' [CONTINUED OVER PAGE]



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