"Put him in a nursing home, he'll never be able to do the therapy." That was the advice I was given by a hospital official after our stroke. I say "our" because we have both been affected by the severity of how much our life has changed. I don't know if I was in denial or just had a gut feeling that we could make changes in his condition if only given the chance to find the right therapists. We were on vacation in Florida, so the task was not easy.

How to select the right therapists, at that time, was a matter of making site visits, asking questions, and listening to the attitudes and beliefs of the therapists we visited. During two months of therapy at The Rehabilitation Hospital of the Lee Memorial Health System in Fort Myers, Florida, I could see that my husband was in the right place. Not only was he making steady progress, despite health setbacks due to diabetic peripheral neuropathy, but also I was being trained to help with homework assignments and management techniques that would be helpful once we left the hospital.

I found out that these therapists had specialized training in the NDT approach. With its focus on using a client's favorite pre-stroke activities to aid in the rehab process, my husband amazingly moved golf balls, held his putter and "played" with related objects as the therapists worked on stated goals. Progress was slow, but motivation was high and he was totally engaged in the process, which stresses functional applications. Sadly, we had to return to our home in Massachusetts.
I could not find any clinics that used the NDT approach at home but I was fortunate to get him into a highly respected facility that has a stellar reputation for success. The objects used in therapy were things like cones to be moved from one peg to another, pulleys to move arms up and down, peg boards, bars to pull yourself up/down, and stimulation machines that introduce an electric current to the affected limb. Progress was still evident but slower and my husband was less motivated. Homework consisted of large rubber bands for stretching limbs and using pulleys attached to a door. Thank goodness for my Florida NDT training – I did that instead of the activities being done in the Massachusetts rehabilitation facility. Their particular training and record of success remained key in our daily sessions. We used golf balls (a favorite sport) and transferred them from one place to another; swung a putter at plastic golf balls for a variety of lengths; and stretched legs by moving soccer balls from one "goal" to another. He would open the dishwasher as I loaded it with each item; he made the morning toast and we buttered each piece using a hand over hand technique; he loaded and emptied the dryer; and reached across the table to get at his favorite cookies. A lot of work, yes, but also a lot of fun and a lot of success.

So, in my mind and his, we went back to Florida and NDT. Back to real life activities as a basis for motivation, back to doing functional movements as part of rehab, back to taking cues from the patient’s progress and making decisions about progress based on readiness rather than an evaluation scheduled every so many sessions.

With rejuvenated spirits, both survivor and caretaker were ready to tackle stated goals. Not only had fun returned, but so had hope for our future and a life more like the one we had known.

We continue to make progress and are so thankful that we found therapists trained in the NDT approach. We are: Jerry and Nancy Bouthilette and we reside at 6 Gabrielle Way in Easthampton, MA, and now also at 11211 Wine Palm Road in Fort Myers, Florida. We can be reached at bouthilette@comcast.net.