

Life after stroke

Problems with memory and thinking

Together we can conquer stroke

A stroke can affect the way your brain understands, organises and stores information.

In this booklet we talk about some common problems that can happen because of this and what you can do about them.

It's aimed at people who have had a stroke but there is information for family and friends as well.

We have information on all aspects of stroke.

If you have a question that is not answered in this booklet, visit **stroke.org.uk** or call our Stroke Helpline on **0303 3033 100**



If you want more information on this topic, take a look at our *Complete guide to cognitive problems after stroke*. Go to **stroke.org.uk/publications** to find it.

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Why has my memory and thinking changed?



Every second you receive a huge amount of information from the world around you, which your brain has to understand, organise and store.

If the part of your brain that processes this information is damaged by your stroke, this can affect your thinking. So you may find it difficult to concentrate or remember certain things. You may also find it difficult to work out how to respond to what's going on around you.

Doctors and therapists often call these **cognitive problems** or a **cognitive impairment**. They are very common after a stroke and most people will have some difficulties.



Because so much goes on in hospital, you may not realise that your memory or thinking has been affected until you return home. Even then, you may not notice until you go back to work or start to do other things like driving.

What kinds of problems can this cause?



Memory problems

Many people have problems with their memory after a stroke, especially in the first weeks and months.

This may not always be down to a problem with your memory. Most memory problems are actually **caused by problems with concentration** – if you can't focus on what you're being told, you're not going to be able to remember it later. So if you're having problems with memory it may help to think about ways to improve your concentration as well.



Problems with concentration

Most people find that their concentration is affected after a stroke, especially in the early stages. If you're having problems with your concentration you may get distracted easily, or find it difficult to do more than one thing at a time.

Concentration is extremely important because we rely on it for all of our other thinking processes.



Problems with planning and problem-solving

As well as being able to take in and store information, our brain performs a whole range of other thinking processes. Doctors and therapists call this **executive function**.

If a stroke affects your executive function, you may not be able to work out how to do certain things, like changing the channel on the TV remote or making a meal. Or you may not know how to start or finish a task on your own. It can also affect the way you respond to people, because you're not able to recognise their expressions or body language.



Other problems

A stroke can affect your thinking in other ways. This can cause problems with:

- finding your way around
- not being able to recognise things
- moving your body in the way you want to
- not noticing things on one side of you
- being confused about the effects of your stroke.

Will it get better?



Cognitive problems are usually worst in the first few months after stroke, but they can and do get better.

They're **likely to improve** very quickly over the first few months. It's still possible for problems to improve after this, but you may find that it takes longer. Recovery tends to slow down, especially after six months.

Having cognitive problems does not mean that you have dementia. Many people worry about this, but dementia gets worse and worse over time, whereas cognitive problems after stroke often get better.

Even if your cognitive problems never go away completely, they should not get any worse and do get easier to live with.



If you think that your problems are getting worse, make sure you speak to your GP about it.

What can I do about my memory and thinking?



Get some help

If you're having problems with your memory or thinking, the first thing to do is to **speak to your doctor**. It's easy for people, including doctors, to forget that there are effects of stroke you can't see. So don't wait to be asked. If you're finding it hard, tell someone.

Your doctor can make sure that there isn't anything else that could be causing problems, such as an infection or your medication. If there doesn't seem to be any other cause, you'll need to have a **cognitive assessment** with someone in your stroke team – usually a doctor or an occupational therapist or sometimes a psychologist.

Some people can find these assessments off-putting because the questions are often very simple, which can seem pointless. Still, it's important that you answer them, as the results of the assessment will help your team decide the best way to help you.



How your stroke team can help

Although there has been research into ways to 'fix' cognitive problems, so far it hasn't shown that people get any long-term benefit from them.

Instead, the therapy you're likely to be offered will focus on ways to help you cope with your problems, rather than 'fix' them. Things that help you to do this are known as **compensation** or **coping strategies**.

Your **occupational therapist** can help you learn coping strategies. This may involve using aids (such as using labels and reminders) or learning other techniques that can help you.

If your problems are quite severe, you may be referred to a **clinical neuropsychologist**. This is someone who specialises in the way the brain works. They can carry out a detailed assessment to understand the type of problems you're having and the best ways to manage them.

2

Don't be too hard on yourself

Having cognitive problems after a stroke is nothing to feel bad about. A stroke is a major injury to your brain, so it's going to take time for it to recover. You're not stupid, even though you may feel that way. **Allow more time** to get things done and don't expect too much of yourself – you wouldn't blame someone who'd broken their leg for not being able to run, would you?

3

Get enough rest

You're not going to be able to take life at the same pace as you did before, at least not to begin with. When you're tired it's even harder to concentrate or remember things. So **rest when you need to** and make sure you get plenty of sleep at night. It will help you to focus if you do.

"I've had to learn not to beat myself up about not being able to remember."

Mary

4

Find ways to relax

Your mind needs to rest just as much as your body. Even small things like listening to music or having a quiet moment to yourself can help to calm your mind. Relaxing can be difficult if you have a busy home life, but it's important that you find a way to rest your mind when you get tired or frustrated.

5

Tell people what's going on

Be up front about the problems you're having. People feel awkward when they don't know what to do, so tell them what will help (speaking slowly or writing things down, for example). It will also stop them from getting offended if you don't remember something from your last conversation, or assuming that you're bored if you get distracted.



Many people find that mindfulness or other forms of meditation help them to relax. There are plenty of books, CDs, websites and courses that can teach you about these things. Try asking your local library or stroke group for recommendations.

What can I do about memory problems?

1

Write things down

- Use **calendars or diaries** to keep track of appointments and important dates. You can also use them to record things that happen each day.
- Make a note of small tasks as you do them, so you know whether you've fed the cat or phoned someone.
- Write down **notes after a therapy session** or doctor's appointment, so that next time you can go back and remind yourself of what you talked about.
- If writing is difficult you could use a dictaphone or an app on your smartphone to record notes. You could also take pictures or ask other people to write things down for you.



Phones can do all sorts these days. Even the most basic smartphones have alarms, calendars, address books and cameras that can help you record things and set up alerts and reminders.

2

Use prompts

- Set your phone or a cooking timer to remind you when you need to take your medication.
- Leave things like your keys or wallet near the front door, so you'll see them when you go out.
- A **pill or dosette box** can help you to organise the medication you need to take each day, so you can easily see whether you've taken it or not.
- Some people **use acronyms or sayings** to help them remember things. One lady told us she thinks of "**SLAC**" when she leaves the house, so she knows she needs to **S**et the alarm, **L**ock the door **A**nd **C**lose the gate.
- Labels on cupboards and drawers will help you know where things go. They don't have to be written labels, you could use pictures instead.

3

Put reminders where you won't miss them

- Leave notes in noticeable places – buy a pen that you can use to write on your bathroom mirror or set up a white board somewhere obvious.
- You could **put up signs** in the kitchen to remind you to turn the cooker off, or one on the front door to remind you to lock it when you go out.

What can I do about problems with my concentration?

1

Keep it simple

- Focus on completely finishing a task before moving on to another one. So if you're making something to eat, don't try to use the phone at the same time.
- If someone's giving you information, ask them to break it down and go through it **one step at a time**. Get them to write it down if it helps.

2

Remove distractions

- Ask yourself if there's anything that may distract you. Turn off the TV and radio or move to a quiet room and ask other people not to disturb you.
- Try to **remove clutter**, so you won't have any visual distractions either. If you only keep the kettle, cups and teabags on the kitchen counter, this will help when you make a cup of tea.

**"Balance being busy with taking rest.
My brain is definitely slower when I'm
overloaded, tired or run down."**

Jo

3

Know your limits

- Remember that you're not going to be able to concentrate for long periods. So keep tasks to half an hour, or however long you can manage. If something is going to take longer than this, **take a break** and come back to it later.
- If you find it hard to follow a TV programme, think about what you're watching. News, sports or cookery programmes will probably be easier to keep up with than dramas or documentaries, which rely on you watching the whole thing.

4

Plan your day

- If you know you're going to an appointment or expecting a visitor, or doing something else where you'll need to concentrate, then **plan to have a rest** immediately before.
- It may help to **write a 'to-do' list** the night before and decide which tasks are the most important. That way, if you find yourself having a bad day, you'll know what to focus on and what can be left until another time.

What can I do about problems with planning and problem-solving?

1

Practise, practise, practise

- Planning and problem-solving can be improved, but only with lots and lots of practice. Your occupational therapist or neuropsychologist can help you decide what activities to focus on, as it will be different for everyone.
- Once you've mastered one task, like making a sandwich, you can move on to more difficult ones, like cooking a meal.

2

Keep to a routine

- Dressing yourself in the same way or order every day will make it easier for you to relearn the steps and spot when you miss one.
- Develop a **weekly routine** – if you know that Tuesday is washing day or Wednesday is shopping day it'll prompt you to do these things.

“The best people to do things with are the kids. We practised planning and sequencing by baking fairy cakes.”

Cath

3

Use prompts and reminders

- **Write out instructions** or checklists for you to follow when you do something.
- Or stick up notes around the house to remind you of things that you may not think of on your own, like brushing your teeth.
- You could use **brightly coloured stickers** on the microwave or remote control to help remind you which buttons to press.
- Prompts don't have to be written, you can use pictures or recordings instead. Some people make up songs or acronyms to help them remember how to do things in the right order.

4

Talk it through

- It can help to talk through a task with someone before you do it, so that you can think of and sort all the steps in your head before you start.
- Also **think about what could go wrong**, so that you know what you need to do in case it happens.

What can I do about other problems?



Speak to your doctor

Other cognitive problems, like not being able to recognise things or not being able to find your way around, will often be picked up by your doctors or therapists whilst you're in hospital. Or they may be picked up by your community team when you're back at home.

If they haven't been and you start to notice that you may be having problems, then **go back to your doctor** to get them properly diagnosed and assessed.



You can find more information in our *Complete guide to cognitive problems after stroke*. Go to **stroke.org.uk/publications** to find it.

Where can I get help and support?

If you're worried about your memory or thinking, speak to your **doctor** or **occupational therapist**.

How we can help



Our **Stroke Helpline** can give you information and support on any issue you or your family may be facing after stroke. Whatever the problem, we're here to help.



We have **coordinators** in some areas of the UK, who can give you and your family information, practical advice and emotional support. We also run **stroke groups** across the UK. Even if we don't run one in your area, we can tell you about others that do.



Our online tool **EquipStroke** can help you find aids and equipment that could help you live with memory and other problems. Take a look at **stroke.org.uk/equip-stroke**

To find out how we can help, just get in touch:

- call our Helpline on **0303 3033 100**
- email **info@stroke.org.uk**
- visit **stroke.org.uk**

Other organisations that can help

The following organisations can provide information, advice and support. Contact our Stroke Helpline if you'd like to know about others in your area.

Headway is a charity for people who've had a brain injury.

Website: www.headway.org.uk

Helpline: 0808 800 2244

Email: helpline@headway.org.uk

The **Disabled Living Foundation** can give you impartial advice about aids and equipment.

Website: www.dlf.org.uk

Helpline: 0300 999 0004 (Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm)

Email: helpline@dlf.org.uk

The **Alzheimer's Society** can provide information about dementia and living with memory problems.

Website: www.alzheimers.org.uk

National dementia helpline: 0300 222 1122
(Mon-Fri 9am-5pm, Sat-Sun 10am-4pm)

Email: enquiries@alzheimers.org.uk

Tips for family and friends

It can be difficult to know how to help someone with their memory and thinking. So here are some tips to help you.



Be patient

None of us like to repeat ourselves or feel that we're not being listened to. But you need to remember this isn't something a stroke survivor can control very easily. So let your friend or family member **do things in their own time**. If there's something that's frustrating you, explain the problem calmly and focus on what you can both do to make it better.



Don't make things too complicated

Help your friend or family member by giving information in the right way:

- break tasks down into individual steps
- give **simple instructions, one at a time**, rather than a list of things to do
- **get to the point** – don't expect them to keep up with a twenty-minute update about your day. Just start with the headlines.



Be encouraging

Practise exercises with your friend or family member and think of ways to make them fun. Cooking a meal can be a good way to practise planning and problem-solving, for example. If progress is slow it can be easy to think that things will never get better, so help them by **celebrating all their successes**, however small.



Don't do everything

It's normal to want to do as much as possible for someone you love, but it will be better for your friend or family member if you **help them to do things on their own** rather than do it for them. So if they ask you what day it is, for example, suggest they look at the newspaper to find out.



Get support

Problems with memory and thinking are often missed by doctors and sometimes it can be difficult to get them taken seriously. So don't be afraid to **keep pushing to get the support you need**. If you don't think you're getting the right support from your stroke team, then call our Stroke Helpline.

About our information

We want to provide the best information for people affected by stroke. That's why we ask stroke survivors and their families, as well as medical experts, to help us put our publications together.



How did we do? To tell us what you think of this guide, or to request a list of the sources we used to create it, email us at **feedback@stroke.org.uk**



We are the Stroke Association.

We believe in life after stroke. That's why we support stroke survivors to make the best recovery they can. It's why we campaign for better stroke care. And it's why we fund research to develop new treatments and ways of preventing stroke.

We're here for you. If you'd like to know more please get in touch.

Stroke Helpline: 0303 3033 100

Website: stroke.org.uk

Email: info@stroke.org.uk

From a textphone: 18001 0303 3033 100

Text **STROKE 5** to **70300** to donate **£5**. It only takes a couple of seconds to make a BIG difference.

For more information visit stroke.org.uk/savelives

Texts cost your donation amount plus one message at your standard network charity rate. The Stroke Association will receive 100% of your gift. Always ask the bill payer's permission. For questions about donating by text call 0330 6600 425.

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