

Emotional changes after a **stroke**



For many people, a stroke has a big emotional impact. This guide can help you understand some of the main emotional effects of a stroke, and how to get help if you need it. There are practical tips for stroke survivors, family and friends.

Find more useful information and tips at **stroke.org.uk** or call our Helpline for printed copies.

Useful topics include:

- Behaviour changes after a stroke
stroke.org.uk/behaviour
- Problems with memory and thinking after a stroke
stroke.org.uk/thinking
- Fatigue after a stroke **stroke.org.uk/fatigue**

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Why do I feel different?

A stroke is sudden and shocking. It can affect every part of your life. It's a lot to deal with, so it's likely to have an effect on your emotional wellbeing.

Everyone's experience of stroke is unique, but for many people it feels like they've lost the life they had before. Feelings of shock, denial, anger, grief and guilt are normal when you're faced with such a devastating change. Dealing with them can be hard and everyone does it in their own way.

You are going through a lot of emotions and the people around you might be too. Some people do not want to admit how they're feeling and put on a brave face. Other people may not realise how you're feeling.

Others may assume everything is fine, which can make it hard to tell them if it's not. Communication problems may mean that you cannot explain how you're feeling, even if you want to.

All of this can be hard to cope with. But if you do not acknowledge the way you're feeling and find things to help you cope, these emotions can become overwhelming. Emotional problems can also affect your recovery, for example, if you are not feeling motivated to take part in therapies.

Sometimes the damage that a stroke does to your brain can make you feel differently as well. Different parts of your brain control all aspects of your body and mind, including senses and emotions. Emotional problems can sometimes be caused by the damage to your brain from the stroke.

Grief and loss after a stroke

A stroke can come with feelings of loss and grief. Stroke is a major life event. For many people, it leads to sudden changes at home, at work and in relationships. A stroke survivor might feel shock, anger or sadness at changes and losses in their life.

Even a mild stroke can affect someone's sense of themselves. And many people tell us that stroke can make you lose a lot of confidence.

Going through feelings of grief takes time, and it's different for everyone. Some people will be relatively unaffected, and others will struggle to manage the emotional impact.

There is no way of knowing how long it will last. Some difficult feelings do not always go away by themselves. But by talking about it and seeking help, you can often make a difference to how you feel. If feelings of sadness and anxiety are becoming overwhelming, let your stroke nurse or GP know.

What kinds of problems can a stroke cause?

Anxiety

It's very common to feel anxious after a stroke. Around one in four people who have a stroke will experience anxiety within the first five years.

Many worries are natural after a stroke. For example, you may worry that you're going to have another stroke. You might be frightened about getting around on your own. You may also be worried about money or your family.

These fears should get better over time. But you should seek help if:

- You're becoming anxious about a wide range of things.
- Anxiety is stopping you from doing things you want to do or causing you distress.
- You feel anxious for no obvious reason.

Getting support and treatment for anxiety can help you focus on things like rehabilitation, eating well and staying active. Feeling more relaxed will help with your recovery, so do not be afraid to seek help if you need it.

Signs of anxiety

We all experience slightly different things when we're anxious, but you're likely to notice some of the following:

- Feeling restless.
- A sense of dread.
- Feeling on edge.
- Difficulty concentrating.
- A racing heartbeat.
- Trembling or shaking.
- Feeling sick or 'butterflies' in your stomach.

It may not always be clear what you're anxious about, which can make these feelings worse. Severe anxiety can be overwhelming. It can make you feel powerless or out of control.

Living with anxiety can lead to sleeping problems, tiredness and muscle tension. You might feel more irritable or avoid certain activities, such as going out or meeting people.

Other people cannot always tell what you are going through, so it can help to share your feelings with someone you trust.

Panic attacks

A panic attack is a sudden, intense rush of anxiety symptoms. It can feel overwhelming. People having a panic attack might believe they are going to pass out or even die.

Symptoms include:

- Racing heartbeat.
- Feeling faint or light-headed.
- Sweating or shaking.
- Feeling sick.
- Struggling to breathe.
- A sense of fear or dread.

It is not always possible to tell if someone is having a panic attack or if it's something physical such as a heart attack or stroke. If you suddenly have new symptoms or you spot them in someone else, call **999**.

Frequent panic attacks may be diagnosed as a panic disorder. It can affect your life if you live with a sense of fear or start avoiding situations due to worry about having an attack.

Getting help with anxiety and panic disorder

Treatments such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) and medication can help.

You can also learn self-help techniques such as breathing exercises and mindfulness. Visit **nhs.uk/mental-health** for free self-help guides and tips.

Like many emotional difficulties, having a healthy diet, dealing with sleep problems and being physically active can all help you manage your anxiety. Contact your stroke nurse or GP for individual advice.

See Page 18 for more information about treatments for anxiety, and Page 22 for more about self-care.

Frustration

One of the emotions that nearly all stroke survivors have to deal with is frustration. So many things change after a stroke that it can be hard to accept. You may feel frustrated about:

- Not being able to do what you used to do.
- Having to rely on other people.
- Everything taking longer than it used to.
- Not being able to work or do other things.
- Not being able to go out.
- Not being able to express how you're feeling.
- Not being able to find the right word.
- Making mistakes.
- Forgetting things.
- Feeling tired and having no energy.

Feeling frustrated is natural. You're going to feel this way from time to time. Everyone deals with frustration in their own way. It might make you more irritable or angry. It can make you more likely to get annoyed about things or lose your temper.

Anger

You may get angry more often after you've had a stroke. It can be linked to many things, including your feelings of grief, loss and frustration about your stroke. It can also be linked with changes in the brain making it hard to control your emotions.

Some people feel they get angry for no reason, or get angry about things that did not bother them before. They might find it hard to control their temper. This can affect someone's wellbeing and recovery. It can also be difficult for the people around them.

If you and the people around you feel that anger is affecting your life, it's a good idea to talk about it or seek help. See Page 33 for more ideas about dealing with anger and frustration.

Feeling low or depressed

It's very common to feel sadness about stroke and the changes to your life. You might also feel low, like you cannot cope, or not enjoy things like you usually do.

A low mood can happen to anyone from time to time. But if you feel this way for a long time, and it's affecting your ability to enjoy life, it could be a sign of depression.

Depression is common after a stroke. Around one in three stroke survivors will have some form of depression within the first year. But you may not have it straight away. Depression can appear at any point, perhaps months or even years later.

It can also return over and over again. It's important to know what to look out for and how to get help if you need it.

Signs of depression

Depression affects people in different ways, but these are some common signs that could last for some time:

- Feeling sad or down most of the time.
- Feeling worthless, helpless or guilty.
- Feeling hopeless or desperate.
- Feeling anxious or worrying a lot.
- Losing confidence.
- Losing interest in things you used to enjoy.
- Lacking energy or motivation.
- Not going out or avoiding other people.
- Finding it difficult to concentrate or make decisions.
- Having problems sleeping or sleeping too much.
- Losing your appetite or eating too much.
- Losing interest in sex.

How to get help with low mood and depression

Feeling low or depressed can creep up on you. It's not always easy to know when you need help. Depression can be mild, moderate or severe. Severe depression is a very serious condition, and it can sometimes lead to a mental health emergency. So it's important to take your feelings seriously and talk to someone if you feel something's not right.

Talk to your stroke nurse or GP about how you're feeling. They can help you find out what's wrong and get any treatment you need.

Turn to Page 18 for information about treatments, and Page 22 for self-care to improve your mood. You can call our Stroke Helpline for someone to talk to.

Feeling in despair or suicidal

Sometimes difficult feelings can lead to self-harming or thinking you cannot go on living.

Signs of suicidal feelings

It's different for everyone, but some common signs of suicidal feelings include:

- Hopelessness and despair.
- Feeling there is no point in living.
- Being overwhelmed by negative thoughts.
- Thinking about death all the time.
- Thinking you are not needed, and other people would be better off without you.
- Feeling that your pain will never end.
- Being cut off from your own body and feelings.

It's important to remember that suicidal feelings are not permanent. How long they last varies between individuals, but the sooner you tell someone how you're feeling, the sooner you can get help.

If you are feeling this way now, it's a mental health emergency.

What to do about a mental health emergency

If you feel like harming yourself, or ending your own life, you should do one of these things:

1. Call **999**.
2. Go to your nearest hospital accident and emergency department.
3. Contact your GP urgently and tell them what's happening. They can refer you to a crisis team.



Call the Samaritans to talk any time, day or night, on **116 123**.

Difficulty controlling your emotions (emotionalism)

A stroke can affect your ability to control your mood and emotions. This is called emotionalism, sometimes known as 'emotional lability'. It can mean that your mood changes very quickly and you are more emotional than you used to be.

You may find that you cry or laugh more. This can become extreme, such as laughing at something inappropriate. Or it can happen for no reason at all. Some people start to swear, when they did not do so before their stroke.

Emotionalism is most common in the early stages of stroke, when about one in five people experience it. It can be upsetting, especially if you were not an emotional person before your stroke. Some people say they feel embarrassed, so they stop going out or try to avoid social situations.

If you're more emotional, it can be a sign of depression, but it can happen on its own too. Speak to your GP about any concerns.

Signs of emotionalism

We're all different. By nature, some people are more emotional than others. So signs of emotionalism depend entirely on what's normal for you.

But some common signs include:

- Finding yourself crying or laughing for no reason.
- Expressing your emotions more intensely than you actually feel them.
- Feeling like you have no control over your emotions and that even the smallest thing can set you off.
- Having emotions that seem out of place or come and go very quickly.

Mania and euphoria

Mania is when your mood is extreme. It can be extremely high or extremely low and may swing between the two. Your energy and enthusiasm will change with your mood, so if it's high you'll seem hyperactive, you may talk very quickly, have lots of ideas and you may have difficulty sleeping. Mania is not a common effect of stroke, but it does affect some people.

Some people also experience euphoria, which is when your mood is constantly high and you seem extremely positive. But, like mania, this only affects a very small number of people.

Are there treatments that can help?

When emotions are overwhelming, it can be easy to think that things will never get better, but they do.

And remember, you're not on your own. There are lots of people who are there to help you cope with the way you're feeling. You do not have to do it alone.

Lots of treatments and therapies can help with your emotions after a stroke. Changes in mood and mental health should be assessed by your stroke team who can offer advice. If you are struggling with your mood or emotions, let your stroke team or GP know. Depending on the problems you're having, your stroke nurse or GP may be able to refer you to someone who specialises in mental health, such as a psychologist or a counsellor.

Many people find that talking about the way they're feeling helps them to understand and deal with it. There are different types of talking therapies available and your GP may be able to refer you. Medication may help as well.

Talking therapies

Talking therapies give you time and space to talk about your problems and explore difficult feelings with a trained therapist. This could be a counsellor, psychotherapist, psychologist or a psychiatrist. This can help you deal with specific problems or develop ways of coping with your thoughts and feelings.

Therapists can work with you one-to-one or jointly with your partner or other family members. Group therapy sessions are another option.

Cognitive behavioural therapy

One type of talking therapy that many people find helpful is cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). This can help with many of the emotions people experience after a stroke. CBT is often used as a treatment for depression and anxiety.

CBT focuses on your thinking and behaviour and how they are connected. Negative thoughts can stop you from doing things, which in turn can make you feel worse. CBT can help you break this cycle and improve the way you feel. It usually involves a number of sessions over the course of several weeks or months.

You can also find books or interactive online programmes on CBT. Your GP or therapist may be able to recommend some. Although most of these resources will not have been developed specifically for people who have had a stroke, they're likely to have information that can help you.

Talking therapy and counselling services through the NHS vary from area to area. You can ask your GP to refer you to a service. In England, you can either ask your GP or visit [nhs.uk/mental-health](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health) to refer yourself to a service.

Your stroke team may have its own clinical psychologist or access to specialist services. Speak to your stroke nurse or therapist to ask for help.

You can choose private talking therapy services if you want a choice of therapist or want more therapy than the NHS can usually offer. We've listed some websites later in this guide to help you check what's in your area, or you can contact our Helpline.

Typical private talking therapy prices can vary widely, from between £60 to over £100 for one session, so this is not an option for everyone. If you choose private therapy, we suggest finding a trained therapist who has experience of working with people who have had a stroke.

Medication

Medications can be helpful for some mental health conditions and are sometimes used alongside other treatments such as talking therapies. There are different types of antidepressant which alter the chemicals in your brain and lift your mood. These can help to treat depression and sometimes anxiety. Medication may help with emotionalism (difficulty controlling your emotions) as well.

Antidepressants do not cure emotional problems, but they may help with the symptoms and make life feel easier. They do not work for everyone and are usually best for people with more severe problems. They can also have side effects.

There are many different types of medication available. It can take time to find the right one, at the right dose. They can also take a little while to start working. If you wish to come off them, you'll need help from your GP on how to stop gradually. If it's something you decide to try, you'll need to persevere and work with your GP to find what works best for you.

What can I do about the way I feel?

1

Get some help

There's a lot to cope with when you've had a stroke, so do not be afraid to ask for some help. If you're worried about the way you're feeling, or you think you may be experiencing some of the problems we've described, then you need to speak to your GP, stroke nurse or therapist about it. They will be able to tell you about the support that's available.

Emotional problems are often missed by doctors and sometimes it can be difficult to get them taken seriously. However, you need to trust that you know yourself better than they do, so do not be afraid to keep asking to get the support you need. If you do not think you're getting the right support from your GP, then contact our Helpline.

Communication problems can make it difficult to ask questions. Your speech and language therapist can help you talk to other members of your stroke team.

2

Talk to someone about it

Talking about the way you're feeling with someone who understands can really help. You may want to do this with a counsellor or therapist. Or you could talk to a family member or friend. Find who you feel most comfortable talking to.

Many people also find support groups helpful, because you can talk about your problems with people who are going through the same thing. Stroke clubs and groups are a good way to meet other stroke survivors and get advice and support, but there are all sorts of groups out there.

3

Stay informed

A stroke can make you feel low or anxious. But talking to the right people and finding answers to your questions will help you feel more in control.

For many people, the fear of having another stroke can cause a lot of stress. Talk to your GP or nurse about things you can do to reduce your risk of it happening again. There are many things you can do to help you stay healthy, such as being active, having a healthy diet, and sleeping well. All those things also contribute to your emotional wellbeing.

If you're worried about not being able to return to work, speak to your employer or Jobcentre Plus about how you can be helped back into the workplace. If you have an occupational therapist, they could offer advice and support.

If you have money worries, find out what financial support you can get. Visit **stroke.org.uk/financial-support** or call our Helpline for some ideas about the help available to you.

4

Take it easy on yourself

Many people find they have to learn what's 'normal' for them after they have had a stroke. This means listening to both your body and your brain. Do not expect to do too much, at least at first. There's no need to be embarrassed about the way you're feeling. There's a lot to cope with.

Be open about the problems you're having. Remember that other people might not realise what's going on with you and they might find it helpful to know. Tell them if there is anything they can do to help.

5

Find new goals

Many people feel that they lose their sense of purpose after a stroke. This can affect your confidence and make you feel down. That's why it's important to stay connected to the people and things in your life as much as possible. This can be hard, as you may not be able to do everything that you did before. But there will be things that you can do, so focus on these.

Set yourself small goals to work towards, one step at a time. Break any bigger goals down into small steps. Keep track of the progress you make as it can be easy to forget, especially if things do not happen as quickly as you'd like.

It can be particularly hard if you worked or were very active before your stroke. But you need to remember that there are still opportunities out there. You may just need to find other ways to use your skills and talents. Many people find things like volunteering, taking part in research or finding new interests help them feel useful again after their stroke.

6

Be as active as you can

When you're active, your body releases chemicals into your brain that make you feel happier. Because of this, exercise has been proven to help with a number of emotional problems. It does not have to be running or swimming. Even a short walk or a bit of gardening can have a positive effect. If you cannot get up and about, practising physiotherapy exercises will keep you active or try some chair-based exercises.

Yoga and tai-chi involve elements of mindfulness and relaxation, as they encourage you to focus on your body and breathing. So why not give them a go? Even if you have physical problems, many of the movements can be adapted. Contact a local instructor or stroke group to ask about suitable classes.

7

Try relaxation

Relaxation can help you cope when your emotions start to feel overwhelming. Research has shown that relaxation can be particularly helpful in treating anxiety after stroke. There are techniques you can learn to help you relax. These usually focus on breathing or releasing tension from your muscles.

Many people find that mindfulness (a type of meditation) or other forms of meditation help them too. These are techniques that encourage you to pay more attention to the present moment, and tune into your own feelings, body and the world around you. This can be especially helpful when you're feeling overwhelmed.

There are plenty of books, DVDs, websites and apps that can teach you about relaxation and meditation. Although most of them will not have been designed for people who have had a stroke, many stroke survivors find them helpful.

There are also courses on relaxation and mindfulness. Contact your local college or library, or ask your GP surgery if there's anything available where you live. Visit **[nhs.uk/every-mind-matters](https://www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters)** for videos and tips to help with meditation.

8

Express your feelings

Writing things down can help you deal with negative thoughts and feelings. Try keeping a journal or making a video diary. Art, music, photography or poetry can give you a way of expressing your feelings as well.

Communication problems can make it very hard to express how you're feeling. But that should not stop you from getting the emotional support you need. If you're struggling with your emotions and would like to talk to someone, tell your speech and language therapist and ask what support is available for you.

What can I do about depression?

Keep active

Although you may not feel like doing anything, being active can help you feel more positive. However difficult it seems, at least try to give your rehabilitation exercises a go. You may find them easier than you think.

Be kind to yourself

Write down compliments people give you or note your achievements, and read them again when you feel down.

Do something you enjoy

Try to take part in something you enjoy. A short walk outdoors or a phone call with a friend could give you a boost. Treat yourself to a haircut or a manicure. If you cannot get to a salon, find someone who can come to your house.

Eat well and avoid caffeine and alcohol

If you're not eating much or you're eating junk food all the time, it can make you feel tired and run down. Try to eat regular meals which include lots of fruit and vegetables. Reduce your alcohol and caffeine intake, as they can alter your mood and affect your sleep.

What can I do about anxiety?

Breathing and mindfulness

Breathing techniques can be especially helpful when you find yourself becoming anxious. Some people find that mindfulness techniques help with anxiety too.

Stay active

Exercise encourages your brain to release chemicals that lift your mood. Focusing on an activity can also give you a distraction from negative thoughts or feelings.

Talk it through

Talking through worries with someone can put them in perspective. A support group connects you with people who are going through similar things. There are groups for people who have had a stroke, as well as groups for people coping with anxiety. Visit stroke.org.uk/support or call our Helpline to find one near you.

What can I do about emotionalism?

Give it time

Emotionalism can get better over time. Many people find that it improves or disappears altogether within the first six months. Even if your problems last longer than this, there are treatments and techniques that can help, so speak to your GP about it.

Be open about it

If you tell new people about your emotionalism when you first meet them, then you'll be less embarrassed if you do become emotional in front of them. People feel awkward if they do not know what to do, so they'll appreciate it if you tell them how to help you. You may prefer people to ignore it and carry on as normal, or you may find a hug comforting when you get emotional. Lots of people have problems with emotionalism after a stroke, so talking to other stroke survivors can help as well.

Tell people when it's real

You may have to tell people when you're genuinely upset, so that they don't mistake it for emotionalism. You're still entitled to comfort and support, so do not be afraid to ask for it.

Distract yourself

Some people say this helps when they feel themselves starting to get emotional. Go into another room or ask if you can change the topic of conversation or the TV channel. If you're out with other people, ask someone else to distract you, or recite some words in your head – whatever works best for you.

What can I do about feeling frustrated or angry?

Let it out

If you're becoming frustrated or angry, you need to find positive ways to release the tension you're feeling. That way you can focus your energy on more positive things, like getting better. Doing something physical, like going for a walk or another kind of exercise, can help you let off steam. Relaxation techniques can also help you to release tension and calm down.

Listen to others

Talk to your friends and family to work out what 'triggers' your anger, like tiredness or boredom. Work out what you can do to avoid your triggers. Agree a word or gesture people can use to let you know that you're becoming angry or aggressive. This can prompt you to take a step back and calm down.

We have more information and advice about managing aggressive behaviour at stroke.org.uk/behaviour, or call our Helpline for a printed copy.

Tips for family and friends

It can be difficult to know how to help someone with their emotions after a stroke. Here are some suggestions.



Talk to each other

Sometimes it's hard for people to talk about their feelings, even with someone close. Let them know that you're willing to listen and ask them what you can do to help. Sometimes there will not be anything you can do, which can be tough. But just being there for them, and encouraging them to seek help if they need to, is often all it takes.



Spend some time with them

Coping with the effects of stroke can make people feel very lonely. Simply spending some time with your friend or family member can really help. You may not have time to visit them as often as you'd like, but even a short phone call will show them that you're thinking about them.



Support their independence

It's normal to want to do as much as possible for someone. But it will be better for your loved one if you support them to do things on their own, rather than do all of it for them. Encourage them to give things a go. They may not think they'll be able to, but often they'll be pleasantly surprised.



Help them stay active

Being active helps to lift our mood, so encourage your friend or family member to do whatever they can. It will help if you do it together. Even if they cannot get up and about, there may be chair-based exercises they can do and they're likely to have exercises to practise if they're having therapy.



Be patient

It takes time for things to improve, so you'll need to be patient. This is not always easy, especially when you're coming to terms with everything that's happened as well. Make sure you look after yourself and have someone to talk to.

Visit stroke.org.uk/caring for ways to get help and support for carers or call our Helpline.

Where to get help and information

From the Stroke Association

Helpline

Our Helpline offers information and support for anyone affected by stroke, including family, friends and carers.

Call us on: **0303 3033 100**

From a textphone: **18001 0303 3033 100**

Email: **helpline@stroke.org.uk**

Read our information

Log onto **stroke.org.uk** where you can find easy-to-understand information, videos and an online community to support you. You can also call the Helpline to ask for printed copies of our guides.

Other sources of help and information

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

Website: **bacp.co.uk**

Tel: **01455 88 33 00**

Has a directory of qualified private psychological therapists.

Hub of Hope

Website: **hubofhope.co.uk**

Provides a UK-wide search tool to look for mental health support organisations in your area.

Inspire Mental Health (Northern Ireland)

Website: **inspirewellbeing.org**

Tel: **028 9032 8474**

Mind (England and Wales)

Website: **mind.org.uk**

Infoline: **0300 123 3393**

Scottish Association for Mental Health

Website: **samh.org.uk**

Tel: **0344 800 0550**

Samaritans

Website: **samaritans.org**

Tel: **116 123**

Email: **jo@samaritans.org**

Offers confidential, non-judgemental emotional support over the phone. They are open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

NHS services for mental health and emotional wellbeing

NHS (England)

Website: nhs.uk/mental-health

NHS Inform (Scotland)

Website: nhsinform.scot/mental-health

NHS (Wales)

Website: nhs.wales

NI Direct (Northern Ireland)

Website: nidirect.gov.uk/mental-health

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



Accessible formats

Visit our website if you need this information in audio, large print or braille.



Always get individual advice

This guide contains general information about stroke. But if you have a problem, you should get individual advice from a professional such as a GP or pharmacist. Our Helpline can also help you find support. We work very hard to give you the latest facts, but some things change. We don't control the information provided by other organisations or websites.

When stroke strikes, part of your brain shuts down. And so does a part of you. Life changes instantly and recovery is tough. But the brain can adapt. Our specialist support, research and campaigning are only possible with the courage and determination of the stroke community. With more donations and support from you, we can rebuild even more lives.

Donate or find out more at **stroke.org.uk**

Contact us

We're here for you. Contact us for expert information and support by phone, email and online.

Stroke Helpline: **0303 3033 100**

From a textphone: **18001 0303 3033 100**

Email: **helpline@stroke.org.uk**

Website: **stroke.org.uk**

Rebuilding lives after stroke



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