

Emotional changes after a stroke

Stroke
association

Emotional changes after a stroke

Together we can conquer stroke

Most people who have had a stroke will experience some kind of emotional change afterwards.

In this guide we talk about some of the most common emotional changes people experience after a stroke, why they happen 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 guide, visit **stroke.org.uk** or call our Stroke Helpline on **0303 3033 100**.



If you're looking for more information on this topic you may want to take a look at our *Complete guide to emotional changes after stroke*. Go to **stroke.org.uk/publications** to find it.

What's in this guide?

Why do I feel different?	4
What kind of problems can this cause?	6
Anxiety	6
Frustration and anger	6
Difficulty controlling your mood and emotions	7
Depression	8
Will it get better?	9
What can I do about the way I feel?	10
Where to get help and information	19
Tips for family and friends	21
About our information	23

Why do I feel different?



A stroke is a sudden and shocking event that can affect every part of your life. It's a lot to deal with, not just for you but for everyone around you too.

Everyone's experience of stroke is different, 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 these feelings can be hard and everyone does it differently. What can make it harder is that the people around you may not realise what you're going through.

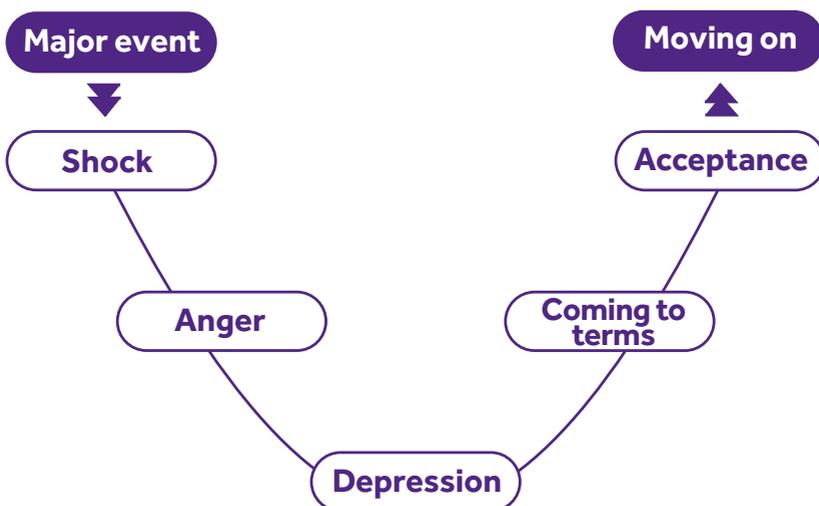
"If I had a penny for the amount of times people say 'you don't look like you've had a stroke.' On the plus side it must mean I look well but the downside is people don't have a clue what I'm going through daily."

John-Lee

Often people don't want to admit how they're feeling after a stroke and put on a brave face. But if you don't acknowledge the way you're feeling and find things that can help you deal with it, these emotions can become overwhelming and lead to problems like depression or anxiety.

The stages of loss

This diagram gives an idea of the emotional stages you might go through after a stroke. It isn't the same for everyone, however, and the stages can happen in a different order or not at all.



Adapted from Stages of the Grief Cycle by Kübler-Ross, 1969

What kinds of problems can this cause?



Anxiety

It's normal to feel anxious after a stroke – you may worry that you're going to have another one, or be frightened about getting around on your own. You may also be worried about money or your family. These fears are all perfectly normal and you should feel less anxious about them over time.

If you're becoming anxious about a wide range of things, or if you can't tell what you're feeling anxious about, then you should speak to someone about it. It can affect your recovery if you're always anxious, so make sure you get some help.



Frustration and anger

So many things change after a stroke, and so quickly, that it can be hard to accept. Feeling angry or frustrated about this is normal and you're going to feel this way from time to time.

But if you don't deal with these feelings properly, they can build up and affect your mood and the way you behave towards other people. It can also affect your health and recovery if you're angry all the time.



Difficulty controlling your mood and emotions

A stroke can affect your ability to control your mood and emotions. This is called emotionalism or emotional lability.

It can mean that your mood changes very quickly, sometimes for no reason at all. It can also mean that you're more emotional than you used to be and you cry or laugh at even the smallest things. Some people start to swear, when they didn't before.

It can be upsetting, especially if you weren't an emotional person before your stroke. Some people say they feel embarrassed, so they stop going out or try to avoid social situations.



Depression

It's normal to feel down or sad after a stroke. But depression is when feelings of hopelessness and sadness don't go away.

They last for weeks or even months, and if they do go away they may come back. Because of this, they can begin to affect your sleep, appetite, daily activities and interest in life. This can also make it harder to feel motivated about your therapy or treatments, which can affect your recovery.

Depression can appear at any point, perhaps months or even years down the line. But if you know the signs and understand that the way you're feeling may be down to depression, it can help you realise that you need some support .



Severe depression is very serious. It can make you feel that you want to give up on life and you may think about harming or killing yourself.

If you've had feelings or thoughts like this, then you need to speak to your GP straight away and get some support.

Will it get better?



When emotions are overwhelming it can be easy to think that they'll never get better. But they do.

Feeling low, anxious or angry, or not being able to control your emotions are all very common after a stroke, especially in the first few months. However, this will probably get better as time goes by.

Even if these feelings never completely go away, you'll probably find them easier to live with over time. And remember, you're not on your own. There are lots of people who can help you.

“Support isn't always offered, but it is out there, so ask. You need to get all the help you can.”

Jocelyn

What can I do about the way I feel?



Get some help

There's a lot to cope with when you've had a stroke, so don't be afraid to ask for some help and talk to others about the way you feel.

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 about it. They will be able to tell you about the support that's available.

It can be easy for people, including health professionals, to forget that there are effects of stroke you can't see. Sometimes they can miss emotional problems or don't take them seriously. So don't wait to be asked about them and keep trying to get the support you need.

If you don't think you're getting the right help from your GP or stroke team, then contact our Stroke Helpline.



How your GP can help

There are a number of treatments and therapies that can help with your emotions after a stroke.

Depending on the problems you're having, it may be good for you to talk to someone who specialises in mental health, such as a psychologist or counsellor. Your GP may be able to refer you to one.

Your GP may also recommend a talking therapy to you. Talking therapies give you time and space to talk about difficult feelings with a trained therapist. 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 may be another option.

The availability of talking therapies through the NHS can vary a lot from area to area. Your GP can offer advice about your options, including choosing a private therapist if you can afford it.

There may also be medication that can help you with your emotions. Antidepressants are drugs that affect the chemicals in your brain and lift your mood.

Antidepressants don't cure emotional problems, but they can help with the symptoms and make life feel easier. They don't work for everyone and can also have side effects.

There are many different types of antidepressants, and it can take a bit of time to find the right one at the right dose. So if it's something you decide to try, you'll need to work with your GP to find what's best for you

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 it could be a family member or friend – whoever you feel most comfortable approaching.

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 on the effects of stroke.

“I wasn't able to cope with it all on my own. Talking to my doctor and getting some counselling was the best thing I ever did.”

Craig

A stroke can make you feel that you're not in control any more. But talking to the right people and finding answers to your questions will help you feel more in control.

The fear of having another stroke can cause a lot of worry, so talk to your GP. Find out what they think caused your stroke and what you can do to reduce the risk of it happening again. Don't be afraid to ask questions. It's important that you understand what's happened and why.

If you're worried about not being able to go back to work, speak to your employer or Jobcentre Plus about how you can be helped back into the workplace. Finding out what financial support you can get may also help to ease your fears. Speak to your social worker if you have one, or call our Stroke Helpline.



Communication problems can make it difficult to ask questions, but your speech and language therapist can help you talk to other members of your stroke team to get the information you need.

3

Take it easy on yourself

Many people find that they have to learn what's 'normal' for them again after they've had a stroke. This means listening to your body and your brain, and not expecting yourself to do too much at once, at least not to begin with.

There's no need to be embarrassed about the way you're feeling – there's a lot to cope with. Be honest about the problems you're having. Often people just want to know how they can help, so they'll appreciate it if you tell them.

Don't be afraid to ask for support when you need it, especially if you're having problems with emotionalism. Your family and friends may not be able to tell when you are genuinely upset and when you're not, so make sure you let them know.

“Accept that you're going to have bad days and don't push yourself too hard when you do. Take each day as it comes.”

Michelle



Keep going

Many people feel that they lose their sense of purpose after a stroke. This can really 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. Keep track of the progress you make, as it can be easy to forget, especially if things don't happen as quickly as you'd like.

It can be particularly hard if you worked or were involved in lots of things 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 that volunteering, taking part in research, or finding new interests help them to feel useful again after their stroke.

5

Get it out

Writing things down can help you deal with negative thoughts and feelings. Many people find that keeping a journal helps them – it doesn't have to be written, you could keep a video journal instead. Things like art, music, photography or poetry can give you a way of expressing your feelings as well.

If you're becoming frustrated or angry you need to find 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 can help you let off some steam, like going for a brisk walk if you can, or some other kind of exercise.



Many people find that relaxation or meditation helps them to calm down when their feelings get too much. There are plenty of books, CDs, websites and courses that can teach you about relaxation and meditation. Try asking your local library, a specialist stroke nurse or a member of a stroke group for recommendations.

6

Try to be as active as you can

Although you may not feel up to it, it's important to be as active as you can. When we're active it releases chemicals into our brain that make us feel happier. Just a brisk walk or a bit of gardening can have a good effect – whatever you can manage.

If you're not able to get up and about, practising your physiotherapy exercises will help. Or you could try some chair-based exercises. Your physiotherapist will be able to show you some.



Yoga and tai-chi involve gentle exercises and relaxation. So why not give them a go? Even if you have problems with moving around or with balance, many of the movements can be adapted. Speak to a local instructor.

Where to get help and information



Talk to us

Our Stroke Helpline is for anyone affected by a stroke, including family, friends and carers. The Helpline can give you information and support on any aspect of stroke. Call us on **0303 3033 100**, from a textphone **18001 0303 3033 100** or email **helpline@stroke.org.uk**.



My Stroke Guide

My Stroke Guide is the stroke support tool and online community from the Stroke Association. Log on at **mystrokeguide.com**.



Talk to others affected by stroke

There may be a stroke group in your local area where you can meet other stroke survivors. You can meet people on our My Stroke Guide online chat forum at **mystrokeguide.com**, and our Facebook page **Facebook.com/TheStrokeAssociation**.

Call our Helpline or visit **stroke.org.uk/support** for more information on stroke groups and other face-to-face support.

Other sources of help and information

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

MIND/MIND Cymru (England and Wales)

Website: www.mind.org.uk

Infoline: 0300 123 3393

Email: info@mind.org.uk

Niamh Wellbeing (Northern Ireland Association for Mental Health)

Website: www.niamhwellbeing.org

Tel: 028 9032 8474

Samaritans

Website: www.samaritans.org

Tel: 08457 90 90 90

Email: jo@samaritans.org

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

Scottish Association for Mental Health

Website: www.samh.org.uk

Tel: 0800 917 3466

Email: info@samh.org.uk

Tips for family and friends

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



Talk to each other

Sometimes it's hard for people to talk about their feelings, even with someone close. So let them know that you're willing to listen and ask them what you can do to help. Sometimes there won't be anything you can do, which can be hard. 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. So 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.



Be patient

It takes time for things to improve, so you'll need to be patient. This isn't always easy, especially when you're coming to terms with everything that's happened too.



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 all it for them. So encourage them to give things a go. Although they may not think they'll be able to, more often than not 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 can't get up and about, there may be chair-based exercises they can do and they're likely to have exercises to practice if they're having physiotherapy.



Look after yourself

It's important to make sure you're looking after yourself and that you have someone to go to for support. It's often easy to put your own needs last, but it is important to rest or get some help if you are feeling tired or stressed, so you are still able to care for someone else

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**](mailto:feedback@stroke.org.uk).



Accessible formats

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



Always get individual advice

Please be aware that this information is not intended as a substitute for specialist professional advice tailored to your situation. We strive to ensure that the content we provide is accurate and up-to-date, but information can change over time. So far as is permitted by law, the Stroke Association does not accept any liability in relation to the use of the information in this publication, or any third-party information or websites included or referred to.

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

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 rely on your support to fund life-saving research and vital services for people affected by stroke. Join the fight against stroke now at stroke.org.uk/fundraising. Together we can conquer stroke.

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