A complete guide to emotional changes after stroke
A stroke is sudden and shocking. This guide can help you understand the effect this could have on the way you feel.

It explains how a stroke can affect your emotions, some of the problems that this can cause and what you can do about them.

It’s aimed at people who have had a stroke, and 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.
# Emotional changes after stroke

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Emotional changes after stroke

Why do I feel different?

A stroke is sudden and can leave you feeling very shocked. It can affect every part of your life. It’s a lot to deal with, so it’s going 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.

Not only are you going through all these emotions yourself, but the people around you might be, too. Often people don’t want to admit how they’re feeling and put on a brave face. So the people around you may not realise what you’re going through.

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

Stages of loss after a stroke

This diagram shows some of the main stages that people can go through after a serious life event like a stroke. People can experience shock, anger and sometimes depression. They may also find they are able to help themselves by reaching out to others and thinking about the future.

People don’t always go through every stage, or they might go through the same stage more than once. It isn’t a linear process. This diagram just helps you get a picture of the common reactions people have after a stroke.

All these stages are normal, but if you find you are stuck feeling angry or depressed, it could be time to seek help. Start by visiting your GP.
What kinds of problems can this cause?

All of this can be hard to cope with. 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. Emotional problems can also affect your recovery, if you aren’t feeling motivated to take part in therapies, for instance.

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. If the part of your brain that controls your emotions is damaged, then this can affect how you feel.

Anxiety

It’s normal to feel anxious after a stroke. Around one quarter of people who have a stroke will experience some form of anxiety within the first five years.

You may worry that you’re going to have another stroke 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.

If you continue to have problems with anxiety, these are some of the long-term symptoms you may notice:

- tiredness
- not going out and avoiding new situations
- problems sleeping
- tense or aching muscles
- being irritable with other people.

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 short of breath
- a dry mouth
- 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. Panic attacks can make people feel as though they are having a heart attack. They are not dangerous, but can feel very frightening. They can be controlled with breathing exercises and other techniques.
Frustration

One of the emotions that nearly all stroke survivors have to deal with is frustration. So many things change after a stroke, and so quickly, 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
• saying the wrong word
• making mistakes
• forgetting things
• feeling tired and having no energy.

Feeling frustrated is normal and you’re going to feel this way from time to time. But if you don’t deal with these frustrations properly, they can build up and make you irritable.

This means you’re likely to get annoyed very easily. You may lose your temper and your mood can change quickly, which can be difficult to live with.

Anger

You may get angry more often after you’ve had a stroke. You may not be able to control your temper and feel you become angry for no reason. Or you may get angry about things that never would have made you feel that way before.

Although some anger is normal, it can affect your health and recovery if you’re angry all the time. It can also make life difficult for you and the people around you.

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 may come and go. Depression is very common after a stroke. We know that at least one third of stroke survivors will have some form of depression within the first year. But you may not have it straight away. It can appear at any point, perhaps months or even years down the line.

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

Signs of depression

Depression affects people in different ways, but these are some of the more common signs:
• feeling sad or down in the dumps
• 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.

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 like this, you need to speak to your GP straight away and get some support.
**Emotional changes after stroke**

**Difficulty controlling your emotions (emotionalism)**

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 and you are more emotional than you used to be.

You may find that you cry or laugh more and 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 didn’t do so before their stroke.

Emotionalism is most common in the early stages of stroke, when about one fifth of people experience it. 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.

If you’re more emotional it can be a sign of depression, but it can happen on its own too.

**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 isn’t 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.

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**Signs of emotionalism**

We’re all different and, by nature, some people are more emotional than others. So signs of emotionalism depend entirely on what’s normal for you. But these are some common signs:

- finding yourself crying or laughing for no reason
- expressing your emotions more intensely that 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.
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. Even if these feelings never completely go away, you’ll probably find them easier to cope with over time.

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 don’t have to do it alone.

“After a stroke your brain is your worst enemy – it will tell you that you’re a burden and there’s no hope. You have to fight it.”

Tina
Are there treatments that can help?

Lots of treatments and therapies can help with your emotions after a stroke. Depending on the problems you’re having, your 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 be able to understand and deal with it. There are different types of talking therapies available, and your GP may be able to refer you. Medication can often 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 and is recommended 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 needs a number of sessions, over the course of several weeks. To help you maintain your progress you can try reading books on CBT, which can guide you through exercises and techniques. There are also interactive computer and online programmes that you can try. Your GP or therapist may be able to recommend some suitable ones to you. Although most of these resources won’t have been developed specifically for people who have had a stroke, they’re still likely to have lots of information that can help you.

Talking therapy and counselling services through the NHS vary a lot from area to area. Depending what services are available and how much demand there is for them, the waiting list could be long. On the other hand, your stroke team may have its own clinical psychologist or access to specialist services that you can be referred to.

Speak to your GP about your options. You can choose private talking therapy services if you want a choice of therapist or don’t wish to wait for NHS help. We’ve listed some websites later in this guide that you can use to look up what’s in your area, or you can contact our Stroke Helpline.

Private talking therapy prices can range between £10 and £60 for one session, so this isn’t an option for everyone. If you do decide to pay for private therapy, we suggest finding a trained therapist who has experience of working with people who have had a stroke. Contact us if you would like to know more about private treatment.

Communication problems can make it very hard to express how you’re feeling. But that shouldn’t stop you from getting the emotional support you need. So 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.
Medication

Some drugs can help you with your emotions. Antidepressants are the best known. These drugs affect the chemicals in your brain and lift your mood. This can help to treat depression and sometimes anxiety. Medication can often help with emotionalism (difficulty controlling your emotions) as well.

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 are usually best for people with more severe problems. They can also have side effects.

There are lots of different types of antidepressants and it can take a bit of time to find the right one at the right dose. They can also take a little while to work, and if you wish to come off them you need to get help from the GP on how to stop gradually. So 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.

“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
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 don’t 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 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 don’t be afraid to keep asking to get the support you need. If you don’t think you’re getting the right support from your GP or stroke team, then contact our Stroke Helpline.

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 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 worry. So talk to your GP about what they think caused your stroke and what you can do to reduce your risk of it happening again. Don’t be afraid to ask, even if it’s weeks or months later. It’s important that you understand what’s happened to you 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. If you have an occupational therapist, they could offer some advice and support. Finding out what financial support you can get will also help to ease your fears. Speak to your social worker if you have one, or call our Stroke Helpline.

   “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

   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, if that will help you get the information you need.
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 both your body and your brain, and not expecting yourself to do too much, 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.

“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 things like volunteering, taking part in research, or finding new interests help them to feel useful again after their stroke.

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 doesn’t have to be running or swimming, even a short walk or a bit of gardening can have a positive effect. If you can’t get up and about, practising physiotherapy exercises will get 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. Speak to a local instructor or contact your local stroke group and ask about suitable classes.
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 – to your own thoughts and feelings as well as your body and the world around you. This can be especially helpful when you’re feeling overwhelmed.

There are plenty of books, CDs, DVDs and websites that can teach you about relaxation and meditation. Although most of them won’t have been designed for people who have had a stroke, there’s still likely to be a lot that you can get from them and many stroke survivors do find them helpful.

There are also many courses on relaxation or mindfulness. Try contacting your local college or library to see if they can tell you about any in your area. Courses are provided by the NHS in some areas. So ask your GP if there’s anything available where you live.

“Rest your mind as well as your body.”
Patricia

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.
What can I do about depression?

- **Keep busy**
  Although you may not feel like doing anything, being active can help you feel more positive. So 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 the compliments that people give you and the achievements you make, so that you can go back and remind yourself of them when you’re feeling down. And think about your appearance – looking good makes us all feel a little better. So treat yourself to a haircut or a manicure. If you can’t get to a salon yourself, find someone who can come out to your house.

- **Eat well and avoid caffeine and alcohol**
  If you’re not eating much or you’re comforting yourself by eating junk food all the time, then it’s going to make you feel tired and run down. So try to eat regular meals with lots of fruit, vegetables and fish. Reduce alcohol and caffeine, 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.

- **Keep active**
  Exercise encourages your brain to release chemicals that lift your mood, which helps to relieve stress and tension. Focusing on an activity can also help to take your mind off things and give you a distraction from negative thoughts or feelings.

- **Talk it through**
  A support group means you can talk about your problems with people who understand because they are going through the same thing. There are groups for people who have had a stroke as well as groups for people coping with anxiety. Or speak to a friend or family member if you prefer. They can help you talk through the things that are making you anxious and put them into perspective.
What can I do about emotionalism?

- **Give it time**
  Emotionalism does 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 make sure you 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 don’t 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 just 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 don’t be afraid to ask for it.

What can I do about feeling frustrated or angry?

- **Let it out**
  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, like going for a brisk walk or some other kind of exercise, can help you let off steam. Relaxation 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 (is it when you’re tired or bored for example?) and what you can do to avoid it. Agree a prompt that they can use to let you know that you’re becoming angry or aggressive. It can be as simple as a word or a gesture, just something that will prompt you to take a step back and calm down.

“Talk to people close to you about what’s happening. Explain to them that this is a change in your emotions and that it is very difficult for you to control.”
Patricia

We have more information and advice about managing aggressive behaviour in our guide F36, Changes to your behaviour. Visit stroke.org.uk/publications to find it.
Where to get help and information

From the Stroke Association

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 info@stroke.org.uk.

Read our publications

We publish detailed information about a wide range of stroke topics including reducing your risk of a stroke and rehabilitation. Read online at stroke.org.uk or call the Helpline to ask for printed copies.

My Stroke Guide

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

Our Enquiry Line can support you with using My Stroke Guide: call 0300 222 5707 or email mystrokeguide@stroke.org.uk.

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

Below are some other organisations in the UK that may be able to help. Contact our Stroke Helpline if you’d like to know about others in your area.

The following mental health charities can provide information, advice and support about emotional problems.

**Mind (England and Wales)**  
*Website*: www.mind.org.uk  
*Infoline*: 0300 123 3393  
*Email*: info@mind.org.uk

**Inspire Mental Health (Northern Ireland)**  
*Website*: www.inspirewellbeing.org/mentalhealth  
*Tel*: 028 9032 8474

**Scottish Association for Mental Health**  
*Website*: www.samh.org.uk  
*Tel*: 0141 530 1000

The following NHS websites can tell you more about specific emotional problems. NHS Choices has a ‘moodzone’ and NHS Inform has a ‘mental health zone’, which have tips to help you cope with anxiety and depression, as well as information about good mental health.

**NHS Choices (England, Wales, Northern Ireland)**  
*Website*: www.nhs.uk  
*Moodzone*: www.nhs.uk/moodzone

**NHS Inform (Scotland)**  
*Mental wellbeing website*: www.nhsinform.co.uk/mentalhealth

If you’d like to know what counselling or talking therapy services are available in your area, you can look them up using the following websites.

**NHS Choices (England)**  
*Website*: www.nhs.uk/Service-Search

**NI Direct (Northern Ireland)**  
*Website*: www.nidirect.gov.uk/mental-health  
Information on mental health services and how to access them.

**NHS Inform (Scotland)**  
*Website*: www.nhsinform.co.uk/Support-Services

**NHS Direct (Wales)**  
*Website*: www.nhsdirect.wales.nhs.uk/localservices  
Select ‘Health, Wellbeing & Support’ from the drop-down menu and then search for services in your local area.

**British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy**  
*Website*: www.itsgoodtotalk.org.uk  
*Tel*: 01455 88 33 00  
*Email*: bacp@bacp.co.uk  
Can tell you about private talking therapy and help you find a qualified therapist.

**Samaritans**  
*Website*: www.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.
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 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. 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.

**Don’t do everything for them**
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 of 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 practise if they’re having physiotherapy.

**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 as well. So make sure you’re looking after yourself and you have someone to talk to. Read F04 Stroke: a carer’s guide for sources of help and information.

“Neil’s still not the man I married but he’s slowly coming back; he’s becoming ‘him’ again.”
Ann

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**Tips for family and friends**

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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**
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:** info@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](http://stroke.org.uk/fundraising). Together we can conquer stroke.

Together we can conquer stroke