



Life post Stroke!

What has happened?

You are 'normal': Researchers have found that there are many common questions, issues and challenges facing all younger people who have had a stroke irrespective of their degree of physical disability. Every individual will have a different and unique experience but it is very important to recognize that you are **not alone** and that most of what you are experiencing is quite 'normal'.

Your journey of recovery from stroke involves various stages of realizing the things that have changed because of the stroke and then readjusting to the effects these changes have on your life. Not all the changes will be obvious in the early recovery period. Coping with the hidden difficulties can be numerous, changes to thinking such as memory and understanding and psychological and emotional problems can be a real challenge on the stroke survivor, family members and loved ones. The recovery period can be lengthy and there is no time frame in which to recover...it all depends on the individual!

You may find yourself comparing your recovery against that of other people who have had a stroke. However it is very important to accept that no two strokes are the same. Every individual will experience differing degrees of severity and speed of recovery, and people with similar problems will react differently.

Coming to terms with a stroke

Why me? Coming to terms with having a stroke is something that many younger people have difficulty with. You may have never been ill previously or have any risk factors for stroke. You certainly did not expect something so devastating to happen to you.

It is normal to expect things to be put right or be reversible but the damage done by stroke may have to be lived with for a long time. After more severe strokes the transition into 'disability' may be very difficult to deal with. With less severe strokes invisible problems such as difficulty concentrating, tiredness and negative feelings about your body image can cause frustration. As part of your recovery you may find yourself questioning many aspects of your life such as what the future holds, your spiritual beliefs, your role in society, your relationships with others, your new found role in the family, your ability to have sex and your ability to work.

A stroke may present many losses. Physical and psychological abilities may have changed as may your level of independence and hopes for the future. Changes in your family and social relationships can also leave you with feelings of loss.

Dealing with these potential changes can feel like a grieving process and often people who have had a stroke feel like part of them has died. In younger people this reaction and the anger and frustration involved can feel overwhelming, as can feelings of guilt they feel for the effect of their stroke on their family and friends.

You may experience the following **stages of grief** (Elizabeth Kubler Ross):

Shock and Disbelief:

A feeling that what is happening is not real, that you will wake up and all will be well again.

Denial:

A refusal to accept the consequences of what has happened. This can last for days or months and sometimes longer. Denial protects you from being overwhelmed by the change in your life. Unfortunately, some stroke survivors get stuck in denial and never come to terms with the effects of their stroke.

Anger:

Anger and sometimes embarrassment are a normal emotional response as the full implications of what has happened to you are realized. You may feel angry with yourself, with God, with the doctors and nurses for not doing enough for you. Anger is often directed at the person closest to you, which can cause feelings of being misunderstood for both of you. The full implications of what has happened are being realized, so particularly family and loved ones need to be aware of this phase and as difficult as it is, sustain this phase!

Loss: Many feelings of loss may be experienced as you adjust to having a stroke and look back to how life was before the stroke.

Anxiety: Anxiety after a stroke is often related to feelings of fear. The fear of dying, fear of having another stroke, fear of the unknown, fear of losing your identity and fears about your roles and responsibilities.

**Guilt:**

Guilt can be about what caused the stroke, about the disruption and worry to the lives of those around you, about not being able to work, about not being able to contribute as before. Feelings of guilt can be powerful and destructive and can be completely irrational.

Acceptance and adjustment:

Adjusting to the way things are for you after your stroke is a gradual process that happens over a long period of time.

Will it happen again?

Much depends on the cause and type of stroke especially whether it was a bleed or a blockage and tests are necessary to find out as much as possible about this. These might include testing the blood for various things, measuring blood flow through blood vessels, checking the heart to look for any abnormalities.

An inherited or genetic condition could have caused a disorder in the clotting mechanism of the blood. Some strokes in younger people are caused by bleeding from a weakness or malformation in a blood vessel that may have been present since birth.

Doctors can't always find a reason: Unfortunately no explanation can be found for some strokes. If this is the case you have to try and accept the fact that you may never get answers to your questions. You must concentrate on being positive, reduce any known risk factors as much as possible and be vigilant in monitoring your health.

In some cases it may be possible to consider surgery to prevent further stroke. Blood thinning medication may be considered as a preventative measure. The risk of another stroke lessens as time passes.

Making lifestyle changes: It can be a big challenge to change lifestyle habits such as smoking and drinking, or serious problems such as substance use. Knowing that these changes will reduce your risk of another stroke doesn't mean they are easy to make. You may feel that the stroke has affected your choices in life too much already, and you may feel resentment about making healthy changes to your lifestyle. A compromise of cutting down if unable to cut out will help to ease conflict if it arises. Some people will take longer than others to come to terms with their stroke and so resist changing their lifestyle.

What you can do to help yourself: There are several well understood medical conditions that are underlying causes of stroke such as high blood pressure, high cholesterol and diabetes. The following measures are known to improve some or all of the conditions mentioned as well as reducing the risk of stroke. So taking steps to implement these changes will be a worthwhile investment.

- Stop smoking and Moderate alcohol intake – binge drinking is particularly dangerous as it raises blood pressure.
- Enjoy a varied, low fat and reduced salt diet, including 5 portions of fruit and vegetables a day.
- Control your weight for your age and height.
- Keep as active as possible.
- Avoid recreational drugs. Amphetamines, cocaine and ecstasy increase the risk of stroke.

The combined oral contraceptive pill may make the blood more likely to clot, especially in women with other risk factors, and may also raise blood pressure. You may want to discuss other forms of contraception with your doctor.