

# RECOVERY AFTER STROKE: COPING WITH EMOTIONS

Dealing with a flood of emotions can be hard for stroke survivors. Some emotions are normal responses to the changes in your life after stroke. Others are common but should not be considered a normal part of stroke recovery. If you suffer from depression, anxiety or emotions that are not in line with the occasion, seek help.

## DEALING WITH DEPRESSION

Grieving for what you have lost is good for you. But when sadness turns to depression, it's time to act. Depression can take hold right after a stroke, during rehabilitation (rehab) or after you go home. It can be – but not always – caused by brain damage from the stroke. Mild or major, it is the most common emotional problem faced by survivors.

### *Depression symptoms include:*

- Feeling sad or “empty” most of the time
- Loss of interest or pleasure in ordinary activities
- Fatigue or feeling “slowed down”
- Sudden trouble sleeping or oversleeping
- Sudden loss of appetite or weight gain
- Being unable to concentrate, remember or make decisions like you used to
- Feeling worthless or helpless
- Feelings of guilt
- Ongoing thoughts of death or suicide, suicide planning or attempts
- A sudden change in how easily you are annoyed
- Crying all the time

### *Some useful tips:*

- Make the most of rehab; the more you recover, the better you will feel
- Spend time with family and friends
- Maintain your quality of life by staying active and doing things you enjoy
- Seek help soon after you note symptoms

Your treatment may include counseling, medicine or both.

## HAVING EXTREME ANXIETY

Anxiety is an overwhelming sense of worry or fear. It can include increased sweating or heart rate. Among stroke survivors, feelings of anxiety are common. Often, stroke survivors suffer from both depression and anxiety at the same time.

Anxiety can affect rehab progress, daily living, relationships and quality of life. So, be sure to seek help right away.

### *Anxiety symptoms include:*

- Ongoing worrying, fear, restlessness and irritability that don't seem to let up
- Low energy
- Poor concentration
- Muscle tension
- Feeling panicky and out of breath
- Scary rapid heart beat
- Shaking
- Headache
- Feeling sick to your stomach

Again, treatment may include counseling, medicine or both.

## UNCONTROLLED EMOTIONS

Do you find yourself laughing or crying at all the wrong times? If so, you may suffer from Pseudobulbar Affect (PBA). Also called emotional incontinence or pathologic lability, PBA is a common medical problem among stroke survivors. It can cause you to laugh at a funeral or cry at a comedy club. It can even make you cry uncontrollably for little or no reason. For this, it is often confused with depression. But, PBA is not depression.

People with PBA are unable to control their emotional expressions the way they used to. When this happens in social settings, they feel embarrassed, frustrated and angry. They also sense that others are uneasy. They may avoid work, public places and family get-togethers. This can lead to feelings of fear, shame and isolation.

There is no treatment approved by the Federal Drug Administration (FDA) for PBA, though antidepressant drugs can help.

### *These things may help you cope with PBA:*

- Be open about it. Warn people that you cannot always control your emotions. Explain that the emotions you show on the outside don't always reflect how you feel on the inside.
- Distract yourself. If you feel an outburst coming on, focus on something boring or unrelated. Try counting the number of items on a shelf.
- Note the posture you take when crying. When you think you are about to cry, change your posture.
- Breathe in and out slowly until you are in control.
- Relax your forehead, shoulders and other muscles that tense up when crying.

## WHAT CAN HELP

- Ask your doctor about emotional changes and symptoms early on.
- Ask your family to stimulate your interest in people and social activities.
- Stay as active as possible and stay involved in your hobbies.
- Set goals and measure accomplishment.
- Plan daily activities to provide structure and sense of purpose.

- Stay involved with people, thoughts and activities that you enjoy.
- Get information on stroke recovery from National Stroke Association. Visit [www.stroke.org](http://www.stroke.org) or call 1-800-STROKES (1-800-787-6537).
- Contact your local stroke association.
- Join a stroke support group. Other survivors will understand your issues, and offer support and ideas to help you manage your emotions.
- Speak openly and honestly to your caregivers about your emotional changes. They'll be glad you did, and together you can work out a solution.

## PROFESSIONALS WHO CAN HELP

Psychologists, psychiatrists and other mental health professionals experienced with stroke-related emotional disorders.

Rehabilitation is a lifetime commitment and an important part of recovering from a stroke. Through rehabilitation, you relearn basic skills such as talking, eating, dressing and walking. Rehabilitation can also improve your strength, flexibility and endurance. The goal is to regain as much independence as possible. Remember to ask your doctor, "Where am I on my stroke recovery journey?"

Note: This fact sheet is compiled from general, publicly available medical information and should not be considered recommended treatment for any particular individual. Stroke survivors should consult their doctors about any personal medical concerns.

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