

Psychological and Social Recovery

Recovery from stroke is generally known to consist of biological healing (return), reorganization of neural pathways (neuroplasticity) and gradual restoration of physical functioning. However, it's much more than that. Psychological and social healing is also essential to optimal stroke recovery.

Stroke is emotionally traumatic. For survivors, it is devastating to be unable to move, talk or to suffer other effects. For family and friends, it is painful to see a loved one ill and disabled, and caregivers are faced with constant responsibility.

To varying degrees, everyone feels loss of control, powerless, afraid, anxious, angry, frustrated, depressed, disconnected, discouraged, disabled, limited, diminished, dependent, alone, self-doubt, self-blame, with challenge to self-identity.

While the medical and physical effects of stroke are necessarily treated first, psychological and social injuries need treatment, too, with education and guidance, interpersonal connection, support and encouragement, practice of the skills of recovery, and targeted psychotherapeutic intervention and medication as appropriate.

Psychological and social services are important because they empower survivors and families to manage the distress and disruption of stroke and stimulate essential drives for recovery, such as determination to live and thrive, and desire to connect with others.

Further, recovery behaviors are generated and sustained by the psychological forces of courage, hope, optimism, determination, persistence, patience and the social powers of trust, interaction, encouragement, support, guidance and example. Also, in the process of recovery, survivors and families discover their inner strength and resilience.

Significantly, survivors and caregivers who participate in psychosocial therapies that emphasize personal empowerment and self-care make more progress in physical recovery, have fewer subsequent strokes and better quality of life than those who do not.

Education and support in a group is an effective way to address the psychological and social effects of stroke. Health professionals and experienced facilitators guide resolution of the recurrent issues of stroke and recovery. Survivors and caregivers who aren't ready for a group experience can be helped in individual and family settings.

Weekly recovery groups help mood, thinking, attitudes and beliefs; stimulate interests, passion, expression and activity; enhance spirit, promote adaptability, strengthen social connections, relationships and friendships; bolster residential and financial stability; and connect participants with other services in the community.

Psychological and social support is the invisible hand of stroke recovery

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Psychological and Social Effects of Stroke

Here are ways that emotion, thinking, beliefs, attitude, relationships impact stroke recovery.

1. After a stroke, survivors and families often feel some degree of loss, fear, anxiety, anger, powerlessness and depression, In the process of recovery, education and support can help them feel hopeful, calm, empowered, capable, valued, valuable and grateful.
2. Stroke affects self-worth. Survivors feel diminished when they can't do normal tasks and caregivers feel ineffective when they are unable to do all they expect of themselves. In recovery, expectations are re-examined and satisfaction is found in gradual progress.
3. It helps to understand recovery as a gradual biological process. We accept that it takes an infant a year to walk and two years to talk. Also, while it takes time to get an education or learn a skill, there is great satisfaction in accomplishing an important goal.
4. When survivors and caregivers feel overwhelmed by the chronicity of stroke, they can learn to enjoy their lives and progress today, even as they continue to recover. They don't have to wait for some future achievement or event.
5. In recovery, survivors and families learn to appreciate the portion of the glass that is full, and satisfaction and meaning is found in the mixture of challenges, limitations, capabilities, pleasures and opportunities in life now.
6. Survivors and families are often isolated because stroke constricts their lives to a small space. It's hard to ask for help when feeling alone, vulnerable and fragile. Recovery is easier when caring persons reach out with empathy, encouragement and support.
7. After stroke, relationships are more difficult because of the limiting effects of stroke, the pressures of caregiving and changes in friendships. Discussion, guidance and practice of social interaction in stroke support groups help restore vital social connection.
8. When survivors and families feel powerless, vulnerable and afraid, the example of others helps access inner reserves of strength and courage. Also, interaction in support groups engender feelings of connection, friendship, empathy, compassion and hope.
9. After a stroke, survivors and caregivers walk, talk, act, and think at different speed. This disparity can cause survivors to feel left out or behind and frustration for family and friends. In recovery, everyone learns to patiently interact at the same pace.
10. Lower energy and stamina are common after stroke. Survivors may do less, but they can choose activities that mean the most, that interest and stimulate, that expand capabilities and enrich their lives. Personal passions add meaning and purpose to life.

11. Caregivers often become overwhelmed while providing hours of support, taking care of the household, meeting personal and work responsibilities. Experienced caregivers in a support group can provide strategies, suggestions and resources for respite and calm.
12. Stroke affects family roles. Caregivers may be stressed over extra responsibilities. Survivors may be upset over loss of status or decisions that are made without their input. Solutions can be found through education and shared experience in support groups.
13. Both survivors and caregivers yearn for independence. Since capabilities can gradually change in recovery without being noticed, periodic reevaluation identifies what survivors can now do on their own and the responsibilities that caregivers can safely release.
14. There are often behaviors that are not recognized as effects of stroke, including changes in mood, emotions, thinking, memory, motivation and energy. Education and support help survivors and families understand and manage the complexities of stroke.
15. Sometimes, survivors don't look like they have had a stroke. Survivors, families and friends need to understand internal effects of stroke that aren't obvious so they can be realistic and patient in their expectations of self and others.
16. Stroke affects every area of life, including financial and residential stability. Recovery programs help survivors and families connect with community resources.
17. Because recovery is gradual, survivors and families learn to accept their limitations and capabilities, and play with the cards they have been dealt with patience and determination.
18. When can less be more? For some, the losses in stroke lead to deeper experience of life. In recovery, anger and bitterness can be replaced with gratitude and loss with love.
19. Fortunately, for individual survivors and families, only some of these issues arise, and at different times over the span of recovery, and when they do occur, stroke recovery groups and experienced survivors and families are there to support them.
20. Here are general guidelines for resolution of psychological and social challenges of stroke: Identify and learn about effects and impact; share with trusted others about experience and coping; gain personal insight through reflection; formulate strategies to address the matter; discuss progress with others; seek psychotherapy and medication when needed.

The Stroke Recovery Group

Interpersonal interaction, support,
education, empowerment, practice,
integrated into the present moment

1. Here is a common experience of stroke. “I lost control of my body and my life and I felt alone and powerless.” Humans cope with such distressful circumstance and emotion by banding together to create connection, relationships, love, caring, belonging, identity, support, example, encouragement and safety.
2. The stroke group is similarly protective, like the nurturing family that we had or needed. The group meets weekly because regular interaction creates connection, trust, healing and empowerment, and because it helps to learn the many skills of recovery sooner, with help, rather than later, by trial and error.
3. In group, individual survivors and caregivers share their personal experiences, feelings and concerns in a safe environment. Others listen with empathy and give feedback on how they felt and acted in similar circumstances.
4. Participants are encouraged to speak from personal experience and point of view to increase self-awareness and to connect with and support others. The most helpful communication is in the first person.
5. An atmosphere of trust is created by authentic interaction and commitment to confidentiality. What is shared in the group stays in the group.
6. As universal concerns are uncovered, each participant discusses how he or she has been affected by or relates to the issue at hand. Facilitators focus on and educate about significant topics that arise, and guide discussion to deeper awareness and understanding.
7. The group is an integrated process of interpersonal connection, mutual support, education, guidance, empowerment and practice of recovery skills and self-care, coalesced into a learning experience in the present moment that can improve functioning, relationships, meaning, purpose, satisfaction, peace of mind and quality of life.
8. Stroke survivors and families who participate in education and support that emphasize connection, empowerment, practice of recovery skills and self-care make more progress in recovery and functionality than those who do not and have fewer subsequent strokes.
9. Ideally, support groups begin during acute rehabilitation and continue during outpatient care for as long needed, so survivors and families learn and practice the many skills of recovery and discover they can enjoy life, even as they recover.

No one has to face stroke alone