



Empowerment after Stroke

To be empowered is to have the ability, means and opportunity to do something

Loss of control is a major consequence of stroke. To varying degrees, stroke can affect every aspect of living, including mobility, dexterity, communication, strength, energy, thinking, emotions, mood, relationships, roles, and social, residential, occupational and financial stability. Stroke patients and their families frequently feel powerless and fear that their disabilities and circumstances are fixed and won't get better.

This response of fear is understandable, because for millennium, little could be done about stroke. Today, the situation is different, for we now know the causes of stroke and how to prevent them; there have been many medical advances in stroke treatment; and stroke survivors and families can now help themselves to get better and enjoy their lives, even as they recover.

A word to describe how stroke survivors and families regain control is "empowerment," and a good way to begin to reclaim their lives is with "empowerment education." As survivors and families learn and practice the skills of recovery, they experience gradual restoration of physical, psychological and social abilities, which inspires them to strive for more progress.

The progression of empowerment is evident in how survivors see themselves. Stroke "victims" feel overwhelmed and trapped by injury and consequences. "Survivors" have also been injured, but are able to focus on recovery to improve the quality of their lives. "Victors" live satisfying and meaningful lives, with minimal thought of or distraction by limitations of stroke.

Today, we have choices in how to respond to stroke. While we may have limited control during the acute phase of stroke, we have significant control over our recovery, daily life and the ultimate outcome. As we pass through the stages of uncertainty, challenge and healing, we find, within us, courage, patience, determination, adaptability, love for others and life, and will to live and thrive. We discover we are stronger than we thought.

Here are steps to empower recovery after stroke:

- Discover what we can do for ourselves to further our own recovery
- Learn the skills of integrated physical, psychological and social recovery
- Learn about neurological return, plasticity and the process of physical recovery
- Believe that recovery can be continuous, with courage, determination and effort
- Be encouraged by the example of others, learning how they have recovered
- With guidance, make a realistic plan to improve functions of our own choice
- Work for optimal recovery with pulse therapy, practice and interpersonal support
- Appreciate the gradual progress and the unanticipated benefits of recovery
- When we face limits, learn to enjoy whatever portion of the glass is full
- The attached practices empower recovery and can prevent another stroke

Empowerment is an antidote to loss of control and powerlessness



Pulse Therapy with Group Support

Stroke survivors and their families want to get better, and “return,” “plasticity” and “pulse therapy” can help their gradual recovery from stroke.

1. Stroke recovery is a gradual process of biological healing and improved physical, psychological and social functioning that occurs over time as a result of recurrent rehabilitation, recovery activities and daily effort and practice by survivors and families.
2. After a stroke, the recovery process typically begins with two or three weeks of inpatient rehabilitation and then two or three months of outpatient therapy, and focuses on general functionality, based on disabilities at that point in time.
3. A longer-term goal is to gradually restore specific impaired functions, drawing on biological processes of return and plasticity, because the potential for stroke recovery continues with a slow return of capabilities that survivors and families may not recognize.
4. "Return" is spontaneous restoration of lost function, as injured but viable cells heal. "Plasticity" is the brain's ability to reorganize itself and regain function by forming new brain connections that bypass cells that no longer work. Both processes are accelerated by recurrent therapy and regular practice.
5. To improve long-term recovery, Bruce Dobkin, M.D., director of UCLA neurological rehabilitation and research, recommends “pulse therapy” which is periodic, targeted treatment to stimulate specific functions, and regular practice by survivors over a period of weeks and months, until the selected behaviors are incorporated into daily life.
6. Pulse therapy is both a rehabilitative and educational process, and is most effective when stroke survivors understand the potential of return and plasticity, and feel empowered to choose and practice the skills and functions they want to recover.
7. Progress in pulse therapy can be reinforced by participation in weekly support groups that generate psychological forces of hope, courage, empowerment, optimism, persistence, patience and social powers of interaction, support, trust and guidance. Individual and family services can help those who are unable to take part in a group experience.
8. Significantly, the United States District Court settlement of *Jimmo v. Sebelius* on January 23, 2013 expands therapy services for Medicare beneficiaries with chronic conditions or disabilities, which would include pulse therapy.

There are limits to all human endeavors, but knowledge, courage and effort help us discover, attain, accept and value what is possible.



Stroke Association of Southern California

The Stroke Recovery Group

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

1. Here is one experience of stroke. “When I lost control of my body and my life, I felt alone and helpless.” Humans protect themselves against such isolation and powerlessness by banding together to create mutual relationship, love, caring, belonging, sense of identity, support, encouragement, and safety.
2. The stroke group is similarly protective, like the nurturing family that we had or needed. The group meets every week 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 be of support to others.
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. Facilitators focus on significant issues that arise and guide discussion to deeper awareness and understanding.
7. The group is an integrated process of personal connection, mutual support, education, guidance, empowerment and practice of recovery skills, coalesced into learning experience in the moment that can improve functioning, relationships, meaning, purpose, satisfaction and peace of mind.
8. Investigation can determine if survivors and families who participate in professionally-led group education and support that emphasize interpersonal connection, empowerment and self-care make more progress in recovery and functionality, than those who do not, and have fewer subsequent strokes.

No one has to face stroke alone



Universal Wellness Teams

for mutual learning and support

Seventy percent of strokes can be prevented by healthy lifestyle, attention to risk factors, and basic medical care. The Stroke Association supports regular practice of universally healthy behaviors because they protect against stroke, heart disease, diabetes, and other illnesses. SASC recommends that those who want to improve their health join together to form universal wellness teams to achieve and sustain their personal health goals.

- Form a wellness team at your work, church, school or in your neighborhood for mutual education and support
- Make your home a “good food zone” and make healthy choices about what to eat before dining out
- Exercise regularly and safely, selecting activities you enjoy, according to your health needs, and with your doctor’s approval
- Manage demands and stress of your personal and work life
- Access the healthcare you need and work with your doctor for good health
- Address health risk factors such as high blood pressure, cholesterol, heart conditions and diabetes
- Know how to recognize and respond to medical emergencies

We all need encouragement and support. It’s not easy to regularly eat well, exercise, maintain weight, manage stress and health risks, stop smoking, moderate drinking, go to the doctor and care for our families while under pressure of personal and work responsibilities, especially when fast foods and other short cuts that bypass healthy behaviors are so accessible.

While there are some healthy behaviors no one else can do for us, self-care is easier, more effective and enjoyable when done with others who are also committed to good health.

**To join or form a wellness team, contact the
Stroke Association of Southern California
(310) 575-1699 • health@strokesocal.org**