

# Independence

*Loss of independence and the resulting feeling of helplessness is one of the most devastating effects of stroke. It makes some people angry, and others retreat into resignation.*

## Learning by doing

From the beginning of rehabilitation, hospital staff will be working to assist the person to regain independence. To the family/whanau this may be misunderstood if they think the person is ill and should be looked after more. The person may feel resentful at being 'left' to cope with a tricky situation. But encouraging the person to do as much as possible helps them in the long term and speeds recovery and the regaining of self-esteem.



## What helps

The family have to learn to stand back.

- Let the person try things they want or feel able to do
- The person may need to attempt things they previously did in order to find out their present limits, work out alternative strategies and build confidence
- Encourage the person to be assertive so they feel comfortable asking for or refusing help
- Resist the inclination to help more than necessary, even when a simple task is becoming chaotic and everybody is getting frustrated
- Allow the person plenty of time to complete a task – don't take over before it is finished because time is short
- Be mindful of unhealthy dependence, a tendency to 'give up' – this is hard to deal with because the person may appear unable to do more and caregivers may have to put the person in a situation where they need to manage
- Try to take a consistent approach to encouraging independence.

*One of my biggest hassles was people who wanted to help me all the time.*

*One minute she'd expect me to do everything, the next minute she'd be doing everything for me.*

## What is independence?

Each person who has had a stroke will have to think long and hard about their personal goal of independence. Their definition of independence will likely change over time; at the beginning it may mean being able to get to the toilet and dress and eat without assistance. As competence with daily activities is achieved, taking a place in the wider world becomes a condition of independence. The goal expands, with aspirations always a step ahead of accomplishments.

A stage may be reached where recovery from the stroke seems to have come to a plateau, but hasn't quite reached the hoped-for independence. It may take a little more time before the person comes to realise that independence includes an inner attitude, and that the qualities acquired from having to deal with limitations can be a source of strength for themselves, their family/whanau and others.

*Most people with a stroke fiercely crave independence, because we've had a real taste of what it means to be dependent.*

The 'inner person' can continue to grow, regardless of what the body is doing.

