

Stress

Stress – the feeling of being stretched beyond an acceptable limit – is common when dealing with any illness; the complex nature of stroke and the comparatively long duration of its effects can make stress a serious problem for the person and caregivers.

Stress can be experienced in several ways:

- **mental** (worries about finance, the future, the implications of the stroke)
- **emotional** (impatience, pessimism, anger, tearfulness)
- **physical** (tiredness, tension, lethargy, upset stomach, shortness of breath, pounding heart, poor sleep, poor appetite).

A person with a stroke may be stressed by:

- not being given the opportunity to do things they know they can do
- not being allowed to be as independent as they think they could be
- having to make life-changing decisions
- being hurried
- feeling as though they have no personal freedom or privacy
- being treated as having a hearing or intellectual impairment.

Caregivers can be loaded with responsibilities and daily difficulties that may be accepted, but in truth not welcomed; there may seem to be no light at the end of the tunnel.

After getting to all the therapy at the hospital, and all the appointments, I was too tired to do anything else. Everything was a hassle.

Warning signs

Stress creeps up. Everybody will have good days and off-days, but several bad days in a row probably indicate that something needs to be done about stress.

Suspect stress if you:

- don't 'bounce back' – an ill-considered remark leaves you brooding for hours, a hitch in the day's schedule turns the day upside-down
- find it hard to relax, even with your favourite people and activities
- lose your sense of humour
- sleep badly, or feel unrefreshed by sleep
- tend to be anxious about little things
- lose your appetite
- smoke or drink too heavily
- feel you're not capable of meeting demands.

Dealing with stress

The stressful situation not only drains energy but alters perspective. Problems become exaggerated and seem to close in, so the sooner you deal with stress the more chance you will have of getting rid of it.

Recognise the stress

Be alert for the warning signals, don't brush them off by thinking you're "just a bit tired," or "not myself today".

Stand back

Try to look at the situation with fresh eyes, to see the whole picture, not just the problems. Pretend you're an outsider assessing your situation, trying to find solutions. It is helpful to talk to someone who *is* outside the situation – a friend, health professional or Stroke Foundation field officer who will often be able to pinpoint things that can be changed or done differently.

Look outward

Arrange to regularly spend some time outside the tight circle of stress. Do something different, even if you feel there isn't the time to spare or don't feel enthusiastic at the beginning. Relaxation takes practice! Let other people (cheerful friends, grandchildren, the local sports club) take some of the weight off you. Or plunge into a hobby or special interest.

The effort involved in organising an outing is so great I wonder whether to bother, but once we're out of the house it all seems worthwhile.

Avoid stressful situations

Not all the factors that cause stress can be changed, but it should be possible to modify some, eg, change the daily schedule to avoid tight spots. Then you can be on guard against the factors that can't be changed and simply resolve not to react ("I know there's going to be a bit of a tantrum here, but by teatime it will all be over...") In this way you can inwardly take charge of the stress factors instead of letting them push you around.

