STROKE FOUNDATION • NZ

DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY AFTER STROKE

Recognising the signs and how to get help

WHAT IS DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY?

Depression and anxiety are common, especially after stroke. Around half of all stroke survivors experience significant depression or anxiety in the first year following their stroke. It is also common to experience both depression and anxiety at the same time.

These experiences can be upsetting and overwhelming, however, there are proven ways to manage them and to start to feel better.

DEPRESSION

When a person feels a persistent feeling of sadness or loss of interest, lacking in energy and unmotivated to do things they would normally enjoy, this is what we call depression.

ANXIETY

When a person often feels anxious and on edge, worries constantly or has a sense of panic, this is what we call anxiety.

WHY IS IT COMMON TO EXPERIENCE DEPRESSION AND/OR ANXIETY AFTER STROKE?

Depression and/or anxiety can happen after stroke because of physical damage or emotional changes to the brain. Sometimes it is a combination of physical damage and emotional changes that causes depression and/or anxiety.

PHYSICAL CHANGES

A stroke causes physical damage to the brain. When cells in the brain are damaged, a person may have difficulty controlling emotions or experience personality changes, which could lead to depression and/or anxiety. Some people are affected by chronic pain following a stroke and this can also lead to depression and/or anxiety.

EMOTIONAL CHANGES

A stroke is a frightening experience. It happens suddenly, causes uncertainties, shakes our confidence, and it can take time to come to terms with what has happened. Many people feel scared, frustrated or angry about what has happened to them, the impact of their disabilities and the changes they are experiencing. They feel they have lost their independence or that they are not in control of their situation. People can also feel anxious about whether they will have another stroke.

“I HAD LOST SOME VISION, SO I’D FEEL REALLY CONFIDENT AND BUBBLY, LIKE MY NORMAL SELF, THEN I’D WALK INTO A WALL AND THAT WOULD JUST KNOCK ME FOR SIX AND I’D GET REALLY UPSET.

RECOGNISING THE SIGNS OF DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY AFTER STROKE

Depression or anxiety can be 'hidden' in the effects of stroke and difficult to recognise. It may help to look out for some key signs to decide whether you, or someone close to you, may be experiencing depression and/or anxiety.

Signs can show up in all aspects of life and can be physical, mental, social or spiritual.

PHYSICAL (TINANA)

- Feeling tired and lacking energy
- Eating too much or too little
- Sleeping too much or too little
- Trouble relaxing
- Moving or speaking more slowly or more quickly than usual
- Racing heart, chest pains, sweating and breathlessness
  (If you have new symptoms of chest pain, you should seek medical help right now)

MENTAL (HINENGARO)

- Losing interest in things you used to enjoy
- Worrying that awful things will happen
- Difficulty thinking and concentrating
- Feeling whakamā, shame or a failure
- Feeling angry
- Feeling like ending your life
- Feeling sad and unmotivated
- Feeling nervous or anxious a lot

SOCIAL (WHĀNAU)

- Feeling like other people don't understand
- Wanting to be left alone
- Feeling empty and lonely
- Getting irritated or hōhā with others
- Losing interest in whānau and friends and avoiding contact with them

SPIRITUAL (WAIRUA)

- Feeling there is no purpose to life
- Feeling numb and disconnected from your tīpuna, your ancestry
- Having bad dreams

Credit: Health Promotion Agency. Based on the Te Whare Tapa Whā model by Mason Durie.

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I REALISED ONE DAY, WHY AM I SO SAD? I'D NEVER HAD DEPRESSION OR ANXIETY BEFORE MY STROKE. I DIDN'T EVEN KNOW I HAD IT, UNTIL SOMEONE SAID THE WORDS AND I THOUGHT THAT'S WHAT IT IS, BINGO.

GETTING HELP AND WAYS TO TREAT DEPRESSION AND ANXIETY

Speak to someone you trust – a friend, whanau member, elder, or your Community Stroke Advisor (0800 78 76 53). They can listen and be there for you, as well as provide advice and practical support.

Visit your family doctor or primary care nurse. They can talk to you about what you are going through and how to manage it – with talking therapy (counselling) or medication – or a combination of both.

If stroke has caused communication and understanding difficulties, it may be helpful to use the services of a speech and language therapist before talking with a counsellor or psychologist.

TALKING THERAPIES

Talking therapies involve discussing the challenges you are experiencing in your life with a specially trained mental health professional – usually a counsellor or psychologist. They can provide strategies and support clients to find solutions to overcome these challenges. Contact Depression Helpline to speak to a trained counsellor (0800 111 757).

MEDICATION

Antidepressant medication is the most common medical treatment for depression and/or anxiety. It is usually most effective in combination with talking therapy.

Antidepressant medications usually take a few weeks to work. Some people may experience side effects. It is important to consult your doctor or a health professional before you stop taking prescribed medication as you may experience withdrawal symptoms.

Other medications and treatments

Some people find complementary and alternative medicines and treatments helpful for depression and/or anxiety. Examples are acupuncture or rongoā (traditional Māori healing). Talk to your doctor or primary healthcare nurse first if you want to try these medicines or treatment.

“I DECIDED I’D GO BACK INTO THERAPY AND REALLY TALK ABOUT THIS MORE IN DEPTH, BECAUSE THE SOONER YOU ATTEND TO IT, THE BETTER RESULTS YOU WILL GET.

EXERCISE AND PHYSICAL WELLBEING

Looking after your physical wellbeing is another way you can help manage your depression and/or anxiety. Go for a walk and enjoy the fresh air in a park or at the beach, go for a swim or do some gardening. Regular exercise can have a profoundly positive impact on mental health.

If you often feel tired, think about the time of day when you usually feel most alert and do your exercise then. It is also important to get enough sleep and enjoy a healthy diet.

Relaxation techniques can be helpful, especially if you are experiencing anxiety. Try breathing exercises and mindfulness to help calm your mind and body.

DO THINGS YOU ENJOY

Think about the things you really enjoy doing and do those things! Maybe there is an old hobby you could take up again or start something new.

In some regions, music therapy and art therapy programmes are available. Talk to your Community Stroke Advisor about these therapies and options for other activities in your area (0800 78 76 53).

TIPS FOR ONGOING WELLBEING

Stay connected with whānau and friends

Remember that you are not alone – join support groups and talk to others who may be going through similar experiences

Stay as active as you can be – exercise at the time of day when you feel most alert

Get enough sleep

Eat healthy meals

Limit alcohol

Find the things you love to do – and do those things

Talk to your Community Stroke Advisor – they can help with support, practical advice and information.

“I HAVE A SYSTEM, A ROUTINE TO DO THINGS. I KNOW I’M GOING TO GET UP, GOING TO MAKE LUNCHES, I’LL GET DRESSED FOR WORK, DRIVE TO WORK AND I’M GOING TO FUNCTION. ALL THOSE LITTLE THINGS ARE BIG THINGS FOR ME.

WHERE TO FIND HELP AND INFORMATION

There are many things you can try to help manage your depression and/or anxiety. Find the things that work for you and keep at them. Things will get better.

If you need to talk to someone right now about how you are feeling, you can phone the free numbers below 24 hours a day.

If you are in a crisis situation call 111

Depression Helpline	0800 111 757
Healthline	0800 611 116
Lifeline	0800 543 354
Samaritans	0800 726 666
Youthline	0800 376 633
Alcohol Drug Helpline	0800 787 797
National Telehealth service	Free call or text 1737 or visit 1737.org.nz

ONLINE

Check out the Stroke Foundation website for more information, resources, advice and self-help tips for dealing with depression and/or anxiety.

stroke.org.nz/free-resources

The Mental Health Foundation also have a wide range of helpful tools: mentalhealth.org.nz

SOCIAL CONTACT

It is important for your wellbeing to stay connected with other people and know that you are not alone. Spend time with your whānau. Meet up with a friend for coffee and a chat.

Talk to your Community Stroke Advisor about networks and stroke support groups in your area – Stroke Foundation (0800 78 76 53).

National Office, PO Box 12482, Wellington 6144
0800 STROKE (0800 78 76 53) / strokenz@stroke.org.nz / stroke.org.nz