

Information/Education Page

Managing Emotions After Your Stroke: A Practical Guide

This resource was created to let you and your family and friends know that your emotions can be affected after your stroke. If you are a person with lived experience of stroke, it focuses on some practical ways you can manage your post-stroke emotions once they arise.

What is emotional regulation?

Emotional regulation involves understanding your emotions, being able to identify what causes your emotions, and being equipped with ways to cope with your emotions. Learning how to regulate your emotions can help you feel more confident, improve relationships with your family and friends, and increase your overall well-being.¹

Check-in with yourself

Do you find it hard to communicate, or understand what you are feeling? Do you feel like your emotions change suddenly? Do you have troubles falling asleep or staying asleep at night?

If you answered yes to the above questions, you may benefit from some of the strategies below. Oftentimes, emotions can be accompanied by physical sensations, such as tightness in your chest, tension in your jaw and neck muscles, clenched hands, a fast heartbeat, quicker breathing, and even sweating. Emotions can also be accompanied by racing thoughts, not being able to stop thinking about something that is bothering you or finding it difficult to focus.

What are some common changes in emotions after stroke?

After your stroke, you and your family may notice changes in your emotions. Due to personal, social, and biological factors, each person may notice different types of changes. Some common changes are displayed below in [figure 1](#), although there are many other changes you may experience that are not included. You are not alone. Approximately 30%-40% of individuals with stroke experience emotional changes (see [fig 1](#)).^{2,3}

What are some practical strategies I can do myself to regulate my emotions?

The key to emotional regulation is being aware of how emotions can affect you physically and mentally. Checking in with yourself regularly will help you increase your emotional self-awareness and could help you proactively manage intense emotions. The strategies below can be practiced individually, or with the support of your family and friends.

Breathing

- Once you become aware that you are breathing faster and a strong emotion is coming on, bring your attention to your breathing.^{3,4}
- Focus on gently exhaling warm air out through your mouth. Allow the inhale that follows to bring fresh cool air in through your nose.
- Do not force your exhales or your inhales. Just follow them to their natural conclusion. Repeat this cycle of calming exhales followed by easy,

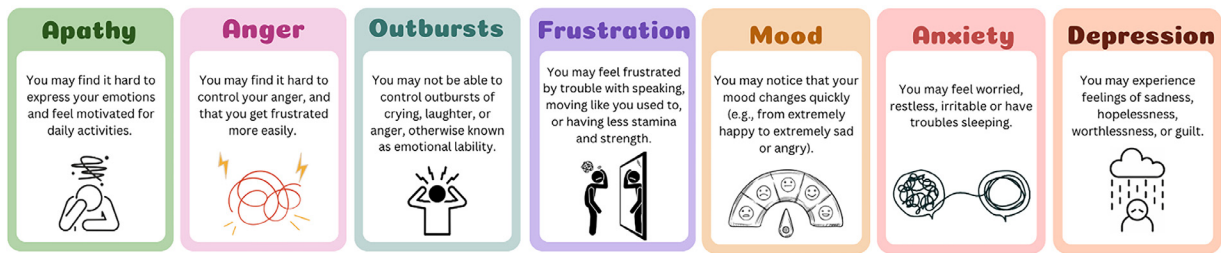


Fig 1 Common changes in emotions.²

unforced inhales at your own pace for as long as you find it helpful.

Relaxation

- When you notice muscle tension, it may indicate that you are feeling overwhelmed, anxious, irritated, or upset.^{3,4} While sitting or lying down, you could try a body scanning exercise that involves squeezing each muscle group for 5 seconds, and then letting it go. Begin with your toes, then the lower portion of your legs, the upper portion of your legs, and your stomach. Then move to your hands, forearms, upper arms, and your shoulders. Finally focus on your chest, neck, jaw, face, and mouth.

Reflection

- When you feel a strong emotion, or overwhelmed with thoughts, reflection can be a helpful tool. You could write your thoughts in a journal, type them, or record them on a device, or find a friend or family member to listen.
- Ask yourself: "What emotion(s) am I feeling? Why am I feeling this way? What happened to bring these feelings up? What could I do right now to help me feel better?"

Communication

- Communication can be difficult after stroke, especially if you have aphasia.^{1,5} Communicating your feelings, expressing your emotions, asking for help, and being honest with others about what you are feeling are all important ways you can improve your emotional regulation.

- Set aside regular "check-in" times with family or friends before your emotions become too overwhelming.
- You could do a "check-in" at breakfast, before bed, after a stressful event, before an important appointment, or during a social gathering.
- Listen without interrupting each other. Wait until the other person is done speaking before you speak. If you have poststroke aphasia, let your partner know that you need more time when speaking.
- Use statements that start with "I" when expressing your emotions. For example, you could say: "I feel angry when I can't find the right word and you say it before I have time to find it."

Movement is key

- Depending on how your stroke has impacted your body, physical activity on your own or with your family or friends could be a great way to improve your mood and manage upsetting thoughts and emotions.⁶⁻⁸
- Yawn and stretch your arms, legs, and back after you have been sitting for a while. Do in person or online yoga, tai chi, Pilates, or dance classes. Take a brisk walk or go for a swim. Do what feels best for you and your body.

Socialization and staying connected

- Stay connected with your family, friends, and community to reduce feelings of isolation.⁸
- Plan visits, lunch, dinner dates, facetimes, or video meetings. Help at a community garden, go to a concert, play, film, or museum with others. Join a small local community group for social hour, try group exercise classes for added social benefits or join an online support group.

Take time to rest

- Many people who have experienced a stroke experience troubles with sleeping which can make it harder to regulate your emotions.⁹ Creating a consistent sleep routine, where you go to bed and wake up around the same time each day can help. Start your sleep routine by brushing your teeth, putting on your sleepwear, and find a calming strategy that helps you wind down.
- This could be listening to quiet music, doing some gentle stretching, or trying the muscle relaxation practice and the calming breathing technique described above.

Creativity to express yourself

- Creative activities such as painting, drawing, dancing, playing, or music can help reduce emotional stress.¹⁰ You could also try acting, writing poetry, or stories that awaken your imagination.
- Join a choir or an improv group. Take an art or clowning class. Perform at a poetry slam or in a community theater production. Make a film with friends.

Who can help me if I find it hard to talk about my emotions?

- Individual or group sessions with a psychologist, psychotherapist, social worker, counselor, movement, or arts therapist could help you and your family support your ability to regulate your emotions, and/or improve relationships with family and friends.^{11,12}
- There are many therapeutic approaches and styles that could help you feel less overwhelmed. A common approach is called cognitive behavioral therapy, which is a therapeutic approach that aims to help you identify and manage difficult thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. This approach has helped people with depression and anxiety and can provide ways to feel less overwhelmed.
- Emotion-focused therapy focuses on helping you better understand your emotions and how to best share them with your family or friends.

This type of therapy could relieve the stress or anxiety you may feel when talking about your emotions.

Who can help me if I feel isolated or alone?

- Joining a professionally led stroke recovery support group, which can also include family members, offers emotional support from others with lived experience of stroke.¹¹ The group will understand what you are going through. It is a safe space to share your experiences under the guidance of a group leader.

Who can help me if my emotions are affecting me physically?

- Strong emotions can cause physical reactions such as tension, numbness, aching, and feeling out of sync.

Your health care professional team is there to support you.

- Physical therapists can recommend exercises that help to boost your mood and reduce your stress.¹³
- Occupational therapists can teach you energy saving techniques that can help you deal with your mood and help you get through your daily routine.⁶
- Speech therapists can help you overcome communication issues to better express your feelings.
- Creative arts therapists (visual, music, dance, drama, and expressive arts) can teach you creative ways to express your emotions.¹⁰
- Psychomotor specialists (Feldenkrais method, Alexander technique) can provide you with tools to improve your mood and reduce the physical effects of stress.¹¹

Can medications help me with my poststroke emotions?

- Safe and effective medications can help you manage emotions after your stroke, but people can react differently, so check with your doctor about recommendations and potential side effects.

Authorship

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Disclaimer

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