



How to Cope After a Loved One's Stroke

Being a caregiver for a loved one going through stroke rehabilitation can be physically and emotionally draining. But by learning to take care of yourself, you'll also help your loved one's stroke recovery.

In a stark contrast to the suddenness of a stroke, stroke recovery can take months or more, and having a good stroke caregiver can make all the difference in successful stroke rehabilitation. But *being* a stroke caregiver can be emotionally challenging — and you'll need to look out for yourself while you're looking out for your loved one.

"Stroke and stroke recovery can cause feelings of shock, fear, and loss for the stroke victim's family. Unlike cancer or heart disease, the stroke victim's loved ones may have to deal with symptoms that seem to suddenly and dramatically change the person they love. It can be like turning off a light switch," says Matthew E. Tilem, MD, a neurologist and stroke specialist at the Lahey Clinic in Burlington, Mass.

The early days of stroke recovery may be the hardest for everyone. Your loved one may have lost the ability to speak or walk and may also have memory loss. It may seem like the person you knew has left you. "The early days of stroke recovery are a major adjustment for the family. As a loved one takes on the role of the stroke caregiver, new challenges and changes will need to be faced," says Dr. Tilem.

Emotional stress may not end when your loved one comes home. As a stroke caregiver, you may worry about another stroke, about your loved one's ability to recover basic functions and possibly needing a nursing home, and about loss of support from friends and family.

What to Expect: The Stroke Recovery Timeline

Most spontaneous stroke recovery occurs in the first 30 days after the stroke, but stroke rehabilitation continues long after that. Good rehabilitation can make the difference between being able to function at home and needing to stay in an institution.

The stroke recovery timeline is quite variable. It depends on age and the severity of the stroke. "The usual progression is from emergency room to hospital room to rehabilitation facility, and then to home care or a nursing home. Although 80 to 90 percent of stroke recovery occurs within six months, but recovery can continue for up to a year, especially in younger patients," explains Tilem. The amount of recovery a stroke patient can expect also varies; some will make a nearly full recovery, while many will be left with significant handicaps even after lengthy rehabilitation.

You may wonder how much to help, and how much to let your loved one do on his or her own. Consider this advice from Tilem:

- **Try to encourage independence.** "Often the person recovering from stroke can do more than caregivers assume," Tilem points out.
- **Try to encourage participation.** Your loved one will benefit from taking part in the decision-making process about home care.
- **Exercise is important during stroke rehabilitation.** "Don't make the mistake of assuming the stroke victim is too fragile for exercise," advises Tilem.
- **Suggest leisure activities and family visits.** "Quality of life is the goal of rehabilitation," says Tilem.

Being a Good Stroke Caregiver

Getting smart about stroke through education is one of the best ways you can help your loved one and reduce your own emotional stress at the same time. Learn as much as you can about stroke recovery and the rehabilitation process. Knowing what to expect at each stage of the stroke recovery timeline will ease the natural anxiety you're probably feeling. "You need to be able to communicate with health care providers and ask the right questions to be the best advocate for your loved one," says Tilem.

Here are some of the critical roles you can play:

- Provide feedback to the medical team about your loved one's pain management needs. Pain and spasticity are common problems during stroke rehabilitation, and you are in a position to relay important information. "You may be the best resource for pain management. Trust the non-verbal communication skills you have developed with your loved one," says Tilem.

- Actively help your loved one control stroke risk factors. "Controlling risk factors like high blood pressure, cholesterol, and diabetes continues to be important," notes Tilem. Get important guidelines from the doctors.
- Be aware of the signs or symptoms that require emergency care. "Every stroke caregiver needs to know the warning signs of a stroke," says Tilem.

Taking Care of Yourself

To be the best possible caregiver, you must take care of your own physical and emotional health, and that often means asking for help, even though you may want to go it alone. "Being a stroke caregiver is not a sprint — it is a marathon. You need to know your limits," advises Tilem. Here are some tips that may help:

- Build a support group of friends and family.
- Talk about your feelings.
- Ask others to take over for you for a short time so you can take a break from caregiving and maintain your hobbies and interests.
- Eat well, sleep well, and take time exercise.
- If you find yourself getting angry, resentful, or depressed, talk to your doctor.

Your role as a stroke caregiver may be one of the most important and rewarding roles you ever play, as well as one of the most demanding. Remember that it's not selfish to make the effort to protect your own health — in fact, it may ensure that you can go the distance during a possibly lengthy rehabilitation.

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