

Stroke
Association

Behaviour changes after a **stroke**



A stroke can lead to changes in your behaviour.

In this guide we explain why your behaviour may change and talk about some of the things that can help you and the people around you cope with it.

It's aimed at people who have had a stroke but there is information for family and friends as well.

Find more useful information and practical tips at **stroke.org.uk**, or call our Helpline for printed copies. Useful topics include:

- Emotional changes after stroke **stroke.org.uk/emotional-changes.**
- Problems with memory and thinking **stroke.org.uk/thinking.**
- Carer's guide to stroke **stroke.org.uk/caring.**

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Why am I behaving differently?

The way we behave often depends on the way we feel. A stroke is sudden and shocking, and there are many emotions to deal with when you have one. It's normal for this to affect your behaviour.

But it's not just about the way we feel. We're constantly receiving information from the world around us, which our brain has to understand, organise and store. This is called cognition.

Our brain uses this information to adjust the way we think and react. If the parts of your brain that do this are damaged by a stroke, this can change the way you behave.

Other effects of stroke will also affect your behaviour. Pain can make you irritable, for example. Frustration at not being able to do things for yourself can build up and make you angry or even aggressive towards others. Fatigue (tiredness that doesn't improve with rest) is common after a stroke. Fatigue can make someone avoid social situations, or become irritable more easily.

What kinds of problems can this cause?

Apathy

Apathy is when you lack motivation to do things. You may lose interest in life and not want to take part in everyday activities. Things that you'd usually respond to, like good news or seeing someone upset, may not make you feel anything at all.

Apathy is fairly common after a stroke, although it's more likely to affect you if you have severe physical or cognitive problems after your stroke. It can be a sign of depression, but it can also happen on its own.

Tip: plan your day

Having a structure to the day can sometimes help people with apathy. Get family members or friends to support you with practical help. They can encourage you to start and finish tasks. Sticking to a regular routine might be helpful.

Anger and aggression

Many people find themselves getting frustrated and angry after their stroke. You may lose your temper for no reason or get angry about things that never would have made you feel that way before. If your anger turns into aggression, you may shout, throw things, threaten people or try to hurt them.

Aggressive behaviour puts you and other people at risk. So it's essential that you learn how to manage it.

Inappropriate behaviour

People usually think that behaviour is inappropriate when it 'breaks the rules' and makes other people feel uncomfortable. This can happen after a stroke for a number of reasons.

- If you lose the ability to read social situations you won't know what's expected of you, so you may stand too close to other people, interrupt them when they're talking or not respond to their body language.
- You may not be able to think decisions through properly, so you may make tactless remarks, act impulsively or spend money unwisely.
- You may also lose some of your inhibitions. If this happens you may be more impulsive. You could seem more self-centred and refuse to do anything if it doesn't give immediate results. This can also affect your sexual behaviour, so you may crave more physical intimacy or make inappropriate comments to other people.

Will I go back to how I was?

It's common for people's behaviour to change in some way after a stroke. As you begin to recover, you might feel that your behaviour changes or improves. You may start feeling better physically and emotionally. But some changes will be long term. You are still the same person, but a stroke may change the way you respond to things.

It's not always possible to go back to the way you were before a stroke, but you can get help and support to make the best recovery possible for you.

It can be hard for the people around you if they feel you've changed. They may also need some support to help them understand what's happened to you.

However, if you or people around you notice that you're behaving aggressively or inappropriately, it's vital to do something about it. The information in this guide could help you understand what to do.

What can I do about my behaviour?

1

Listen to others

It's very difficult to see changes in our own behaviour. So if you're acting differently your friends and family are probably going to be the ones to notice. That's why it's important to listen to them if they bring it up.

People often talk about their loved one's 'personality' changing after a stroke or claim that they've 'become a different person'. It can be upsetting if your family or friends say this about you.

However, what they're really noticing are changes to your behaviour, not who you are as a person – a stroke can't change who you are.

2

Give it time

Some change to your behaviour is to be expected, and although it may be difficult to live with at times, it's likely to improve. Many people find that they have to learn what's 'normal' for them again after they've had a stroke. This will take time, for you and the people around you.

3

Talk to someone

Talking about the way you're feeling with someone who understands can really help. You may want to do this with a professional, such as a counsellor or therapist. Or it could be a family member or friend – whoever you feel most comfortable talking to.

Many people also find support groups helpful, because you can talk about your problems with people who are going through the same thing. Stroke clubs and groups are a good way to meet other stroke survivors and get advice and support.

If the change to your behaviour is extreme, or you start to behave in ways that may hurt or offend other people, you need to speak to your GP surgery to get some help with it.

"I wasn't able to cope with it all on my own. Talking to my doctor and getting some counselling was the best thing I ever did."

Craig

Getting help

The way you're behaving may be a sign of emotional problems, such as depression or anxiety. Contact your stroke nurse or GP, who will be able to look into other possible causes and talk to you about the best way to treat them.

Talking therapy can help with emotional problems. It gives you time and space to talk about difficult feelings with a trained therapist and think about how your feelings may be affecting your behaviour.

You may need more checks to see if there are any cognitive problems (changes to your memory and thinking) that may be causing you to behave differently.

"I'm constantly starting arguments with my partner. But now he tells me when I start getting stressy and that's my signal to go off and have a quiet moment to myself."

Dawn

What can I do if I'm becoming aggressive?

1

Learn your triggers

Talk to your friends and family to work out what makes you angry and how you can avoid it. If you have fatigue and your behaviour changes when you are tired, try telling those you are close to so they can understand how you feel. To avoid anger developing, you can try to make sure you get more rest or do things earlier in the day when you have more energy. Or if it happens when you're bored, try to keep busy and plan activities ahead so you don't end up with days when there's nothing to do.

2

Develop a strategy

Agree a word, phrase or sign that your family and friends can use to let you know that you are acting aggressively. Or agree that they walk away and leave you on your own for 15 minutes.

What can I do if I'm behaving inappropriately?

1

Don't ignore it

The way you behave will seem entirely normal to you, even if it seems inappropriate to everyone else. So it's important to listen to the people around you. It may not mean that the way you're behaving is wrong, but it may mean you need to try to manage it a little better and help your family and friends adjust to it.

2

Try talking therapy

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is a type of talking therapy that focuses on your thinking and behaviour and how they are connected. CBT may help you to learn how to think through your actions and understand the effect they can have on other people.

A therapist could also work with your family members, to help them adjust to your change of behaviour and help you all find a way to be comfortable with it.

Tips for family and friends



It can be difficult when someone close to you starts to behave differently, especially if they're being aggressive or behaving inappropriately. Here are some tips to help you.



Talk about it in the right way

If your friend or family member is behaving in a way that upsets you, you have a right to tell them. But be careful not to make them feel that they are the problem. Keep your focus on their behaviour and how it makes you feel – say “it upsets me when you shout” rather than “you’re always upsetting me”.



Don't do it all on your own

Get as much support as you can. Contact your GP to find out about services in your area that can offer support. Talking to a therapist or counsellor may help you come to terms with the changes.

Dealing with apathy



Be patient

Apathy can be very difficult to deal with. It can feel as if your friend or family member has completely changed. But remember, they are still the same person and it's likely to get better with time. Having a regular routine can help, and you could try encouraging them to plan their days, and start and finish activities.

"Neil's still not the man I married but he's slowly coming back; he's becoming 'him' again."

Ann

Dealing with anger



Listen

Sometimes, people can lash out because they feel ignored or not in control. So make sure you listen to your friend or family member and involve them in decisions. For example, even if they can't make their own lunch, they may still want to choose what they have to eat.



Don't put yourself at risk

It's essential that you look after your own safety, so don't feel bad about walking away if you need to. Just because someone has had a stroke, it doesn't give them the right to hurt you.

If your friend or family member becomes verbally or physically aggressive, try not to raise your voice (it won't help if you become angry too) and leave them alone until they've calmed down. If you are in danger, dial **999**.

Dealing with inappropriate behaviour



Explain what's acceptable and what's not

If your friend or family member is acting inappropriately make it clear that their behaviour is not acceptable. Be firm but not rude – remember they won't be doing it deliberately. Make sure you praise them when they do act in the right way.



Get everyone on board

Being consistent is important, so talk to other friends, family members and carers to ensure that they deal with inappropriate behaviour in the same way. It will help to get the message across if everyone says the same thing.



Be willing to compromise

Just because your friend or family member's behaviour has changed, it doesn't automatically make it wrong. It may just be a matter of adjusting to it. So talk honestly about it with them and find a compromise that you're both comfortable with.

Where to get help and information

From the Stroke Association

Helpline

Our Helpline offers information and support for anyone affected by stroke, including family, friends and carers.

Call us on **0303 3033 100**,
from a textphone **18001 0303 3033 100**.
Email helpline@stroke.org.uk.

Read our information

Get more information about stroke online at stroke.org.uk, or call the Helpline to ask for printed copies of our guides.

Other sources of help and information

Brain and Spine Foundation

Website: brainandspine.org.uk

Helpline: **0808 808 1000**

Helpline and information for people affected by brain and spine conditions, including stroke.

Headway

Website: headway.org.uk

Helpline: **0808 800 2244**

Email: helpline@headway.org.uk

A charity for people who have had a brain injury. It has information for survivors as well as family, friends and carers.

About our information

We want to provide the best information for people affected by stroke. That's why we ask stroke survivors and their families, as well as medical experts, to help us put our publications together.



How did we do?

To tell us what you think of this guide, or to request a list of the sources we used to create it, email us at feedback@stroke.org.uk.



Accessible formats

Visit our website if you need this information in audio, large print or braille.



Always get individual advice

This guide contains general information about stroke. But if you have a problem, you should get individual advice from a professional such as a GP or pharmacist. Our Helpline can also help you find support. We work very hard to give you the latest facts, but some things change. We don't control the information provided by other organisations or websites.

When stroke strikes, part of your brain shuts down. And so does a part of you. Life changes instantly and recovery is tough. But the brain can adapt. Our specialist support, research and campaigning are only possible with the courage and determination of the stroke community. With more donations and support from you, we can rebuild even more lives.

Donate or find out more at stroke.org.uk

Contact us

We're here for you. Contact us for expert information and support by phone, email and online.

Stroke Helpline: **0303 3033 100**

From a textphone: **18001 0303 3033 100**

Email: helpline@stroke.org.uk

Website: stroke.org.uk

Rebuilding lives after stroke



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