

# Navigating Marriage After Stroke

By Julia Schwarz

## **The Benefits of Marriage**

Our society attaches many benefits to marriage: tax cuts, lifelong companionship, and large delicious cakes. Another major benefit of marriage is that people who are married are more likely to live longer, especially after an illness. A recent study showed that the risk of dying after stroke is significantly higher for those who were never married, remarried, divorced, or widowed than for those who had been continuously married (1). Another study went further to show that high quality marriages increased the length of survival after stroke more than simply being married (2). In other words, the benefits of marriage may go beyond Hallmark Channel's depiction of "happily ever after", and have real health benefits as well.

## **The Challenges of Marriage**

Maintaining a happy marriage can be challenging for any couple. It is specifically difficult when one partner is recovering from stroke, for this may place strains on a marriage and cause the relationship to change. As mentioned previously, the benefits of preserving a marriage are significant, but wanting to maintain a high quality marriage does not always mean knowing how to.

## **Reconstructing Roles and Identities as a Couple Post-Stroke**

A recent study looked at common issues that couples faced post-stroke (3). The study found that the major challenge couples had to undergo after a stroke was reconstructing their roles and identities in the marriage. This meant changing how each individual saw themselves, and how partners saw each other. As the couples sought to re-identify their roles and identities in the marriage, they struggled with three themes: feeling overwhelmed, resolving conflict, and finding value in their marriage. Many of the couples faced similar issues, however the different ways the couples handled the issues allowed some to maintain their marriages, while others chose to get divorced or separate. The remainder of this post discusses common issues faced by couples and how those who maintained a high quality marriage handled them.

### **Feeling Overwhelmed → Ask for Help**

Many couples have struggled with being overwhelmed by the need for care, rehabilitation, and the uncertainty of what lay ahead. Couples had difficulty filling the new roles asked of them after a stroke. Couples who could access resources such as meal delivery, house cleaning, rehabilitation, counseling, and specialized assistive devices had better marital relationships because they did not have to fill so many different roles. Not everyone may have access to these resources, but it is important to take advantage of any resources available. Talk to social workers to learn about the extra resources you may qualify for. Seeking help is not a weakness, but an important step to preserve your relationship with your partner after a stroke.

### **Resolving Conflict → Find Mutually Acceptable Solutions**

Many couples encountered conflict about similar issues such as how much rehabilitation the survivor thought they could do as opposed to how much a partner thought they were capable of. Although many couples argued about similar topics, what differentiated couples that stayed together and those who separated was how they resolved the conflict. Couples who were ultimately satisfied in their relationship solved conflicts by finding a solution that was acceptable to both partners in a way that made each feel like their opinion was heard. Another feature of happier couples was that they were able to relate their difficulties to the stroke or other outside factors, rather than a problem with a partner such as laziness or bossiness.

### **Finding Value in Your Marriage → Communication is Key**

After a stroke, many of the couples struggled to determine if their partner valued them. Communicating well with each other was essential to help make sure both partners felt valued in their relationship. This meant finding a balance between avoiding topics to protect a partner's self-esteem and frank discussions about their situation in ways that preserved a partner's self-esteem.

### **Benefits of Social Interaction**

The benefits we have described in today's article are not benefits that solely come about because you are married or in a committed relationship - so please don't worry if you read this and you don't have a spouse or significant other! Really, this is all about maintaining close,

meaningful social connections and avoiding social isolation. If you feel as though social isolation may be an issue for you, remember that there are many stroke support groups nationwide. Look for a support group in your area by reaching out to your hospital or local community center. If travel is an issue for you, you can stay connected to other stroke survivors by using online platforms like [Health Unlocked](#) and [Patients Like Me](#).

## **Sources**

1. M. E. Dupre, R. D. Lopes, [Marital History and Survival After Stroke](#). *J Am Heart Assoc* **5**, (2016).
2. T. F. Robles, R. B. Slatcher, J. M. Trombello, M. M. McGinn, [Marital quality and health: a meta-analytic review](#). *Psychol Bull* **140**, 140-187 (2014).
3. S. Anderson, N. C. Keating, D. M. Wilson, [Staying married after stroke: a constructivist grounded theory qualitative study](#). *Top Stroke Rehabil* **24**, 479-487 (2017).