

Managing Anxiety After Stroke

By Julia Schwarz

Fear is a powerful emotion. In small amounts it can help motivate you to be your best version of yourself, but it can also grow into an anxiety disorder which can set back your stroke recovery. A recent study published in the journal Stroke found that one-fifth of people who had a stroke were dealing with an anxiety disorder three months later (1). Additionally they found that the most common trigger for anxiety among people who have suffered a stroke was the fear of another stroke.

How to Use Anxiety Effectively

Different people deal with fear in different ways. For some, the fear of another stroke inspires them to live healthier lives by changing to healthier behaviors, such as taking their medications or giving up smoking. For others though, the fear of another stroke becomes overwhelming and leads to avoiding situations such as traveling alone, crowded environments, exercise or spending time with friends and family. Fear can have a powerful effect on your behavior, but whether it promotes healthy or unhealthy behaviors is up to you.

Why Treatment Is Essential

If you struggle with anxiety, seeking professional help is not only important for your mental health, but it also allows you to reach your full potential after stroke. People recovering from stroke who also suffer from anxiety disorders tend to rely more on others and participate less in social events. Typically, these individuals also have poorer physical and mental health than individuals recovering without anxiety disorders. Therefore, it is essential to seek help if you are experiencing serious anxiety following your stroke. With the right support you can turn your anxiety into motivation for recovery.

Types of Anxiety Disorders

There are a number of different types of anxiety disorders that are common in patients recovering from stroke and each have different therapies. If you are suffering from anxiety after

stroke, see a mental health professional to diagnose the type of anxiety you are dealing with in order to get the best treatment.

Phobic Anxiety:

What: Phobic anxiety is the fear of specific situations. When a person with phobic anxiety encounters the triggering situation, it causes anxiety and then they avoid that situation. Although avoiding a situation can relieve stress in the moment, this can be disabling in the long run. *How to Overcome It:* The best treatment is a form of therapy which involves gradual, repeated exposure to the source of anxiety until a person becomes comfortable with the situation. This is known as exposure therapy, which allows a person to slowly adjust to the situation.

General Anxiety Disorder (GAD):

What: This is constant worrying over multiple issues with no relief to a point where it interferes with daily activities. *How to Overcome It:* There are several approaches to addressing GAD. Cognitive behavior therapy, a form of talk therapy, helps individuals recognize that their anxiety is an unhelpful way of thinking and promotes changes in patterns of thinking to better deal with the anxiety. Additionally, individuals experiencing GAD can be prescribed medication.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD):

What: This is another psychiatric disorder that is also common after stroke. An individual struggling with PTSD repeatedly experiences the traumatic event in flashbacks, thoughts or nightmares typically after a feeling or situation that reminds them of their stroke. *How to Overcome It:* It can be treated with medications. The form of talk therapy known as cognitive behavior therapy is also an effective treatment.

Getting Help

If you are recovering from stroke, it is important to recognize if your fear is helping or harming your progress. This can be a blurry line, so talk to your doctor if you think your anxiety is interfering with your recovery.

Sources

H. Y. Chun, W. N. Whiteley, M. S. Dennis, G. E. Mead, A. J. Carson, Anxiety After Stroke: The Importance of Subtyping. *Stroke* **49**, 556-564 (2018).