

Behaviour changes after a **stroke**



A stroke can lead to changes in your behaviour.

This guide explains why your behaviour may change. It also looks at 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's information for family and friends as well.

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

- Emotional changes after stroke: including depression, anxiety and difficulty controlling emotions (emotionalism).
stroke.org.uk/emotional-changes
- Problems with memory and thinking: including problems with planning and problem-solving.
stroke.org.uk/thinking
- Caring for someone after a stroke:
stroke.org.uk/caring

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Why am I behaving differently?

Behaviour changes can be due to stroke damage in your brain. Or they might be linked to emotional changes, thinking problems, or physical factors like pain or fatigue after stroke.

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

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

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

Other effects of stroke can also affect your behaviour. Pain can make you irritable, for example. Frustration at not being able to do things can make you angry or even aggressive towards others. Fatigue (tiredness that does not improve with rest) can make you avoid social situations, or become irritable more easily.

What problems can this cause?

Apathy

Apathy is a lack of motivation or emotional drive to do things after a stroke. You may lose interest in everyday activities, or feel less engaged with things you used to enjoy or care about before your stroke. You may feel or appear indifferent to things you previously would have had an emotional response to, like hearing good news or seeing someone upset.

Apathy is fairly common after a stroke. It can be a sign of depression, but it can also happen on its own.



For more information on depression after stroke, see stroke.org.uk/emotional-changes

What can I do about apathy?

Plan your day

Having a structure to the day can sometimes help with apathy. Ask family members or friends to offer practical help. They can encourage you to start and finish tasks and break them down into smaller steps. Sticking to a regular routine might be helpful.

Anger and aggression

Many people find themselves getting frustrated or angry after their stroke. This may result from changes in the brain and your thinking skills. It may also happen as you are trying to adjust to the impact of your stroke.

You may lose your temper for no reason or get angry about things that you would not have done 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 you understand why it happens and learn how to manage it. If you need support, contact your GP or stroke team who may refer you for expert help.

See **pages 11 and 12** for more information.

Inappropriate behaviour

People usually think behaviour is inappropriate when it 'breaks the rules' and makes other people feel uncomfortable. You may behave in ways you didn't before your stroke. This may include:

- If you lose the ability to read social situations, you will not know what's expected of you. You may not realise you're behaving inappropriately. You may stand too close to others, interrupt them, or not respond to their body language.
- You may not be able to think through decisions properly. You may make tactless or rude remarks, act impulsively or spend money unwisely.
- You may lose your ability to control certain behaviours. For example, you may be more impulsive, swear or seem more self-centred. It can also affect your sexual behaviour. You may crave more physical intimacy or make inappropriate comments to other people.

These changes in behaviour can feel embarrassing or distressing, but are a recognised effect of brain injury and help is available. See **page 13**.

Will I go back to how I was?

It's common for behaviour to change in some way after a stroke. As you begin to recover, you might feel your behaviour changes or improves. You may start feeling better physically and emotionally. But some changes can be long-term. You're 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 your family and friends too if they feel you've changed. They may need some support to help them understand how a stroke has affected you.

However, if you or people around you notice you're behaving aggressively or inappropriately, it's vital to do something about it.

Can a stroke change your personality?

People often talk about their loved one's 'personality' changing after a stroke or claim they've 'become a different person'. It can feel upsetting if your family or friends say this about you. However, what they're really noticing are changes to your behaviour after the stroke, not who you are as a person. Try to talk to your loved ones about how you're feeling.

What can I do about my behaviour?

1

Listen to others

It can be difficult to see changes in your own behaviour. If you're acting differently, your friends and family will probably be the ones to notice. That's why it's important to listen to them if they mention your behaviour, even if you don't notice anything different.

2

Give it time

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

'I never shouted before, but I changed, I lost my temper more and didn't even realise it. I couldn't understand why I was reacting like this. Mental support has been crucial. I use techniques to help me and stop me in my tracks.'

Jim, stroke survivor

3

Talk to someone

Talking about how 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 you could talk to a family member or friend. Find who you feel most comfortable talking to.

Many people also find support groups helpful, because you can talk with people who are going through the same thing. Stroke clubs and groups are a good way to meet other stroke survivors and get support. You can also connect with others who understand stroke first-hand on the Online Community on our website. See **stroke.org.uk/support** for more details.

If the change to your behaviour is extreme, upsetting, or may hurt or offend other people, contact your GP or stroke team to ask for help.

Getting help

You should be assessed for changes in your behaviour after a stroke. Talk to your stroke team or GP, who can look into possible causes of changes and the best way to treat them.

The way you're behaving may be a sign of emotional problems, such as depression or anxiety. Talking therapies may help with emotional problems. You can talk about your thoughts, feelings and behaviour with a trained therapist.

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. Cognitive problems can affect things like your ability to plan and complete everyday tasks. This could be mistaken for other problems, so it's important to get your symptoms checked.

Your doctor may refer you to a specialist, such as a clinical psychologist or neuropsychologist.

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 or manage it. You could keep a diary about situations where you felt angry and how you reacted, to help you spot any patterns or triggers.

If you have fatigue and your behaviour changes when you're tired, try telling loved ones so they can understand how you feel. Try to get more rest or do things at times when you have more energy. Or if your behaviour changes when you're bored, try to plan some activities to keep you busy. Physical activities and exercise may also help reduce stress and tension.

2

Develop a strategy

Agree a word, phrase or sign your family and friends can use to let you know you're acting aggressively. Or agree they'll walk away and leave you on your own for a few minutes. Some people find learning breathing techniques can help them calm down if they feel stressed or angry.

What can I do **if** **I'm behaving** **inappropriately?**

1

Do not ignore it

Your behaviour may seem 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 the way you're behaving is wrong. But it may mean you need to try to manage it a little better. Ask family and friends for any support you may need, such as giving you a signal to step back and think for a moment.

2

Try talking therapy

Talking therapies involve talking to a trained professional about your thoughts, feelings and behaviour. You might have therapy in person, online, or over the phone. A therapist could also work with your family, to help them adjust to your changed behaviour and help you all find a way to be comfortable with it.

To find talking therapies in your area, visit **[nhs.uk/mental-health](https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health)** or contact your GP surgery.

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 they are the problem. Keep your focus on their behaviour and how it makes you feel. You could 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 surgery to find out about support in your area. Talking to a therapist or counsellor may help you come to terms with the changes. You can also call our Stroke Support Helpline if you need someone to talk to, or need help finding support.

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're still the same person and it's likely to get better with time. Having a regular routine can help. You could try encouraging them to plan their days and start and finish activities.

Dealing with anger or aggression



Listen

Sometimes, people can become angry because they feel ignored or not in control. Make sure you listen to the person and involve them in decisions. For example, even if they can't make their own lunch, they may still want to choose what they eat.



Do not put yourself at risk

It's essential you look after your own safety. 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 the person becomes verbally or physically aggressive, try not to raise your voice. It will not help if you become angry too. Leave them alone until they've calmed down. If you are in immediate danger, call **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 their behaviour is not acceptable. Be firm but supportive – remember they will not be doing it deliberately. Praise them when they do act in the right way.



Get everyone on board

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



Be willing to compromise

Just because the person's behaviour has changed, it doesn't automatically make it wrong. It may be a result of their stroke and they may not be able to control these behaviours. Seek support with understanding why this can happen and with ways to manage it. Talk honestly about it with them and find a compromise you're both comfortable with.

Where to **get support** and **information**

From the Stroke Association

Stroke Support Helpline

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

Call us on **0303 3033 100**

Textphone **18001 0303 3033 100**

Email **helpline@stroke.org.uk**

Read our information

Log onto **stroke.org.uk**, where you can find easy-to-understand information, videos and an online community to support you. You can also call our Helpline to ask for printed copies of our guides.

Other sources of support and information

The Brain Charity

Website: thebraincharity.org.uk

Tel: **0151 298 2999**

Offers counselling and mental health support to people with neurological conditions, their families and carers.

Carers UK

Website: carersuk.org

Helpline:

0808 808 7777 (England, Scotland and Wales)

028 9043 9843 (Northern Ireland)

Information and support for anyone caring for a family member or someone else close to them.

Headway

Website: headway.org.uk

Helpline: **0808 800 2244**

Charity with information for people who have had a brain injury, their family, friends and carers. They produce a free 'brain injury ID card', which can help you explain to others how your stroke affects you.

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**



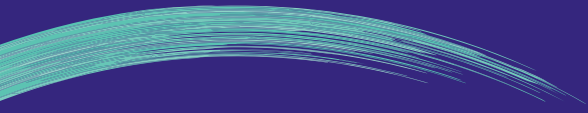
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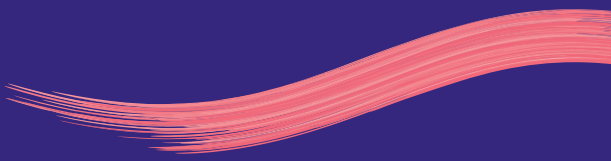


Always get individual advice

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 Stroke Support 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.



Remember, you are not alone.
We are here to support you throughout
your recovery, whenever you need us.



Contact us

Stroke Support Helpline: **0303 3033 100**

Textphone: **18001 0303 3033 100**

Email: **helpline@stroke.org.uk**

Website: **stroke.org.uk**



Finding **strength** through **support**

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