

# Coping with Stress after Stroke

## Stress

Stress is your physical, mental and emotional reaction to things around you and things that happen to you. Stress happens when the world around you asks more of you than you are able to give. It can be associated with good or bad events.

Stress is a natural part of life. In fact, mild stress is good because it provides the motivation to achieve. Stress becomes harmful when it is too much to cope with. The key is finding your unique balance, which will vary over time.

Stress can be caused by small things, such as losing car keys, as well as by major crises, such as a death in the family. Stress can also build up gradually over a long period of time.

The amount of stress we experience is influenced by the amount of perceived value we place on an event or action. For example, a divorce could be a highly stressful event for some, but for others it may bring a sense of relief. Also, Christmas can either be a highly stressful or pleasurable time of the year.

## Stress and Stroke

While stress does not cause stroke, having a stroke - or someone close to you having a stroke - can be an over-whelming event. The comparatively long duration of its effects can require lifestyle changes, as well as the necessity of having to cope with serious physical, psychological, emotional, social and financial consequences. These can all make stress a serious problem for the caregiver and the one who has had a stroke.

Continuous stress without any release of tension is harmful. Bottling up worries and conflicts can add to stress. If allowed to continue, something will give and the result can be serious mental or physical illness. It is important to recognise the signs of stress and learn to manage stress and potentially stressful situations.

## Reactions to stress

Everyone reacts to stress differently. Recognising how you react under stressful situations is the first step in gaining control over feelings of stress and anxiety. The ability to deal with stress can be learned and once mastered those skills can be used for life.

A whole range of factors including personality, hereditary issues, finances, previous personal experiences and health will influence our reactions to things that can cause stress.

### Physical signs of too much stress can be:

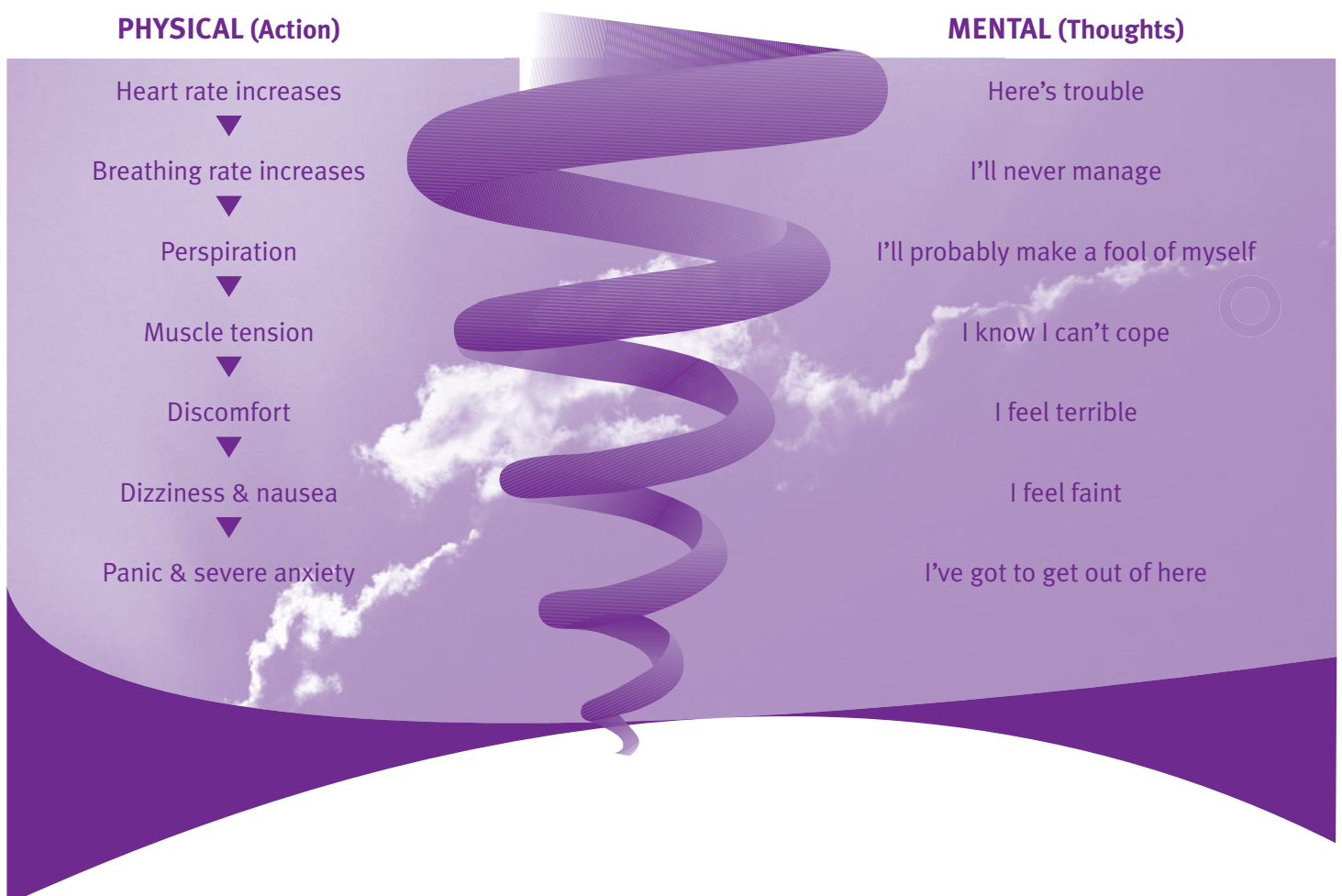
- Sleeplessness or changes in sleeping patterns
- Loss of appetite or eating too much
- Stomach pains, indigestion, change in bowel habits
- Headaches
- High blood pressure
- Palpitations, chest pains
- Heavy sweating
- Skin problems
- Allergies
- Loss of sexual desire
- Muscular aches and pains
- Emotional highs and lows for no apparent reason
- Frequent colds or flu
- Shortness of breath or shallow breathing
- Fatigue
- Tightness in the chest.

### The mental signs of too much stress can be:

- Depression
- Anxiety, worrying
- Inability to relax
- Loss of concentration
- Poor memory
- Irritability/short temper
- Impulsive behaviour
- Difficulty in finishing tasks
- No desire to mix with others socially
- Smoking and drinking too much
- Not being able to organise your day-to-day life as easily as before
- Poor motivation
- Inflexible thinking.

Stress is not the only cause of such problems, but it can be a significant factor. Have your doctor clarify whether your symptoms are stress related. Your doctor will also be able to recommend ways of coping with your stress.

### The spiral to panic shows the mental and physical reactions to excessive stress



## Coping with stress

Stressful situations not only drain energy but can also alter perspective. Problems become exaggerated and seem to close in. Some cope with stress better than others, and there are plenty of practical ways to reduce and manage stress before it gets too bad. The most drastic way to manage stress is to change your environment: your living situation or place of work. If this is not practical, it may be possible to change parts of your environment. But remember - some stress is necessary to make life challenging and rewarding.

## The positive approach to coping

Here are some ways to help you reduce stress. Try to develop methods which work best for you:

- ✓ **Don't bottle things up.** Talk to someone you trust.
- ✓ **Stand back.** Try to look at the situation with fresh eyes, to see the whole picture, not just the problems. Get another person's perspective – someone you trust.
- ✓ **Learn to relax.** Take a relaxation course, try deep (abdominal) breathing, learn to meditate, try yoga, tai chi or a massage.
- ✓ **Learn to breathe deeply.** Breathing correctly is central to stress reduction. A stressed person tends to take shallow breaths - from the chest. Breathing slowly and deeply from the diaphragm, using all of the lungs, helps restore calmness. Breathing in this way is central to yoga, tai chi, meditation, relaxation, martial arts and so on.
- ✓ **Take time out.** Do things you really enjoy.
- ✓ **Develop more skills to give you confidence and energy in coping with unavoidable pressures.** Take an assertiveness course. Learn to give honest and clear messages. Learn to say 'No!' and not feel guilty.
- ✓ **Find a solution to problems before they become unmanageable.** Dealing with conflict is not usually easy, so try to find a solution that works for you when you do have to face it.
- ✓ **Learn to take responsibility for your own feelings.** Do something to let your feelings out: cry, scream as loud as you can (preferably where you cannot be heard!). Try talking into a tape recorder, then play it back and agree with what you said.
- ✓ **Set limits for yourself and reasonable time limits for others.** After a stroke, even simple actions may become more difficult and time consuming, so allow extra time. Remember to delegate, prioritise, plan and be prepared to compromise.
- ✓ **Remember to value exercise and a healthy diet.** As well as helping keep you fit, exercise is a good way to work off tension. Being physical creates a feeling of wellbeing due to the release of chemicals in the body. Eating fresh foods and a balanced diet is also important to keep healthy. Try to avoid too much of those foods that cause tension and stress, such as coffee, tea, chocolate and soft drinks.
- ✓ **Get enough sleep.**
- ✓ **Learn to say "No".** Do not overload yourself with commitments.
- ✓ **Recognise your own strengths and weaknesses, as well as those of other people.**
- ✓ **Learn to accept what you cannot change.**
- ✓ **Try humour.** Laughter reduces stress and tension.

## Getting Help

Changes in personality and attitudes - which sometimes accompany stroke – can be stressful and difficult to accept. Discuss these problems with someone who is not involved in the situation such as your doctor, minister, a social worker, a psychologist, a counsellor or a Stroke Foundation Field Officer.

Remember, it will probably take some practice to be able to turn those stressful thoughts into more positive ones! Stress management courses are sometimes advertised and can be very effective in helping to learn stress management techniques.

### Some sources of help:

- Your GP
- Community health services
- Citizen's Advice Bureau (they offer free, confidential information on a variety of matters – family, domestic and personal worries, finance and budgeting, language problems, tenancy, marriage problems, legal matters. Staff do not offer counselling, but will recommend appropriate sources of assistance).
- Charitable and welfare organisations
- Local telephone directory listings
- Clergy
- Telephone counselling services – a chance to “get it off your chest”
- Psychologists with a speciality in stroke and/or stress management, anxiety and depression
- Neighbourhood support groups for local collective help and security
- Good friends or family
- Stroke Foundation Stroke Clubs, Field Officers, support groups and volunteers

### 'Reducing risks - improving outcomes'

The Stroke Foundation is the only organisation in New Zealand solely dedicated to reducing risks of stroke and improving the outcomes for stroke survivors nationwide.

The Stroke Foundation is a not-for-profit organization and relies on community support, donations, and sponsorships to provide services.

### Acknowledgments:

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**REMEMBER** -recovering from a stroke is often a long, slow process. Be kind to yourself. We all have our good and bad days. Try and see the good in each and every day. Set goals and remember to reward yourself when you have achieved them.

If you would like any further information about this topic or anything else in relation to your stroke, please contact the Stroke Foundation on 0800-78 76 53 or visit our website [www.stroke.org.nz](http://www.stroke.org.nz)

