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DIFFERENT STROKES: A GUIDE FOR PATIENTS AND CAREGIVERS

Stroke can cause many physical effects such as speech problems and memory loss. It can also trigger psychological changes. Henry Lew, psychologist, National Healthcare Group Polyclinics, reports.

When stroke damages the brain cells, the sensations and parts of the body controlled by these cells no longer function properly. Along with the physical damage to the brain, stroke can cause emotional, psychological and behavioural changes. Each stroke is different and, to a large extent, the psychological problems that someone may experience will vary, depending on the part of the brain affected and the extent of the damage.

In addition, the person who has had a stroke may have to come to terms with the loss of many of their hopes and plans for the future, as well as having to adapt to a changed role in the family, and possibly the loss of a career. Some of them may feel anxious or depressed, frustrated, angry or bewildered. All these feelings are common and, although they usually fade with time, they may persist in some people.

Treatment of psychological difficulties faced by patients is often through medication by medical doctors and psychiatrist, and referral to psychological interventions by mental health professionals like psychologists, medical social workers and counsellors.

Emotional Difficulties: What Stroke Patients Can Do

In addition to seeking help from your doctors and mental health professionals below are some points you could consider. Not all of these suggestions will suit everyone, but you may find some helpful. Do bear in mind that these do not replace professional help.

Information

A lack of knowledge about stroke can lead to uncertainty. Misunderstandings can arise and that can add to your worries. Do not be afraid to ask your doctor to explain.

Social Contact

Meeting people regularly, every day, if possible, is an important source of well-being. Talking to others can be a big help, too. If you are able to, keep talking to family and friends, and try not to push people away or assume you are a burden.

Support Groups

Many people find support groups useful. They provide a chance to meet people who have been through a similar experience, and many arrange social activities.

Hobbies and Interests

Returning to hobbies and interests after a stroke is an important part of the rehabilitation process. You could even look at trying new things. Try not to be put off by thoughts that you are unable to do things as well as you could before the stroke. Many activities can be adapted to enable you to carry on enjoying them.

Exercise

Recent research shows that regular physical activity or exercise, however gentle, can help improve one's mood.

Counselling

Acknowledging what has happened, and accepting how life has changed is an important step in the recovery process and talking treatments can help with this. Psychological and counselling services aim

to encourage you to talk about your thoughts and feelings and help you to come to terms with what has happened to you. You will gain a clearer picture of what lies ahead and help you feel more in control of life by working out and trying to find solutions to problems.

Many people benefit from talking through their difficulties, but if your stroke has left you with problems communicating or understanding others, it may not be the best option, or you may require the specialist skills of a speech and language therapist.

Managing Your Diabetes

Diabetes is progressive and, if left untreated or uncontrolled, it increases the risk of developing and complicating your stroke.

Take regular exercise, eat a healthy and balanced diet, manage your weight and don't smoke.

Emotional Difficulties: What Family Members Can Do

Communication:

- Slow down and speak in short, clear sentences.
- Ask direct questions that can be answered with "yes" or "no". For example, "would you like a cup of tea?"
- Give the person plenty of time to answer.
- Don't shout at the person – they're not deaf!
- When starting to speak, give the person time to tune in. Touch the person and pause. Say their name first.
- Place the key word at the end of a sentence, such as "What do you want for dinner?" and "It's time for your bath."

Managing emotional difficulties

- Don't tell the patient not to cry; this will not help him or her. People often feel upset or embarrassed about being too emotional or helpless.
- Distract the patients by changing the subject of conversation, or try some deep breathing to help them relax.
- Don't ignore the person. Do not leave them, unless they say they want to be alone, when they are emotional.

Managing personality changes

Family and friends of stroke survivors often find changes to personality in the stroke patients hard to deal with. Some people find that the challenging behaviour, e.g. aggressiveness is aimed only at them and that the person affected by the stroke is reasonable with other people. This kind of situation is harder to manage so it is important to try and get support from other members of your family. You should also avoid confrontational situations and walk away if a situation is becoming too hot to handle.

Each patient and family is affected by stroke differently, hence it is important to seek professional help to assess and help you and your family cope with these new challenges.

References:

<http://www.strokensw.org.au>

<http://www.strokesurvivors.org>

<http://www.stroke.org.uk>

