

Stroke and the Family

A NEW GUIDE

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Introduction

A stroke is actually a family illness.

McKenzie Buck, stroke survivor and psychologist

The diagnosis of stroke is a feared yet unfortunately common event. Despite its prevalence, however, both the lay public and medical professionals harbor many misconceptions about it. The very term “stroke” describes the way this disorder often occurs. Frequently an active, independent person is literally “struck down.” Stroke is a sudden, life-altering event that often gives no warning of its approach.

This book is about life after a stroke, with an emphasis on providing information and resources for the family members of a stroke survivor. Knowledge can help loved ones obtain needed services, advocate for the survivor, and cope with the stresses that stroke creates for the entire family. Millions of stroke survivors and their families are living with a situation they never anticipated and feel ill-equipped to manage. It is easy to lose hope after a stroke, and society’s attitudes about this disorder can make a difficult situation even worse. Unfortunately, many people in both the medical and the lay community believe that the useful, enjoyable phase of life ends when a stroke occurs. But there is good news: some stroke survivors are becoming more vocal about their experiences, sharing their stories and thus working to dispel these myths. Although stroke affects many different people in many different ways, plenty of individuals go on to live rich, satisfying lives after stroke, and they can serve as role models for the recently affected.

A person's response to stroke depends in substantial part on the individual's personality and character traits. Some people are used to controlling their own destiny, and so may react to a stroke by working vigorously to reestablish their independence and function. Others are more passive and may have a harder time mustering the resolve and determination to overcome the losses stroke imposes. I never cease to be amazed at the achievements of some of my stroke patients, who surpass my every expectation and achieve function I could not have reasonably expected them to attain. I have learned from these patients not to be too certain in my prognostications, and to always leave the door to hope ajar. Patients, families, and healthcare providers can all create self-fulfilling prophecies—for better or for worse.

There is a tendency among clinicians, patients, and families to focus on the limitations experienced after stroke. We all need to recognize that disability of one sort or another is pervasive in life. Many people live with pain from arthritis, vision or hearing loss, or a host of other physical limitations. People with disabilities cannot necessarily deny or change their limitations, but they can focus their attention on the many activities they can accomplish and enjoy. Indeed all of us, stroke survivors, families, and healthcare professionals, must focus our attention on stroke survivors' abilities rather than on their disabilities. The key to success after stroke is working to minimize limitations, accepting what we cannot change, and then moving on to the interesting and enjoyable parts of life.