Since my stroke I feel sad and depressed. Is that normal?

Mood swings and depression are very common in patients with stroke. At least 1 person out of 4 will feel depressed or moody after a stroke. Some studies have shown that the rate of depression is even higher, as high as 1 person out of 2.

What is depression after a stroke (post-stroke depression)?

Anyone who has experienced a stroke would agree that it is a big life change. Suddenly daily activities like washing and dressing become a challenge. It is a very difficult experience that can affect your emotions.

What are mood swings?

After a stroke, you may experience rapid changes in mood. For example, you may feel happy then suddenly feel very sad. You may feel that it is like your emotions are on a roller coaster. Some people might cry and laugh at inappropriate times.

Just like depression, these mood swings can appear when there is an injury to a specific area of your brain.
When does post-stroke depression appear?

The time that depression can appear after a stroke varies. Some people quickly become depressed from hours to days after the stroke; but some experienced feelings of depression later – even up to 3 years after the stroke.

Are my mood swings or depression caused by my stroke?

It is possible that your mood swings or depression are effects of your stroke. There are two possible explanations for why people develop depression after a stroke.

1). Injury to your brain

Some areas of your brain control your mood and emotions. If one of these areas is affected by the stroke, it can lead to mood swings or depression.

There are debates about whether the site of the lesion is related to depression. Some researches suggest that individuals who have a stroke in a specific lobe or area of their brain (the frontal lobe) are more likely to experience depression. Other researchers argue that it is the side of the brain (left or right) where the stroke happened that causes mood swings and depression.
2). Changes in your life skills and abilities

Changes in your physical abilities after a stroke can be very difficult to accept. You may find rehabilitation overwhelming. Everyday tasks now require extra efforts. These feelings of sadness can lead to depression.

The real cause of depression is probably a combination of these two theories. That is, depression is due in part to the damages in the brain area and also due to the changes in your life skills and abilities caused by the stroke.

How do I know if I am depressed? What are the common signs of depression after a stroke?

People who are depressed shared some common traits such as:
  ▪ getting angry easily or crying easily
  ▪ sleeping too much or too little
  ▪ feeling down
  ▪ being slow mentally
  ▪ feeling guilty
  ▪ feeling less hopeful about the future
  ▪ not wanting to see friends
  ▪ thinking about ending one's life.

Is it easy to detect depression after a stroke?

It is often difficult to detect depression in a person who has had a stroke. After a stroke, most people will have physical and cognitive problems. Often, treatment tends to focus more on these two aspects of recovery and does not always take into account the individual’s feelings. Sometimes, people who had a stroke have difficulty talking or understanding words – this makes it difficult for them to share their feelings, which in turn makes it difficult to detect if they are feeling depressed.

Family members and close friends are often the first to detect signs of depression in their loved one. This is because they know the individual better than any health care workers.
How is the diagnosis of post-stroke depression made?

Your clinician may ask you a series of questions or may have you fill out a questionnaire. This will help them to identify any signs of depression.

How can I deal with mood swings or depression without taking medication?

Post-stroke depression is a fairly new topic in research. Some studies have tried to prove whether different treatment options work, without success. However, there are many things that may help people with depression feel better.

Who can help me with my mood swings or depression?

Your health care providers can help you or refer you to the right resource. Your family and friends can also assist you. Use the resources around you and accept help of other people.

There might be some available resources in your community (example: group therapy, meals on wheels). To find more information consult your National stroke association.

Can sleeping and eating well help?

They sure can! Proper meals and good sleep will give you more energy during your recovery. You may feel you are not hungry or you have difficulty sleeping. It is common with people who are depressed.

Should I exercise?

Yes. Exercise is recommended by the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada. You can start an exercise class if your doctor agrees. Exercising releases a hormone (endorphin) that will make you feel good.
Should I continue my rehabilitation program (OT/physio/speech and language therapy) if I do not feel like doing it?

Yes. Sometimes you may not feel motivated to go to your rehabilitation sessions. They can be difficult and they need a lot of energy. However, rehabilitation sessions will teach you many things that will help you feel and become more independent. You might feel very proud of yourself afterwards!

Should I try to see other people?

Yes! Research has shown that a social life can help people get better when they are feeling depressed. It is very important that you continue hobbies such as playing cards, doing crosswords or going outside. Your occupational therapist can show you how to adapt your hobbies and interests according to your current abilities.

Is it possible to speak to someone who had a stroke?

Yes. Some regions have support groups for people who have had a stroke. You can meet with other people who have had a stroke and share stories with people who went through an episode like yours.

Consult your National Stroke Association. In Canada this is the Heart and Stroke Foundation.

What is psychotherapy? Can it help me?

Psychotherapy is a treatment for mood swings. The goals of psychotherapy are to reduce mood swings and improve emotional well-being for participation in work, social and day-to-day activities. Psychotherapy encourages people to talk about personal conflicts in order to understand and overcome problems.
Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) is a particular type of psychotherapy. CBT teaches people how to change their behaviour by changing their thinking. We only have information from one quality study that evaluates the effectiveness of CBT. The study showed that CBT is not effective in treating depression after a stroke.

Go to this website to find out more about CBT: www.nacbt.org/whatiscbt.htm

**Can music therapy help me?**

Music therapy uses music to help people express their emotions. One study has found that music therapy may help to improve depression after a stroke. More research needs to be done before we will know the value of music therapy for reducing depression after a stroke. Click on this link to find more information about music therapy.

Go to this website to find out more about music therapy: www.musictherapy.ca/musictherapy.htm#whatis

**How does depression impact on my recovery?**

Depression can slow recovery. Depression may make you feel less motivated and more tired. It can also make it difficult for you to concentrate. All these traits of depression will slow down your recovery. Many studies have shown that people who experience depression after a stroke will not recover as quickly as people who are not depressed. The extent to which depression can affect recovery from stroke is not really known. It seems that both the physical loss and the depression can affect recovery.

**Will the depression ever get better?**

Some studies show that people with post-stroke depression can get better.

Sometimes depression can return, so it is important to watch for the signs and symptoms.
How long does it take to recover from depression after a stroke?

Recovery from depression after a stroke takes time. It can vary a lot from one person to another. For example, medications can take a few weeks to work. With treatments, people who are depressed usually get better. On average, the duration of major depression in people who have had a stroke is under 12 months.

Does depression lead to stroke?

Not everybody who is depressed will have a stroke. However, some studies have shown that having depression may increase the chances of having a stroke. When heart diseases, hypertension, diabetes, and tobacco use are all ruled out, people with depression are 2.6 times more likely to have a stroke.

If I had depression before the stroke, am I more likely to experience depression after a stroke?

Yes, if you were depressed before your stroke, it is more likely that you will experience depression after a stroke. This is one of the risk factors linked with post-stroke depression.

I am a carer – what can I do to avoid feeling depressed too?

A carer (or care provider) is the person who takes care of the individual who has had a stroke. This person is usually a family member, a spouse, or a close friend. Often, the care provider will be so devoted to their loved one that they will forget to take care of their own needs.

When your loved one is depressed after a stroke, it is more difficult for both of you to stay positive so it is especially important that you both receive support. It is very important that you, as a care provider, take time for yourself everyday.
a moment during the day to do an activity you like such as reading, shopping or gardening. You should continue to see your friends to share your feelings and refresh your mind.

I would like to know more about depression and stroke.

Understanding what happened can reassure you. There are many resources available on the Internet. Your health care provider can also answer your specific questions.