How Should I Communicate with Heart and Stroke Patients?

When someone has a heart attack, heart surgery or a stroke, they need special consideration while they are recovering or adjusting to their life after one of these events. They are likely to have emotional ups and downs. Sometimes they may become clinically depressed. Often roles between the survivor and the caregiver are reversed.

**How do I communicate with a heart attack or heart surgery patient?**

- Expect emotional ups and downs, crying for no reason, nightmares and fears of death.
- Give yourselves time to adjust and freely express your emotions to one another.
- Encourage your loved one to start making the necessary changes to prevent further events or complications.
- Accept the fact that your roles may be reversed, at least for now.
- Encourage your loved one to get back into life and make plans together for the future.
- Even though he or she is sick, remember that you still deserve to be treated with respect.
- Be a good listener. Your loved one may need to openly express how he or she is feeling.
- Use “I” messages rather than “you” messages.
- When you feel angry or frustrated, say “I feel angry,” instead of “You make me angry” to express your feeling without blaming others.

**How do I communicate with a stroke survivor?**

- Remember that many stroke survivors may have damage that makes it difficult for them to communicate well.
- Accept whatever communication form they have, even if it’s just making signs with their hands.
- Learn everything you can about their condition so you can be more understanding and helpful.
- Join support groups and learn how others have managed to break down communication barriers.
- With aphasia, it’s not necessary to talk louder, just more slowly. Avoid talking down to your loved one, and be a good and patient listener.
• Stroke survivors may have many emotional ups and downs. Get help for your loved one if these become severe or last too long.

How can I help my loved one after a heart attack or surgery?
• Understand that they have gone through physical and emotional trauma.
• Be patient, and let them talk to you about their fears and feelings.
• Learn as much as you can about their condition and help them get back into life.

How can I help my loved one after a stroke?
Stroke can change a person’s life forever. Your loved one may be disabled or have difficulty communicating. It’s important for you to:
• get support.
• have patience.
• be prepared to create a different way of life for you and your loved one.

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ANSWERS
by heart

Take a few minutes to write your questions for the next time you see your healthcare provider. For example:

Talk to your doctor, nurse or other healthcare professionals. If you have heart disease or have had a stroke, members of your family also may be at higher risk. It’s very important for them to make changes now to lower their risk.

Call 1-800-AHA-USA1 (1-800-242-8721), or visit heart.org to learn more about heart disease.

For information on stroke, call 1-888-4-STROKE (1-888-478-7653) or visit us at StrokeAssociation.org.

We have many other fact sheets to help you make healthier choices to reduce your risk, manage disease or care for a loved one. Visit heart.org/answersbyheart to learn more. Knowledge is power, so Learn and Live!