

TITLE: IDENTIFYING AND TREATING POST-STROKE DEPRESSION

STROKE REHABILITATION AND RECOVERY SERIES
AMERICAN STROKE ASSOCIATION

- Announcer: [00:03](#) This podcast is supported by Kindred Healthcare. Kindred Healthcare is a sponsor of the American Stroke Association Together to End Stroke initiative.
- Patty Clements: [00:14](#) Hello and welcome to another important conversation in the American Stroke Association's audio series. Today's broadcast will focus on a topic not only relevant to stroke survivors, but something many people are struggling with throughout our country.
- My name is Patty Clements and I'm with the communications team at the American Heart Association. Today we're talking with Dr. Nada El Hussein about depression after a stroke. Dr. El Hussein is an associate professor of neurology Telestroke medical director and vascular neurology fellowship program director at Duke University Medical Center. She's also a member of the AHA quality and outcomes committee of the stroke council and a member of the International Stroke Conference planning committee.
- Dr El Hussein, thank you so much for joining us.
- Dr. Nada El Hussein: [01:00](#) Thank you. It's my pleasure to be here.
- Patty Clements: [01:02](#) Depression is not something that everyone wants to talk about, but it's an important topic. It can be especially important for stroke survivors and their families. Let's start by diving in with some basics.
- What is depression exactly and how common is it in stroke survivors?
- Dr. Nada El Hussein: [01:19](#) Depression is a mood disorder that causes a persistent feeling of sadness and loss of interest. It affects how a person feels, thinks and behaves and can lead to a variety of emotional and physical problems. Individuals who are depressed may have difficulty doing normal day-to-day activities and sometimes they may feel as if life isn't worth living. Depression is one of the most common complications after stroke and affects about one-third of all stroke survivors. The symptoms can be mild to

severe and they can occur any time after a stroke, but most commonly in the first year.

Patty Clements: [01:57](#)

What causes depression after a stroke?

Dr. Nada El Hussein: [02:00](#)

As you know, a stroke can be a sudden life altering event that dramatically changes the before and after in a person's life. As far as the specific causes of depression after a stroke, it is likely multifactorial and may depend on the timing after stroke. It could be a neurological disorder stemming from the stroke lesion and subsequent biological changes on the brain itself. It also might be a reaction to deficits resulting from the stroke and their impact on the survivor's quality of life. Or it may be a combination of both.

Patty Clements: [02:34](#)

Should stroke survivors be checked for depression?

Dr. Nada El Hussein: [02:37](#)

Yes, absolutely. Stroke survivors should be assessed for depression and then treated when it occurs. It's important to identify and treat it as soon as possible. Untreated depression can lead to a slower recovery because it may prevent the stroke survivor from participating in therapy. Depression also increases the risk of another stroke and is also associated with higher mortality after stroke as well as increased healthcare utilization and poor quality of life.

In summary, all stroke survivors should be checked for depression and there should be a mechanism to follow up on these results. Checking alone may not be sufficient, but there should be a mechanism to address it if depression is present.

Patty Clements: [03:21](#)

Are there tools that healthcare professionals can use to check for depression?

Dr. Nada El Hussein: [03:26](#)

Yes, there are multiple screening tools that can be used. Three screening tools in particular have been studied extensively and proven to be effective. The center of epidemiological studies depression scale, the Hamilton depression rating scale, and then nine point patient health questionnaire or PHQ-9. The first two that I mentioned are relatively lengthy, but the patient health questionnaire consists of just nine questions and can effectively screen for depression and clinical settings.

Patty Clements: [03:57](#)

What are the symptoms of depression after a stroke?

Dr. Nada El Hussein: [04:01](#)

Symptoms vary for different people and they may change over time, but stroke survivors and their families should watch for

these signs: persistent sad, anxious or depressed mood, loss of interest or pleasure, sleeping problems, low or no motivation, responding with little or no emotion, feelings of guilt, worthlessness, hopelessness or helplessness, feeling like a burden, low energy, fatigue, being slowed down, difficulty focusing, remembering or making decisions appetite changes, thoughts of death or suicide.

When five or more of these symptoms last at least two weeks. A survivor may be experiencing depression. If at any point a survivor talks about self-harm or suicide, take them seriously and offer them the help or call 9-1-1.

- Patty Clements: [04:58](#) Very, very good advice. And once it's been established that a person is suffering from depression, how is depression treated?
- Dr. Nada El Hussein: [05:05](#) General depression responds well to a combination of antidepressant medication and psychotherapy. There is also limited data suggesting that neuromodulation such as with transcranial magnetic stimulation may be effective. When choosing an antidepressant medication, SSRIs are commonly used, but other antidepressant medications may work as well.
- The selection should be based on individual characteristics and side effect profile. So far, we do not have evidence that certain antidepressants are definitely better than others post-stroke depression.
- Patty Clements: [05:41](#) Aside from the help that a person should seek from qualified medical professionals, how can family and friends help a stroke survivor going through depression?
- Dr. Nada El Hussein: [05:50](#) They can help by expressing compassion, support, and understanding. They can show their support and understanding by being patient, not finishing the stroke survivors sentences, talking to them and not at them, maintaining eye contact, helping them avoid social isolation, encouraging good habits such as good diet and exercise and encouraging adherence to prescribed medications.
- Patty Clements: [06:16](#) What other resources are available to help stroke survivors and their caregivers?
- Dr. Nada El Hussein: [06:21](#) Support groups can be helpful for both survivors and caregivers because you get to hear from others who have walked this path. Knowing you are not alone, that others are going through what you are going through can go a long way in helping you cope

more effectively. While there are a variety of resources out there, the American Heart and American Stroke Association have many tools that a health care professional, a stroke survivor or a family member can utilize.

[06:49](#)

One is the American Heart Association Support Network. It's a place where survivors can share their story, connect with other people in their same situation and get answers to questions they may be having. They may be able to connect with others who have gone through post-stroke depression and learn how they were able to cope and manage their depression, or they may meet the others who are experiencing the same symptoms and emotions in their lives right now and maybe become a support system for one another.

[07:19](#)

The American Stroke Association also has a toll free Stroke Warmline that connects stroke survivors and their families with a trained team member who can provide support, helpful information or just a listening ear. A healthcare professional can recommend to their patients and their families to call the stroke warm line at 1-888-4-STROKE. Again, it's 1-888-478-7653.

[07:47](#)

Finally, the American Stroke Association's website, www.stroke.org also includes lots of resources for patients and their families.

Patty Clements:

[07:57](#)

We've covered a lot of important information here today. Are there any final thoughts you'd like to share?

Dr. Nada El Hussein:

[08:04](#)

Sure. I would like to add that the high prevalence of depression after stroke obviates the need to increase awareness among stroke survivors, treating teams and caregivers. I also want to add that depression can be common among caregivers of stroke survivors who also need attention by the bigger community and treating medical teams.

In addition, young stroke survivors, those who have worse disability from the stroke, those who have a previous history of depression and those who have cognitive impairment are at higher risk for post-stroke depression and certainly should be screened for that.

In summary, I think that this condition should be well-recognized and screened for by treating physicians, but also I would like to emphasize the need to also let stroke survivors know that this is a common condition and that if they do have

these symptoms that there are treatments that can be offered which hopefully can improve the ultimate outcome.

Patty Clements:

[09:25](#)

Dr. El Hussein, thank you so much for your time today and for weighing in on such an important topic. It's important that we mention that if one of your patients, a family member or someone you know is struggling to cope with life after stroke or depression of any kind, please take them seriously, offer them support however you can and encourage them to contact (800) 273-8255 and talk to someone trained in helping them through this time.

To our listeners, we hope you enjoyed today's conversation. I'd also like to remind you that the American Stroke Association has additional audio broadcasts available to listen to on our website.

Visit, stroke.org/recovery to find those, and please continue to come back to find more.