

# How to Make Life after Stroke Easier: Healing, Adapting, and Living Again

January 27, 2016



Life after stroke is full of problem solving. And like any problem that needs solving, there are little things you can do to make it all easier. We tried to fit all the little things into one little article... but that didn't happen. Instead, we grouped them into 3 parts:

1. Healing your mind and your mentality
2. Adapting to this new life without giving up
3. Living your life beyond limitations

Let's start with the essentials.

## 1. HEALING

### A Bit on Neuroplasticity

You're probably fully aware of how neuroplasticity will get you better. And if you already know, then congrats! Skip this section and move on down.

For those who don't know about this **super important concept**, neuroplasticity is how your brain **heals itself after injury**. Your brain can rewire impaired functions (caused by damage in the area of the brain that controls those functions) to different areas of the brain. Think of it as mind remapping.

In order for neuroplasticity to work, it requires practice, consistency, and **repetition**. For example, if your **fine motor skills** were impaired by your stroke, then your brain can rewire those skills to **regain hand movement with the help of a solid hand therapy regimen**.

And it has to be solid – that's how you get better. You need to diligently repeat your rehab exercises over and over until they stick. It's a true test of your **willpower and discipline**, and that is exactly how stroke recovery makes you stronger.

## Should You Work on Becoming Functional or Better?

Every goal that you set during your recovery will fall under two categories:

- Things that will get you functional again
- Things that will make you better again

Your therapist will most likely help you become functional again by helping you with the **activities of daily living**. But anything beyond that will most likely be in your hands – unless you enlist the help of an amazing therapist (which we highly recommend). But if you can't afford more hours with your therapist, then you can dedicate those hours to yourself. **But first you have to decide, do I want to become functional or do I want to get better?** Asking this question regularly will help motivate you to start pursuing a full recovery.

## The 1% Motivation Method – Why Smaller Is Better

Now that you know what to do, you need to figure out how you're going to motivate yourself to follow through. Enter: The 1% Method.

Ahh yes. Perhaps the most motivating and doable method for approaching stroke recovery is the 1% method. But how can 1% progress get you better? Because when we set goals that are too big, we tend to exert all our energy and willpower in the beginning – leaving us burnt out and defeated. And burnout will not get you better.

Taking **small, consistent steps** everyday will. Try dedicating just 15 minutes of your day to the one thing you want to achieve most. And if you don't know what you want to achieve, then it's time to set some goals (**the better kind of goals that aren't boring**) and then dedicate 1% of your time and energy every day towards working on them. It'll get you much farther than the all-or-nothing approach.

## 2. ADAPTING

### Adaptable Problem Solving

At the beginning of this post we talked about how stroke recovery is full of problem solving, and there's a solution to everything – you just have to find it. If you're frustrated with trying to read one-handedly, then try reading on a tablet. (But be sure to see the "*Getting It Done or Getting Better?*")

section near the end of this post – it discusses the benefits and downsides of **compensation techniques** like these.) Also, who said you can't cook efficiently with one hand?

That's what adaptive cutting boards are for. They come with edges and spikes to prop your food onto, making one-handed maneuvering really easy. You can also invest in tools like automatic can openers and other appliances that make two handed tasks easier.

If you find yourself frustrated with the limitations of your recovery, try taking a step back and look at things from a new angle. Most frustrating tasks can be solved with a little ingenuity and a lot of creativity. However, you should only use adaptive equipment as a temporary solution while you're working on the permanent solution: getting your movement back.

## Moving Normally Again

Regaining movement starts with a solid at-home rehabilitation regimen. If you're looking for exercises to do, you can skim through **all our rehab exercises** to see if you find any you like. We cover all the muscle groups from head to toe.

And like we mentioned earlier, you should try experimenting with as many **methods for recovery** as possible. For example, you can try **mirror therapy** or **MusicGlove** to regain fine motor skills. Or you can try **CIMT** or robot-assisted rehab for arm movement. There are tons of options, and we have a lot of resources to help.

Regaining movement is only possible with the help of your good ol' friend neuroplasticity, so be sure to utilize a **high number of repetitions** during your exercise and practice consistently. The 3 things that will get you better the fastest are repetition, consistency, and **visualization**.

## A Full Recovery IS Possible

When it comes to regaining movement after stroke, the debate over a **full recovery** is likely to come up. And we're probably at odds with what your doctors has to say – and that's okay. Medical professionals have to disclose the realistic potential outcomes of your stroke. However, they don't always put it in the best light, and that can actually hinder your recovery – *a lot*.

It's called the **nocebo effect**. And it occurs when you hear the negative effects of something and, because you believe them to be true, they become real. *Don't let this happen to you*. You have more control over your recovery than you could ever image. **Developing a positive mindset** is the best thing you'll ever do for yourself.

## 3. LIVING AGAIN

### Making Peace with Slow

If your stroke has impaired your movement then it has probably slowed you down, and this can be the most frustrating thing for many stroke survivors. If you're forced to slow down and you don't like it, then making peace can make life a lot easier.

A slow life is actually something that **some people advocate**. But we live in a world that unfortunately makes us feel bad about slow lifestyles. We're always *go, go, go*; and when the fast pace is taken away from us, it disrupts everything. But it's time to **make peace with the disruption**.

And you can do so by becoming mindful and present with everything you do. Making this mental shift can reap massive benefits for your recovery by creating more room for healing. Become a master of **the science of healing and happiness** by focusing on mindfulness and meditation. It will slow you down and help you get better.

## Getting It Done or Getting Better?

Should you focus on getting things done or getting better? The answer isn't always obvious. Let's say that you're unloading the dish rack while only using your 'good' hand. This might double the time it takes to complete the task, but it's certainly easier than using both hands – which could even *triple* the time needed.

You already know that unloading with both hands is what you *should* do, and this is where you have to make a choice: Do you want to get things done or do you want to get better? This isn't a one-time question, either. You should ask it every time you feel yourself growing frustrated. *Is this a situation where I need to get things done? Or can I afford to exert some extra time and energy towards getting better?* It's completely up to you to decide, but be sure to put some careful thought into it.

## Don't Stop Living! Find Your Now

Focusing on recovery doesn't mean you have to stop living. If your old hobbies are no longer an option, then this is an opportunity to explore new things. Make this life a new one, and dare we say – a better one too.

If you can make the mental shift and view this stage of your life as an opportunity to grow, you'll come out stronger. You'll need the help of your friends and some fresh ideas on **where to start having fun**, but don't ever give up.

If you feel like you can't live a happy life until you're better, then you're creating your own unhappiness by not living in the present moment. Living with presence is a choice that you have to make every day, and honestly some days will be harder than others.

**There will be times where you want to cry and shake your fist in anger, but always remember that there *is* a life after stroke. You just have to learn how to turn your 'doing mode' off and take breaks when you need them.**

*Enjoy yourself. Eat some good healthy food. Bask in the beauty of nature.* Because tomorrow isn't always promised. And today is your chance to find little bits of life that you can live *right now*.

If you do that, it will make things a lot easier.