



A complete guide to **stroke** for employers

Stroke
Association

Finding **strength** through **support**

What's in this guide?

This guide can help you to support an employee returning to work after a stroke.

At the Stroke Association, we recognise the value stroke survivors add to our workplace. This guide can help you support people returning to work after a stroke. Your organisation can celebrate diversity, and benefit from the contribution of those with different life experiences.

This guide is aimed at employers, to help them support people with disabilities or different needs after a stroke. Stroke survivors can get more information at **stroke.org.uk/work** or by calling our Stroke Support Helpline on **0303 3033 100**.

We have information on all aspects of stroke. If you have a question that is not answered in this guide, visit **stroke.org.uk** or call our Helpline.

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Section 1: What is a stroke?

A stroke happens when the blood supply to part of your brain is cut off, killing brain cells.

Damage to the brain can affect how the body works. It can also change how you think and feel. The effects of a stroke depend on where it takes place in the brain, and how big the damaged area is.

Stroke occurs more than 100,000 times a year in the UK. That's around one every five minutes. It is also a leading cause of disability in the UK.

Many people think that strokes only happen to older people, but stroke can strike anyone at any time. Younger people can have strokes too.

One in four strokes in the UK happen in people of working age.

With the right support and guidance, many people successfully return to work after a stroke.

Section 2: Our 10 golden rules for employers

A stroke can dramatically change someone's life and your employee will need your support. They may be experiencing emotional, mental or physical changes. They may also be worrying about their financial situation and find themselves navigating an unfamiliar benefits system.

Here are our golden rules to help you support them the best you can. See 'The effects of stroke' later in this guide for some tips about supporting people with communication problems and other effects of stroke.

1. Timing is important

Often people just want to get back to 'normal' after a stroke, so it can be tempting to rush back to work. But if people return to work before they or their employers are ready, it can lead to problems later. On the other hand, too much of a delay can affect someone's confidence and make it more difficult when they do come back.

The best thing to do is to stay in touch with your employee and plan for their return together. Agree with them how often you will contact them and by what method. Planning together will help you understand what support they need and give you time to put it in place before they come back. This should make it much easier for both of you.

2. Ask the expert

Every stroke survivor is an expert in their own needs. So don't be afraid to ask your employee about the best ways for you to support them. Start by being open and supportive. Let them know their needs are important. And keep talking.

It can take time to become aware of all the different changes that happen after a stroke. So your employee may not have all the answers straight away and things are likely to change as time goes on.

3. Listen

It's really important to set up clear, open channels of communication with your employee as soon as possible, so you can understand how their stroke has affected them. Listen without judgement and ask questions to make sure you understand.

4. Don't make assumptions

No two strokes are the same, just like no two people are the same. Some people will have visible disabilities (such as problems walking). For others, their disabilities may not be as easy to spot (such as problems with concentration or fatigue, which is tiredness which does not get better with rest). These less visible disabilities can make it difficult to know someone needs support. That's why it's important to ask and listen.

5. Respect their privacy

Be sensitive to your employee's right to privacy. They may not wish to disclose their disabilities or the fact they have had a stroke. Ask them if they would like to let other colleagues know and, if so, who. Decide together the best way to do this.

6. Check guidelines and policies

Find out if your organisation has policies in place for long-term illness or absence. Familiarise yourself with these and speak to the relevant teams, such as Human Resources and Occupational Health, for additional guidance.

If the person is unable to return to work, make sure the right processes and clear communication are in place, to ensure a fair outcome for employer and employee.

Check what financial support your employee is entitled to, such as sickness pay and health insurance. Make sure you give information as promptly as you can, so your employee has enough time to respond. Present it a clear, honest way that is easy to understand.

7. Ask about support

Your employee may be able to get practical support via Access to Work. See the 'What is Access to Work?' section later in this guide. Your employee may also be receiving support from an NHS occupational therapist (OT) who can help them decide when they are ready to return to work. Your employee may be able to put you in touch with their OT, so they can help you understand how the stroke has affected your employee and answer any questions you may have.

8. Create a return-to-work plan

Arrange ways to keep in touch while your employee is away from work. Once they are ready, meet to create a plan for returning to work. This can include the number of days they will work each week and how many hours each day.

Most people find a phased return, which allows them to gradually build up to their previous working hours, helps them to get used to working again.

You should also review the tasks they do and any changes that need to be made to them.

It's also a good opportunity to update your employee on any changes at work while they were off.

9. Trial and review

Your employee's needs are likely to change as their recovery continues. Set regular times to review the arrangements you've agreed. Be honest about what is or isn't working and encourage your employee to do the same. Try to be as flexible and creative as you can.

Your reviews don't have to be formal meetings. You could have a weekly chat over a coffee. Do keep notes, as this can help you both see the person's progress, as well as any problems that need to be addressed.

10. Be flexible

It's likely your employee will continue to have appointments with health professionals once they return to work. You should try to allow time off for these appointments, as they will be an essential part of their recovery. They also help the person to maximise their contribution to your workplace. Some organisations have a medical and disability leave policy.

'With employer support and reasonable adjustments, I was able to stay in my job and continue my career.'

Annabel, stroke survivor

Section 3: Frequently Asked Questions

What is a reasonable adjustment?

The Equality Act 2010 states a disability should not stop someone from working or having the same rights and access to opportunities as other people. The legal definition of a disability in the UK is a physical or mental impairment that has a substantial and long-term effect on your ability to carry out daily activities. This includes emotional and cognitive problems due to a stroke.

As an employer, you have a duty to make reasonable adjustments for employees with disabilities. These are alterations to the workplace, or the way a disabled person does their job, to allow them to work. Employees cannot be made to pay for reasonable adjustments.

Other examples of reasonable adjustments are:

- Changing duties and targets and adapting processes.
- Arranging work shadowing or mentoring with a colleague.
- Adapting equipment or making other changes to the work environment.
- Working from a different location or from home.
- Changing working hours and working patterns.
- Changing the recruitment process when hiring for a job role.

Reasonable adjustments do not have to be expensive or complicated. It's about looking at the barriers a person is experiencing and thinking creatively about removing them.

Some adjustments can be made in advance such as new equipment. Others will be made with the person as they find out what changes they need to help them fulfil their role.

The adjustments you can make will also depend on the size and finances of your organisation. So it may be that you can't accommodate all the adjustments your employee needs. However, with an open and collaborative approach, you'll be able to decide together what adjustments you can realistically and fairly make.

The Acas website has more information at [acas.org.uk](https://www.acas.org.uk)

More information about your duties as an employer under the law and about protecting your staff from disability-based discrimination can be found at [equalityhumanrights.com](https://www.equalityhumanrights.com)

What is a phased return?

This means your employee would return to work on a part-time basis and gradually build up their hours.

It may help to change working times, such as a later start to avoid commuting in the rush hour. It may take time to return to the amount of hours they were working before, or they may not be able to return to their original hours, so be as flexible as you can.

Many people find a phased return helps them readjust to working again.

It could also have benefits for you, as it makes the return more likely to be a success. It also gives you the chance to see what's working and assess any changes that may be needed.

What is Access to Work?

This is a UK government scheme that provides practical advice and support for disabled people and their employers. It's designed to help people find or stay in work. It offers an initial workplace assessment, where an adviser can look at the workplace and tasks your employee needs to do. They will then make recommendations for additional support that could help.

This could be a grant for adapted equipment, a coach to work one-to-one on things like building memory strategies, or a support worker to assist with basic manual tasks. The scheme can also help with transport to work. See 'Other sources of help and information' on **page 12**.

'I found Access to Work support to be very good. They help get me to the office every day, which has really helped to alleviate the stress of getting on transport.'

Kevin, stroke survivor

Section 4: The effects of stroke

How well someone recovers from a stroke depends on many factors, including how quickly their stroke was treated and the support and therapy they received afterwards. People can make excellent recoveries and even if they're left with problems, these can continue to improve over time. With the right help and adjustments in place, they can continue to make a valuable contribution to your workplace.

Over the next three pages, you'll find a brief guide to some of the effects of stroke your employee may be coping with and how you can help. It's important to remember everyone's experience of stroke is different. So the best way to understand how your employee has been affected is to ask them.

- If possible, offer a room or private space where they can take a break.

Visit **stroke.org.uk/fatigue** for more information.



Communication problems

Some stroke survivors experience speech and language problems. It can include difficulties with speaking and understanding, and reading and writing. This is called aphasia. Other types of communication difficulties can be due to weak muscles in the face, or problems with concentration.

How can you help?

- If your employee is having difficulty speaking, you need to give them time. Try not to interrupt. With enough time, they'll be able to answer for themselves.
- Remember your employee's intelligence has not been affected, just their ability to use and understand language.

Visit **stroke.org.uk/communication-problems** for more tips and information.



Fatigue

Many people have problems with fatigue after a stroke. This isn't like typical tiredness. It doesn't always improve with rest and it isn't necessarily related to how busy or active you've been.

Fatigue is a less visible effect of stroke, but it can be a major barrier for people returning to work. They may need support to manage their energy levels and ensure they can do their job as well as possible.

How can you help?

- Regular breaks may help your employee to manage their tiredness. A later start time may also be helpful.



Cognitive problems

A stroke can affect the way your brain understands, organises and stores information. This can make it difficult to concentrate, remember things or solve problems. Problems with concentration and short-term memory are especially common after a stroke.

How can you help?

- Written instructions or a reference guide could be useful for someone who has short-term memory problems. Instructions for using the phone or the photocopier, for example, could be helpful, so your employee doesn't feel they have to keep asking the same question.
- Keep verbal or written instructions clear and concise and try not to overload them with too much information at once.
- Reducing distractions and allowing for regular breaks can often help to improve concentration.

Visit stroke.org.uk/cognitiveproblems for more information.

'I still struggle with word recall when tired and cannot 'multi-task' in the way I could before. At work, I record all my meetings so I can listen back to them afterwards and I have to be careful not to 'overdo' things.'

Jo, stroke survivor



Emotional changes

A stroke is sudden and shocking, and affects every part of your life. It's a lot to deal with, and everyone deals with it differently. The anxiety and frustration a stroke can cause may sometimes make people feel they're unable to cope. People may also experience anger, low mood or depression.

How can you help?

- Frequent reviews will help both you and your employee. This will allow you to catch issues early on and implement any changes needed.
- Check if your organisation can offer any counselling or emotional support.
- Encourage your employee to talk to their GP about emotional support and counselling, or find out about services they can refer themselves to. Our Stroke Support Helpline can tell them more.
- If possible, offer a room or private space where the person can rest if they feel overwhelmed.

Visit stroke.org.uk/emotional-changes for more information.



Physical effects

A stroke can have many different physical effects. It can cause weakness or loss of movement in an arm, leg or down one whole side of the body. As well as affecting someone's mobility, this can also cause a great deal of pain. A stroke can also affect balance and coordination.

How can you help?

- You may need to make some adaptations to your employee's work space – they may need a more supportive chair, for example.
- Make sure things they need are within easy reach, floors are clear of trip hazards and there's plenty of room to move around, to minimise the risk of falling.

Visit stroke.org.uk/physical-effects for more information.



Vision problems

Almost two-thirds of people have vision problems after a stroke. These can be mild or more severe. They may affect the ability to drive or operate machinery.

How can you help?

- If someone finds it hard to read, discuss their preferred format, such as large print. Technology can offer alternatives such as speech-to-text apps or screenreaders.
- A clear, uncluttered workspace and good lighting can help them make the most of their vision. Consult Access to Work about support available.

Visit stroke.org.uk/vision-problems for tips and advice.

Support with effects of stroke

Although your employee may look physically fine, they could still be coping with other difficulties like cognitive problems, fatigue or emotional changes. Very often, people aren't aware of these effects until they are back at work.

The best thing to do is to have open, regular communication. Some stroke survivors struggle to talk about their difficulties or may not wish to, so you'll need to be as supportive and patient as you can. Ask questions and encourage your employee to do the same.

Section 5: Where to get help and information

From the Stroke Association

Stroke Support Helpline

Our Stroke Support Helpline is for anyone affected by a stroke, including family, friends and employers. The Stroke Support Helpline can give you information and support on any aspect of stroke.

Call us on **0303 3033 100**, from a textphone **18001 0303 3033 100** or email **helpline@stroke.org.uk**

Read our information

Log onto **stroke.org.uk** where you can find easy-to-understand information, videos and an online community to support you. You can also call the Stroke Support Helpline to ask for printed copies of our guides.

Other sources of help and information

Equality and Human Rights Commission

Website: **equalityhumanrights.com**

Advice line: **0808 800 0082**

Has information for employers about your duties under the law and making reasonable adjustments. The Scotland section of the site gives information about the additional considerations public sector employers in Scotland need to consider.

Acas

Website: **acas.org.uk**

Helpline: **0300 123 1100**

Text Relay service: **18001 0300 123 1100**

Information and advice for employers and staff on all aspects of workplace relations and employment law.

Access to Work (England, Scotland, Wales)

Website: **gov.uk/access-to-work**

Email: **atwosu.london@dpw.gsi.gov.uk**

Telephone: **0800 121 7479**

Textphone: **0800 121 7579**

Provides advice and support for both you and your employee. Your employee can apply either online or over the phone.

Access to Work (NI)

Website: **nidirect.gov.uk/articles/access-work-practical-help-work**

The Access to Work scheme for Northern Ireland. To apply, your employee should speak to a work coach at their local Jobs and Benefits Office.

Disability Rights UK

Website: **disabilityrightsuk.org**

Telephone: **0330 995 0400**

Email: **enquiries@disabilityrightsuk.org**

Helplines for different topics including students and discrimination, and disability confidence training for employers.

Headway

Website: **headway.org.uk**

Helpline: **0808 800 2244**

Email: **helpline@headway.org.uk**

A charity for people who have had a brain injury. They have information about returning to work for employees and employers.

Scope

Website: **business.scope.org.uk**

Tel: **0207 619 7390**

A charity which offers employers a programme of support to improve disability inclusion in the workplace, including with recruitment.

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About our information

We want to provide the best information for people affected by stroke. That's why we ask stroke survivors and their families, as well as medical experts, to help us put our publications together.



How did we do?

To tell us what you think of this guide, or to request a list of the sources we used to create it, email us at feedback@stroke.org.uk




Accessible formats

Visit our website if you need this information in audio, large print or braille.



Always get individual advice

This guide contains general information about stroke. But if you have a problem, you should get individual advice from a professional such as a GP or pharmacist. Our Stroke Support Helpline can also help you find support. We work very hard to give you the latest facts, but some things change. We don't control the information provided by other organisations or websites.



Every day in the UK, another 240 people wake up to the catastrophic impact of a stroke, which can leave survivors unable to move, see, speak, or even swallow. With strength, determination and the right support, recovery is possible.

The Stroke Association is the only charity in the UK providing lifelong support for all stroke survivors and their families. We provide tailored support to tens of thousands of stroke survivors each year, fund vital scientific research, and campaign to secure the best care and support for everyone affected by stroke.

Learn more about stroke support: **stroke.org.uk**



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