

Improving Awareness to Speed Recovery

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Have you seen your stroke survivor leave food on half of their plate? Forget to put their recovering arm into a shirt sleeve? Bump into the door jam with the left side of their wheelchair? Not turn their head in your direction when you speak? If you have noticed any of these things, you've very likely witnessed one-side neglect.

One-side neglect can be very frustrating and is often misunderstood. Neglect is more than not being able to use

the recovering side. Think of it as a lack of awareness of that side. This common effect of stroke can reduce the possibility of independent living and increase the potential of painful injury. However, there are several things that you can do to help a person improve awareness of their recovering side.

Improving Awareness

Whatever the reason for someone's lack of awareness of one side, everyone (including family members, caregivers, nurses or visiting friends and relatives) can be helpful. Everything you do and how you do it helps improve awareness of the neglected side. Take every opportunity, large or small, to help them "tune in" to that side.

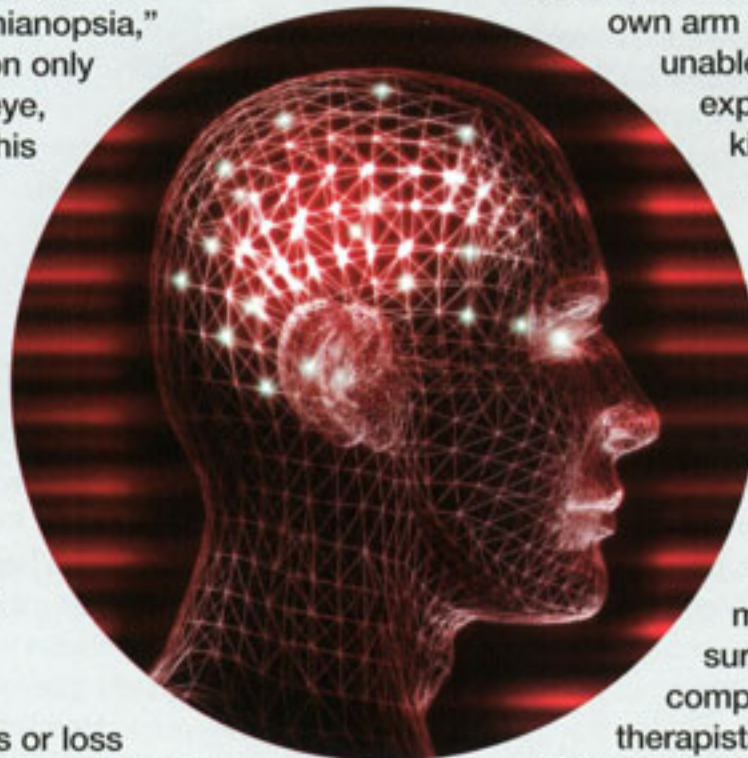
Possible Causes Of One-Side Neglect

Visual — In some cases, the stroke injures the optic nerve, which sends information from the eyes to the brain. This is called a "visual field deficit" or "hemianopsia," and it means that the person only sees out of a part of each eye, instead of the whole eye. This is different from blurred vision and cannot be corrected by glasses. If you want to understand how this might feel, take a pair of glasses and mask half of each lens with tape. Now look at the world around you. When part of our visual field is blocked, we are less aware of that side.

Sensory — Many people experience some numbness or loss of feeling in the face, arm or leg. It may be temporary, or it may be more severe. I have

known of people who awaken during the night, frightened that some stranger is lying in bed next to them, not knowing that it is their own arm that they are seeing but unable to feel. When we experience numbness of any kind, we are less likely to be aware of, or use, that side.

Perceptual — It is not uncommon for a stroke affecting the left side to impair judgment and contribute to poor safety awareness. Often described as perceptual problems, the inability to take in information and make sense of the surrounding world is extremely complex. Occupational therapists and speech pathologists provide specific therapy to help with perceptual problems.



Approach the Neglected Side

At home or at the hospital, have a comfortable chair next to the bed on the neglected side. This encourages them to look in your direction as you talk to them. Hold that hand, touch their arm, make contact with them, helping them become more aware of that side. If they have difficulty turning their head in your direction, gently place your hand on their chin and slowly help them turn their head toward you, far enough for their eyes to meet yours. Initially you may need to do this several times a day, until they can do this on their own.



Place the Nightstand on Their Neglected Side

Placing the phone, TV remote control, glass of water or other necessities on the neglected side encourages them to look and reach for objects on that side. When I was first instructed to do this as a new therapist 25 years ago, I thought it was mean and unnecessary. But I have seen significant improvement and am convinced that it can be one of the most helpful things you can do. One exception: Make sure the control for calling the nurse is on the strong side, where they can find it quickly.



Include the Neglected Hand During Daily Tasks

As your stroke survivor improves, you may notice that they are still unaware of objects on one side. Don't scold or say things that may increase their frustration or embarrassment. If they haven't seen the fork to their left, saying things such as "What did you forget?" or "Look to your left" aren't very helpful. Instead, gently remind them by saying "here is your fork."



The most helpful thing you can do is take their hand in yours and guide it to the fork. There is an interesting phenomenon that occurs when you take someone's hand — their head automatically turns in that direction and their eyes follow. By first telling them "let's get your fork" and then taking their hand in yours to "search" for the fork, you have now combined the sense of hearing with the sense of touch. The improvement in awareness can be dramatic and many stroke survivors begin to try to move and "use" the hand as you guide it. I encourage guiding the neglected hand during all daily tasks: holding a washcloth, squeezing the toothpaste tube and brushing hair are just a few examples.

These strategies help you encourage awareness immediately following a stroke. That can significantly improve the stroke survivor's overall recovery and potential for independent living. Every day provides limitless opportunities that are simple and easy to do at home or in the hospital. Helping them incrementally overcome weak-side neglect is one way family members and caregivers can make a big difference in a stroke survivor's life. **SE**

To see more of Jan's ideas, view her videotape "Improving Function and Awareness" from the series Stroke Help: A Stroke Survivor's Guide to Independence. The six-videotape series is available to readers of Stroke Connection Magazine at \$75, a 50 percent discount. International Clinical Educators will donate 10 percent of each video series ordered to the American Stroke Association. To contact Jan, call (888) 665-6556 or visit her Web site at www.StrokeHelp.com.