



The Beat Podcast
Season 2, Episode 8: Transcript

Women, stroke and mental health

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Lisa Meeches [00:00:03] I know that in order for me to get home, I had to do the work, I had to do the heavy lifting and I had to cry. And I knew I had to win. I had to win this. The struggle and, you know, mentally and emotionally, you know, it was draining, but I knew I couldn't let my kids down.

Caroline Lavallée [00:00:26] Chances are you or someone you know has been personally affected by heart disease and stroke. They can devastate lives, sometimes suddenly, but there's hope. I'm Caroline Lavallée and you're listening to The Beat, a podcast by Heart & Stroke, with support from our generous donors. In each episode, we're joined by Canada's leading physicians and experts to discuss the most pressing issues related to heart and brain health. And you'll be inspired by the real stories from people living with heart disease and stroke. Thanks for listening. Now let's get into the episode.

Stroke can affect anyone, but women have worse outcomes and more trouble recovering from strokes than men. After a stroke, many people experience some mental health challenges, such as depression or anxiety. For women, these effects can hit hard. But women often carry greater family responsibilities and so can feel less supported themselves during recovery, leading to negative impacts. Too many women aren't aware of their risk factors for stroke or what to expect during recovery. Prioritizing research and education about risk factors and understanding the impact of stroke on women's mental health is critical to ensure that they make the best recovery possible. Lisa Meeches is a respected film and television producer, originally from the Treaty One territory of Long Plain First Nation in Manitoba. Lisa was with her family attending a powwow in Alberta in August 2016 when she had a stroke.

Lisa Meeches [00:02:21] I remember that day so vividly. Now that I've had a chance to think about it and revisit it. At the time, when I first told my story, it wasn't mentally and emotionally safe for me to delve into those details. And then so that day I felt like nothing bad was going to happen. But later on, I found out after talking to my daughter, she says, "Mommy, you're looking at me like you didn't know me. You were looking through my eyes and you weren't saying anything. And I kept talking to you. You didn't answer back. You just looked at me."

Caroline Lavallée [00:02:58] When Lisa woke up from a coma caused by the stroke, she was told she was paralyzed and might never walk again. Lisa had to grapple with the shocking news and how it would affect her life.

Lisa Meeches [00:03:15] I cried for days after that and then thinking my world is going to be over and I would never be able to dance or run again. Because prior to that I was a powwow dancer. I was a runner. And to have that taken from me, you know... I guess all, all stroke survivors go through that "poor me" for the first couple of days, but or when you realize the totality of what just happened to you.... And that's what I went through. And then I had these really vivid dreams. Once the doctor told me that and I cried myself to sleep that afternoon. And, you know, when you have that cry where you're like, gasping like that.

Caroline Lavallée [00:03:57] Luckily, her doctors' worst prediction did not come true and Lisa began to recover. Even if someone who has experienced a stroke recovers physically, the mental effects still take a large toll.

Lisa Meeches [00:04:13] And so I went to see a couple of therapists, one that was in the hospital and then one that was from my community. You know, just mitigating those morbid thoughts of, "Is this going to happen again?" Or "Am I going to wake up or never wake up?" like all those morbid thoughts and depression. Going through depression, this post-stroke and menopause together, so I had to rely on a lot of traditional medicines.

Caroline Lavallée [00:04:45] Lisa's struggles are familiar to Dr. Gayla Tennen. She is a psychiatrist at Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre in Toronto. She runs the post-stroke psychiatry clinic there, where she sees patients with mood and anxiety issues related to stroke.

Dr. Gayla Tennen [00:05:03] A stroke can affect a person's mental health and well-being because it's very often a shocking, life-threatening event. And in addition to an understandable amount of emotional distress related to that, stroke survivors are at risk of developing mental health issues that affect their recovery and their quality of life. These issues include depression, anxiety and cognitive impairment. There are other emotional changes that can occur as well, like excessive tearfulness, trouble regulating emotions or irritability. And these may not be diagnosed as depression or anxiety, but they do represent a distinct emotional change following stroke. And some other people have apathy, which causes a lack of concern and motivation. And other people may have post-traumatic symptoms as a result of their stroke experience as well.

So depression occurs commonly after stroke. Studies have shown that approximately one out of every three stroke survivors develop depression, and this can occur at any time after stroke, though the frequency is highest in the first year. Anxiety is also common following stroke and depression and anxiety can occur together. So post-stroke depression affects people's quality of life and has also been associated with social withdrawal, poor rehabilitation and functional outcomes. And it can also negatively impact cognitive recovery as well as mortality.

If you think about it, after stroke, people often have new medications that they have to be diligent about taking, and many people have to work hard in rehab or work on establishing new lifestyle habits, like maybe quitting smoking or substance use, starting an exercise routine, or making dietary changes. So it is a challenge to do these things at any time, and it's much harder to carry out these changes if someone also has post-stroke depression or anxiety. So mental health issues after stroke often have a negative impact on people's recovery and quality of life.

Caroline Lavallée [00:07:10] Even surrounded by support, recovering from a stroke is draining both mentally and physically.

Lisa Meeches [00:07:18] But in order for me to get home, I had to... I had to do the work. I had to do the heavy lifting and I had to cry. And I had to... I knew I had to win. I had to win this. And the struggle and you know, mentally and emotionally, you know, it was draining, but I knew I couldn't let my kids down. I still wanted to you know, I wanted to make grandmotherhood. And I'm a grandmother now. You know, I have five grandchildren and I made it.

Caroline Lavallée [00:07:56] While anyone can experience a stroke, stroke can affect men and women differently. This ranges from risk factors to effects on mental health.

Dr. Gayla Tennen [00:08:08] Speaking more generally, women face different challenges following stroke at various stages of their lives. They certainly face unique challenges if they have a stroke at a younger age or a stroke related to pregnancy, which is a time that's supposed to be joyful and positive. So it can be quite traumatic. Women at various times of their lives may be juggling the demands of work or caring for their children, often both. They may also have other caregiving roles, for example, to elderly parents, or they may have commitments in their home or community, so they may have trouble prioritizing their own care, for example, seeking help for post-stroke mental health concerns, or they may have trouble accessing care when they have so many other responsibilities that they feel they need to be.

And then older women, because they tend to live longer in general, are more likely to live alone than men, and they often lack caregiving support and can be quite isolated. So that is a challenge in itself, and it also has another negative association in that social isolation is considered to be a risk factor for post-stroke depression and worsened outcomes.

Caroline Lavallée [00:09:21] Thankfully, Lisa experienced an outpouring of support from her community and from those around her.

Lisa Meeches [00:09:30] And, you know, the love and the hugs and kisses and the well-wishes on social media, like the therapist told me, don't go back to that day. And what do I do as soon as I get on social media? You know, I went back to that day and I'm glad I did. I'm glad I didn't take his advice because I needed to see what that day was like, what I missed, because there was three big powwows and (at) every single one of those powwows, I was acknowledged and they had honored dances for me. So I got to see the totality of their love from the community. And I wish every stroke person can feel that kind of love, that kind of nurture. You know, my community takes ownership of me because I've been in their living rooms every every week for the past, you know, since in my 20s.

Caroline Lavallée [00:10:23] The healthcare system still has a ways to go in meeting the needs of women who experience a stroke.

Dr. Gayla Tennen [00:10:29] The healthcare system could support better outcomes for women after stroke in many ways, including increasing awareness of women's challenges and needs, and investing in research on women. When it comes to post-stroke mental health, I think patients' families should be educated about the emotional challenges that are common after stroke and informed about the things they should be looking out for.

According to the Canada Stroke Best Practices recommendations, everyone who has experienced a stroke should be screened for depression when medically appropriate, so it would help to build capacity and systems in health care in order to do this. But there's a lot of focus on screening. But screening alone is not enough because we can't make a diagnosis based on screening. And we also need to build capacity for treating these patients once they're identified and diagnosed.

So I believe the healthcare system needs more skilled psychiatry resources to appropriately diagnose and effectively treat these patients, and also to be able to provide comprehensive treatment recommendations to the person who's going to be treating, like the family doctor or other healthcare professionals that are involved, so that people can get the help they need. And women need to be heard when they point out that something isn't right — and given the opportunity to access good medical care. It is important to know that there are effective treatments for post-stroke depression and anxiety and other emotional changes after stroke. So I do think that should be a priority in our healthcare system, to support stroke recovery and quality of life.

Lisa Meeches [00:12:03] So many women that I met in post-stroke had the same story, that their men weren't understanding what was going on with them, what they were feeling. And so we validated each other's concerns, and that was good enough for us. I don't think men will ever understand. It takes a real woman nation who has been through this and understands the world of menopause and childbirth and how that correlates to having your body turn on you the way this was, and how to prepare and prevent this from happening to you. And that is getting to acknowledge your blood and getting to acknowledge your body and not ignoring these signs.

Caroline Lavallée [00:12:47] Her experience reminded Lisa of her strength as a woman.

Lisa Meeches [00:12:53] My family really surrounded me with a lot of love, with a lot of challenges, too, because they know what I'm made of. And I forgot. And I think if it wasn't for that stroke, I... you know, wouldn't have even remembered how strong I really am as a woman, but also as an Indigenous woman, and how much we rely on the prayers and the ceremonies.

I went to a lot of sundances and sweats. A year after I got my license back, I drove down to South Dakota and went to one of the sundances and was prayed over by the most revered sundance chief down there. And I did everything I could to remind me of, you know, for my own healing. Everyone was telling me how amazing I was — all around me, how strong I had been and how I persevered. But emotionally, mentally, I need... I need a grounding. I still needed a lot of work to do.

So I'm always listening to find ways of reframing my thoughts and my thinking and know that this is... this wasn't just about me. My recovery is about me and my strength and my thoughts are about me. The recovery is general. Then how you deal with it and focus and challenge yourself as a woman and understanding your role and the legacy that we have to leave for other young women.

Caroline Lavallée [00:14:21] Dr. Tennen stresses that there haven't been many studies to assess sex-based differences in stroke outcomes, so there is still lots to learn about women's risk factors and recovery.

Dr. Gayla Tennen [00:14:33] We're lacking some of the research that we would love to see in this area, but depression is... because it's so common after stroke. Two consistent predictors that have come up in the studies include a history of pre-stroke depression and severity of functional dependence or physical disability after stroke. So in the general population, women have been shown in some studies to have higher rates of mood disorders. And so after stroke, this puts them at greater risk of developing depression. And studies have also shown that women have worse functional outcomes after stroke compared with men. And this is also a consistent predictor of post-stroke depression. So these two risk factors appear to place women at higher risk of developing depression or other mental health issues after stroke.

Caroline Lavallée [00:15:23] Support from family and friends is a critical aspect of stroke recovery and can help break down the stigma that can stop people from talking about mental health challenges.

Dr. Gayla Tennen [00:15:34] If they see an issue, they can encourage their loved one to inform their doctor or a professional on their healthcare team. And they can also advocate on their loved one's behalf. When suitable, they can provide practical support like ensuring they can get to rehab or to their medical appointments, and also emotional support by listening, checking in with them, and providing companionship.

A few other things they can do: Exercise is important after stroke and is also helpful for mood and anxiety. So supporting the person, if they're able to do some form of exercise, or joining them in doing it, can be helpful. And that also goes for anything that supports their mental health and recovery. So that may include helping them get outside, helping them connect with their social circles, doing something engaging that is meaningful to them, maybe trying mindfulness or other relaxation exercises to help their sleep or their worry.

Lisa Meeches [00:16:35] I had a big cheering section behind me and that made all the difference in the world. And knowing that I had so many people rooting for me from so many directions and, you know... that really made a difference. The fact that the hospital was also willing to provide the space that I needed for the ceremonial practice, like there was a church in there. And... but we needed the place to have a ceremony where you can smudge.

Caroline Lavallée [00:17:07] The community of other people recovering from stroke in the hospital helped Lisa stay hopeful, and she emphasizes that women need to support each other in situations like this.

Lisa Meeches [00:17:21] The emotional and mental well-being was hard. It was a struggle. But I was grateful every step of the way and realizing that all these elderly people in the hospital with me still had so much hope. And... we became a small community in there and I was their baby! And so we stood by each other and were champions for each other. And that really made a big difference in my recovery, my mental and emotional recovery especially.

Then came the hard part was realizing... and therapy, my fears. And I would say to women that are (on) the road to recovery or perhaps just feeling like your life is over. It's not over. It'll never be over. You have a strong legacy that will live on in your children and grandchildren. And if you don't have any, your community still needs you. You're vital and imperative to this world as a woman, part of the woman nation.

Caroline Lavallée [00:18:31] Eventually, Lisa recovered and was able to walk and dance again. She has these words of encouragement for any woman who has experienced a stroke.

Lisa Meeches [00:18:41] Tell yourself and your mind, tell your body parts not to give up. And whatever the doctor tells you as a woman, you know your body better than anybody else. Don't, don't give in. Don't, you know you can manifest your own healing and just try to move. Don't, don't give in.

You know, imagine if I had believed what the doctor said, and I didn't even try to move. Like, can you imagine? You know, nobody gave up on me, and nobody should be giving up on themselves. We have a responsibility and covenant as the woman nation to stand by each other. And let's do that no matter what skin colour we come from. We are all in this together.

Caroline Lavallée [00:19:38] Both men and women can experience stroke, but they're affected differently. Women often have caregiving responsibilities like caring for children. This can result in them feeling like they cannot take the time they need to care for themselves after a stroke. Mental health should be a priority for everyone recovering from a stroke. Having the support of loved ones and a community can help the person during recovery and let them feel like they can prioritize their own mental health. It is as vital a part of recovery as physical therapy.

Thank you, Lisa, for sharing your story and words of hope. And thank you, Dr. Tennen, for your expertise. Thank you for listening to season two of The Beat. We hope you found the season insightful,

inspiring and that you learned something new. If you enjoyed today's or any previous episodes, please rate and review the show.

Thanks for listening to The Beat and a special thanks to our donors for making this podcast possible. Subscribe now to stay informed, get inspired and rediscover hope. Don't forget to rate and review the podcast so we can reach even more listeners. Until next time. I'm Caroline Lavallée.