



## Adapting to challenging times

### Emma Gee is not one to shy away from a challenge.

After having a stroke in 2005 at the age of 24, Emma's future changed forever. Emma was an occupational therapist with a love for travel and fitness, but found herself in a situation where she had to learn to swallow, walk and talk again.

Emma has overcome many hurdles since her stroke 14 years ago with love, support and a positive mindset.

This includes establishing her own public speaking business and writing a memoir with dual insights as a therapist and patient. However, when COVID-19 first emerged, she was once again fearful about the future. Emma recognised parallels with the way she felt shortly after her stroke.

"I was walking at my local park and approached a woman I would normally chat to, but rather than acknowledge me or give me a wave from a distance she held up a gloved hand and kept walking. I know this was nothing personal, but it hurt." Emma said.

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# Welcome from Sharon McGowan, Stroke Foundation CEO

Just like you and your families, Stroke Foundation is adapting to the extraordinary times we are living in. We're here to support stroke survivors, their loved ones, carers and health professionals.

While COVID-19 is understandably top of mind for us all right now, it is imperative we continue to talk about the importance of calling triple zero (000) if you suspect a stroke. Our colleagues in the ambulance services report that calls are down some 20 percent which is very concerning as we know that a stroke still happens every nine minutes in Australia.

Please help us get this message out to the community by sharing the F.A.S.T (Face. Arms. Speech. Time.) message with your friends and family. Our ambulances and hospitals are safe and ready to treat all medical emergencies. Stroke is always a medical emergency. As you know, the faster someone gets treatment, the better chance they have of making a good recovery.

We know too that people who have had a stroke are at a higher risk of severe symptoms from coronavirus. Please stay at home as much as you can, wash your hands with soap and water often, and keep a distance of at least 1.5 metres between yourself and others. Staying healthy by eating well, getting regular exercise and sleeping well is more important than ever. Make sure to continue with your GP and specialist visits as usual.

Our StrokeLine health professionals are here on 1800 787 653 if you or your family have any concerns about stroke treatment and rehabilitation, work, mental health and wellbeing or anything else that arises during this time.

Stay safe and take care of yourself and your loved ones. Remember we are here for you. We will get through this together.



Sharon McGowan

*Continued from cover*

**"It took me back to my time in hospital when I lost the ability to communicate and I felt powerless and even devalued as a person."**

Stroke has taught Emma many life lessons and these are helping her cope with the many changes this pandemic has brought.

"While you can't turn the clock back, you can gradually reinvent yourself by accepting what you can't change and choosing to change what you can.

Establishing great support networks, engaging in meaningful things and adopting a positive outlook on life is vital," Emma said.

Recognising the need to navigate this confronting world event in her own way, Emma decided to blog about her experiences.

Emma said writing provided an outlet for processing her thoughts and moving towards acceptance.



"I didn't want COVID-19 to sway me from staying on track physically and mentally," Emma said.

"I was determined not to let it set me back in my conditioning or my ability to manage pain levels. I know many stroke survivors are also dealing with these issues. By blogging, it was also a way to let them (other stroke survivors) know they are not alone.

"I hope my blogs bring some comfort to others while helping me re-focus negative thoughts into a more positive mindset."

Emma has touched on topics like planning ahead in uncertain times to reduce stress in her blogs. This has included moving back in with her parents temporarily, scheduling additional telehealth meetings with her psychologist, subscribing to online yoga and planning more facetime chats with friends to stay connected.

"When you have other challenges in your life, social distancing and self-isolation is more difficult," Emma said.

**"I am honest about feeling unsettled and lost at times. That's only natural. I've felt frustrated and cheated that all of the hard work I have put into rehabilitation and into my advocacy and education roles could amount to nothing. All because we don't know when all of the restrictions will end."**

"It's easy to question 'what's the point?' when appointments and jobs and social activities come to an abrupt halt, but the alternative is spending my days in my pyjamas and I won't be doing that."

The inspirational Emma has found solace in simple things like taking time away from technology for silence to reflect, to actively listen to her breath and think about the things she is grateful for.

Emma has also literally changed her perspective by doing handstands!

"While I can't control the uncertain times we are living in, I can control aspects of my life that will improve my wellbeing," she said.

Emma has received positive feedback about her blogs from fellow stroke survivors, motivating her to keep writing.

**"It feels good when people can relate to my journey through this pandemic. I hope I can help others feel less isolated. Our mental and physical health are so important," Emma said.**

"I know it's tough, but I believe there will be positives to come from this situation, just as there was after my stroke.

"People will value a simpler life and be more resilient and present."

To read Emma's blogs visit [www.emma-gee.com](http://www.emma-gee.com)



# StrokeLine's top 3

**The StrokeLine team have been busy answering questions prompted by the changes to our lives caused by COVID-19. Here are our top 3 tips:**

## Keep your health and recovery ticking

Australia's health system is changing fast in response to COVID-19. Your GP and pharmacist have new ways to help you. Make sure to keep your regular GP appointments, phoning ahead if you have any concerns. You may find your GP offers you a telehealth appointment. Telehealth appointments are done over the phone or with video via the internet. Your pharmacist may be able to help with home delivery of prescriptions.

Allied health providers are also offering telehealth appointments. If you've been thinking of using your five Medicare-subsidised therapy sessions under a Chronic Disease Management Plan, talk to your GP about this. Allied health includes services like physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech pathologists and dietitians.

Finally, if you are online, check out the Australian Physiotherapy Association's new website. The Safe Exercise at Home website has been developed by physiotherapists with expertise in exercise and physical activity for older people and people with mobility limitations. Visit [safeexerciseathome.org.au](https://safeexerciseathome.org.au)

## Connect with others

There's nothing more powerful than connecting with people who just 'get it'. Stroke Recovery NSW is now running support groups online. They have a number of weekly groups covering a number of topics and these are varied from week to week.

If you're interested in becoming a member of Stroke Recovery NSW and joining one

of their groups, email [officemanager@strokensw.org.au](mailto:officemanager@strokensw.org.au). If you don't have access to email, call **1300 650 595**.

The Australian Aphasia Association has an online coffee group each Tuesday. Visit [aphasia.org.au](https://aphasia.org.au) and scroll down to Online Aphasia Group (Zoom).

If you need a pick-me-up, type **Sing to Beat Aphasia** into Google and check out this Brisbane group's weekly singing sessions.

Our stroke recovery website, EnableMe, is a great place to connect with others. Visit [enableme.org.au](https://enableme.org.au). If you need help accessing EnableMe, or with anything at all, call the StrokeLine team on **1800 787 653** 9am to 5pm (AEST).

## Reach out if you need help

With all of us experiencing changes and challenges, Australia's telephone support services have been boosted so they can help more people.

### **Beyond Blue 1300 22 4636 (24 hours)**

Everyone experiences the ups and downs of mental health. But what happens when it's down?

Beyond Blue provides practical help with depression and anxiety.

### **Lifeline 13 11 44 (24 hours)**

Lifeline can help if you are experiencing a personal crisis. They offer support and suicide prevention services.

### **Relationships Australia 1300 364 277**

Support services helping individuals, families and communities build positive and respectful relationships.

### **1800 Respect 1800 737 732 (24 hours)**

Violence and abuse can happen in any kind of relationship. It's never okay.

Whether it's learning about ways to make yourself safer or taking a step in a new direction, 1800 Respect can help.

**Mensline 1300 78 99 78 (24 hours)**

If you're struggling with your emotions, relationship or family problems, Mensline offers free professional support.

**Carer's Gateway 1800 422 737**

Connecting with their telephone counselling and coaching services will get you thinking about how you are going, how you'd like

things to be and what can help make that happen. Carer's Gateway can also help you plan for emergencies and access respite in an emergency. The emergency respite service is available 24 hours.

**Quitline 13 78 48**

Calling Quitline increases your chances of stopping smoking and staying stopped.

So take care of your health, stay connected and reach out if you need to. We are here on StrokeLine 9am to 5pm AEST, Monday to Friday. Call **1800 787 653**.

## Disability Information Helpline 1800 643 787

Do you have a question about COVID-19?  
Do you need help because things have changed?

The Disability Information Helpline is a new helpline providing information, counselling and outreach services for people with a disability.

You can call the Disability Information Helpline to talk about your concerns about COVID-19 if:

- › Your support worker has not turned up
- › Your provider has stopped services
- › It's hard for you to get food, groceries, medications or other essential items
- › Someone close to you has symptoms of coronavirus
- › You are feeling really upset
- › Anything else is worrying you.

The Disability Information Helpline is free, private and fact-checked.

Call the Helpline on **1800 643 787**.

The Helpline is available Monday to Friday 8am to 8pm (AEST) and Saturday and Sunday 9am to 7pm (AEST). It's not available on national public holidays.

If you are deaf or have a hearing or speech impairment, you can call the National Relay Service on **133 677**.

If someone you know requires support in another language, they can call the Translating and Interpreting Service on **131 450**.

The Disability Information Helpline is funded by the Australian Government.

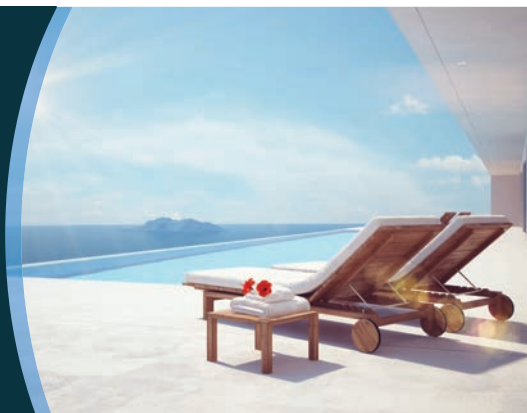
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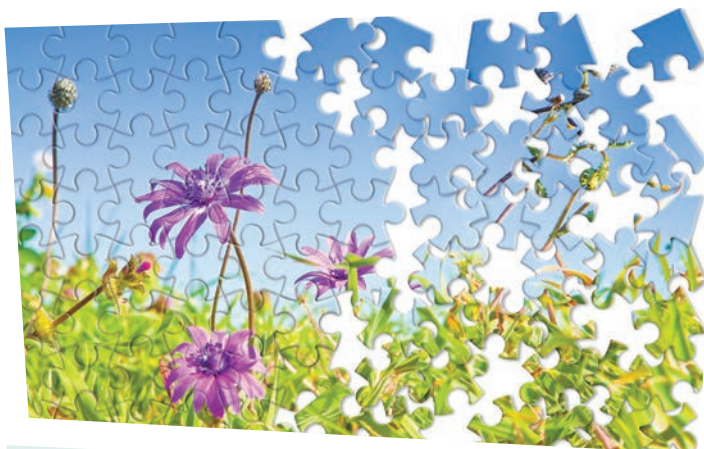
## What's life like right now?

Recently we asked stroke survivors on EnableMe if their stroke experience and recovery has influenced how they've approached life during COVID 19.

Adrian let us know that his focus on what he can control has helped him. "In hospital after my stroke I often had little, or no, control about what was going on around me, even if it was about me. The only thing I had complete control of during that time was what went on between my ears. Realising that really helped. COVID-19 can leave you feeling overwhelmed. I have minimised my risk of exposure as that is the only thing I have direct control over. Minimise risk, take care of what's going on between your ears, you can't do much else."



Brent noted: "I'm about 80% recovered after 18 months but I still feel the frustration of not being 100%. Every day is a reminder and it's a constant battle to stay positive and motivated when you can't do what you used to, well you can it's just slower. What's working for me is exercise, exercise and more exercise! I find when I don't exercise, I feel much worse."



Dean writes: "I usually go to a balance and movement class at my local community centre, but the class isn't running. Also, the only way I can get any cardio workout is in the community pool – it's also closed. Due to my balance and cognitive challenges, I can't walk far so I'm getting very unfit. I do some exercises at home with stretchy bands, but it's hard to stay motivated.

I really miss the social contact and conversation with other classmates and the exercise co-ordinator. Now I cope by listening to upbeat music while exercising and relaxing music to chill out. I also do a lot of jigsaw puzzles to get a sense of achievement."



Stacey told us her six-year-old son had a series of small strokes recently. "While my son's immune system is suppressed, we aren't panicking and his neurology team has encouraged him to be at school when he can. Since his diagnosis, he has become incredibly hygiene conscious and he's a little stunned that these practices aren't normal for everyone in the first place."



**Julie notes:** "Having a stroke makes me at high risk of complications from COVID-19, so I take a bit more care with hygiene and distancing. A perk I'm using is the priority order list for supermarket shopping! I have two dogs that I try to walk daily, but some days I can't manage it. I do find on occasion that not having simple choices is a bit difficult, but I'm surviving and I'm quite happy to be saying that in a pandemic."



Toni told us: "I've found this time to be interesting: a moment to observe, grieve, reflect and be thankful. I am meant to be in France celebrating my 30th wedding anniversary. I'm glad this all broke before we had started our trip as I would have hated being away from Australia."

"I am surprised at how easily I have adjusted to doing Pilates via Zoom – this has really demonstrated how telehealth can work. I miss my weekly art lessons but at least I can continue doing it at home and my teacher is just a message away if I need some advice."

"I believe we are so lucky to be living in a country that has responded to COVID-19 the way it has. Speaking to people, it seems to have brought a sense of calmness back to their lives as they're no longer rushing from one thing to another. I wonder what will happen when life returns to having all activities available again? Will people have re-assessed what is important? Do children need to have a daily activity to attend after school? Will those that have started family game nights continue them? And will the amazing sense of community that we saw for ANZAC Day infiltrate into our post-COVID-19 lives?"



# Towel challenge

**Stroke Foundation would like to thank the amazing Lee Carseldine and David Genat from Australian Survivor All Stars for their incredible fundraising effort.**

The pair created the Towel Challenge campaign to raise widespread awareness of stroke and to raise funds for stroke research. The initiative rallies Australians to put on a towel, take a black and white picture of themselves and post it on Instagram. While it is a little cheeky, it has engaged people from all walks of life and initiated important online conversations about stroke, with many people sharing their personal stories.

The campaign highlights the impact stroke can have on individuals, but also on their loved ones. This includes Lee himself whose father is a stroke survivor and mother sadly passed away from a stroke last year while he was filming Australian Survivor All Stars.

The campaign has raised more than \$46,000. If you haven't had a chance to check it out visit [www.towelchallenge.org.au](http://www.towelchallenge.org.au)



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- Belinda R.



  
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