

Post-stroke rehabilitation

# Stroke survivors need help renewing intimacy

Beyond physical recovery, many survivors need help rebuilding emotional and physical intimacy with their partners



**Akshita Nanda**  
Correspondent

A stroke survivor in her 30s was too shy to ask what type of contraception she could now safely use.

Another stroke survivor in her 70s felt rejected by her husband as he stopped hugging her.

Post-stroke rehabilitation here focuses on physical recovery, but many stroke survivors and their partners need help with renewing their emotional and physical intimacy as a couple. Yet they do not know how to ask for help, say experts working on this problem here.

Oct 29 is World Stroke Day, a time to raise awareness of the serious nature of strokes and what support is needed for survivors and their caregivers.

In Singapore, there were 8,846 incidences of stroke in 2020, according to the latest report from the Singapore Stroke Registry released in October 2022. Most stroke survivors are aged 60 and above, but the rate of incidence in younger age groups has increased since 2010.

Principal occupational therapist Shirlene Toh from Tan Tock Seng Hospital helped the stroke survivor in her 30s, who was advised not to use contraceptive pills by her doctor. Ms Toh introduced her to other birth control options.

"The first time I went to see her,

she was rather emotional," Ms Toh recalls. "She told me she was very grateful that there was someone with whom she could discuss her concerns. She didn't know who to talk to and didn't dare to ask the doctor."

Ms Toh, an expert in the sexual health of persons with disabilities, adds that the inability to express one's sexuality affects self-image, mental well-being and relationships.

For the couple in their 70s, she says: "When I told the husband that his wife missed his hugs and kisses, he was shocked and teared

up. When the husband went up and hugged his wife, my patient was very happy, and it was the brightest smile I had ever seen on her face."

Strokes happen when the flow of blood to the brain is restricted, or when a blood vessel ruptures.

Stroke survivors tend to deal with muscle weakness, cognitive issues and increased frailty. Relationships with loved ones change. Spouses become caregivers and the existing distribution of household duties is affected. This takes a toll on intimacy as the focus becomes caregiving rather

than a partnership or lover-like relationship.

Social taboos on discussing intimacy and sexuality leave people unsure of how to find help. Family physician Angela Tan is a certified intimacy coach and co-founder of the private relationship counselling service, Academy of Relationship & Sex. In October 2022, she led a workshop on post-stroke intimacy for Stroke Support Station (S3), a non-profit which supports the well-being of stroke survivors.

S3 has 300 members and 40 per cent of them are under the age of 60. A 62-year-old woman who attended Dr Tan's workshop at S3 and only wants to be known as Mrs A, was glad to find someone willing to talk about post-stroke changes in a relationship. Her 65-year-old husband had a stroke in 2012.

"It helped me accept that a one-handed hug while managing uncertain balance, and wonky kisses on the cheek are valid and enough to stay connected," she says.

"It also helped me reflect that in our interaction now as a family, we spend more time together, laugh more, listen more and hear more spontaneous words of affirmation and affection than before the stroke," she adds. "In many ways, we are closer than before."

Regardless of age, says Dr Tan, couples want to keep their connection with each other going.

"The intimacy I encourage is not about intercourse but about how you have moments of connection when your partner seems so far away," she says. Her clients relearn how to communicate their needs and work on different kinds of intimacy.

Physical intimacy can involve holding hands or giving back rubs and hugs. Dr Tan gives the example of a stroke survivor who preferred his wife's help with bathing, saying that she acted out of love, while for the children, it was a duty.

Another couple in their 50s rekindled their romance - emotional intimacy - with the wife ordering flowers when her incapacitated husband wanted to gift them to her.

Rethinking their roles and goals as a couple can also help. "It's the connection that two people have that allows them to recharge and continue with the relationship," says Dr Tan. "Love is hard work, it's an ongoing process. It can't happen spontaneously."

akshitan@sph.com.sg

## HOT BODS

Text and photos by Gavin Foo

### Charlene Chor, 28

Fixed income associate  
HEIGHT 165m  
WEIGHT 54kg

**EXERCISE REGIMEN** I do a mix of cardio and weightlifting about five to six times a week. I try to alternate between the two, so I have time to recover for my strength sessions by doing a day of cycling in between. But whenever I feel the physical burnout, I make sure to have a rest day or two to fully recharge before working out again.

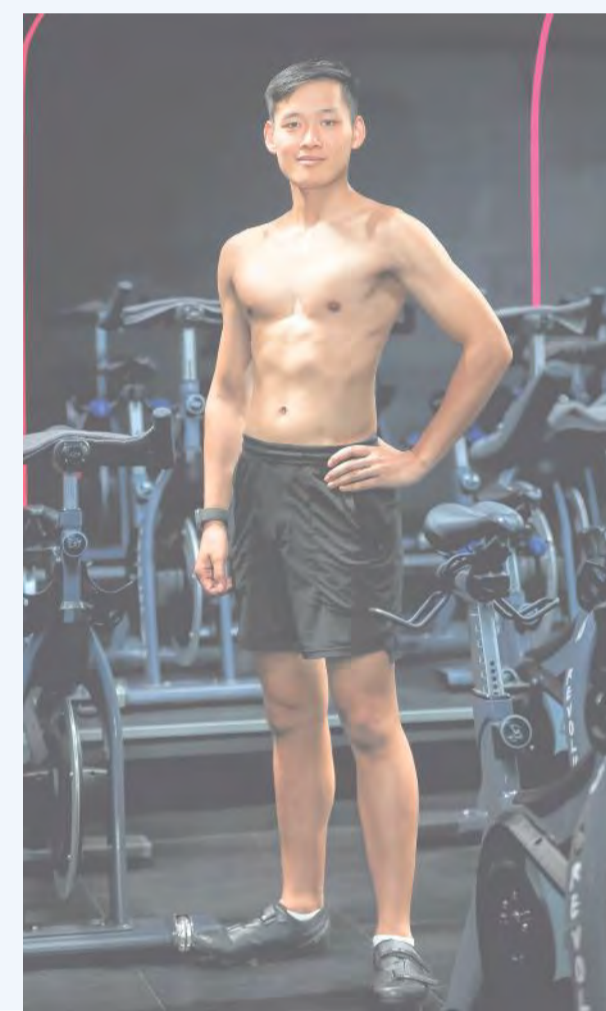
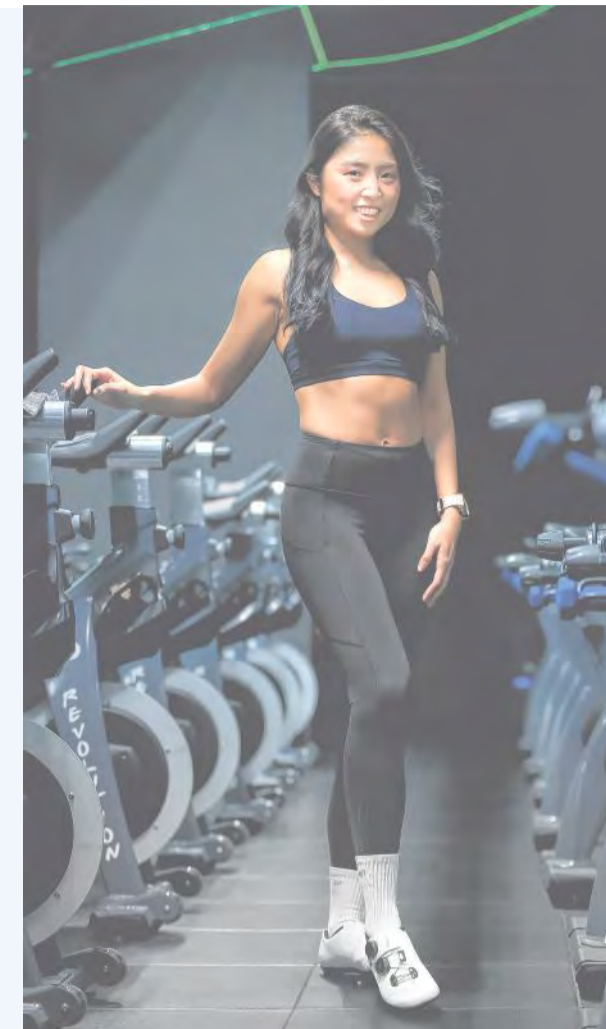
**DIET** For every meal, I aim to keep my protein on the higher side with eggs and lean meat since I exercise so much, and fill myself up with a mix of vegetables and whole grains. I am not a fan of sweet desserts, but I do eat some chocolates and treats when I feel like it. I also make sure to take my multivitamins, since it is hard to meet the daily micronutrients requirement with my busy schedule.

### Paul Pan, 24

Photographer/videographer  
HEIGHT 183m  
WEIGHT 74kg

**EXERCISE REGIMEN** I teach four to six spin classes a week and go to the gym two to three times a week for strength training. I make sure I get enough rest, as recovery is just as important as working out. I also go for yoga classes to stay flexible and nimble.

**DIET** I make sure there is a balance of carbs, protein and vegetables in my meals. I tend to eat more carbs to fuel my active lifestyle. I do not restrict myself from eating desserts or fried food, as I believe that anything consumed in moderation is acceptable.



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Time	Topic	Speaker
10.00am	Welcome Address	A/Prof Edmund Chiong
10.10am	PSA Testing: When and How do I do it?	Dr Karthik Thandapani Ng Teng Fong General Hospital
10.30am	Why My Flow is Slow	Dr Arshvin Kesavan
10.50am	Erectile Dysfunction in the Ageing Male	Dr Chia Jun Yang
11.10am	Why do I Keep Urinating at Night?	Dr Melissa Tay
11.30am	Q&A / End	

This programme is brought to you by the Department of Urology ([www.nuh.com.sg/urology](http://www.nuh.com.sg/urology)).  
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## Video games could boost children's brains: Study

WASHINGTON - Parents often worry about the harmful impacts of video games on their children, from mental health and social problems to missing out on exercise.

But a new large American study published in medical journal *Network Open* on Monday indicates there may also be cognitive benefits associated with the popular pastime.

Lead author Bader Chararani, an assistant professor of psychiatry at the University of Vermont, was naturally drawn to the topic as a keen gamer himself with expertise in neuroimaging.

Prior research had focused on detrimental effects, linking gaming with depression and increased aggression.

However, these studies were limited by their relatively small number of participants, particularly those involving brain imaging, said Dr Chararani.

For the new research, he and his colleagues analysed data from the large and ongoing Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development Study, which is funded by the National Institutes of Health.

They looked at survey answers, cognitive test results and brain images from about 2,000 nine- and 10-year-olds, who were separated into two groups: those who never played video games, and those who played for three hours or more a day.

This threshold was chosen as it exceeds the American Academy of Pediatrics' screen time guidelines of one or two hours of video games for older children.

Each group was assessed in two tasks.

The first involved seeing arrows pointing left or right, with the children asked to press left or right as fast as they could. They were also told to not press anything if they saw a "stop" signal to measure how well they could control their impulses.



Children in Brazil playing video games. A new large American study indicates there may be cognitive benefits associated with video gaming. PHOTO: AFP

**After using statistical methods to control for variables that could skew results... the team found that the video gamers performed consistently better on both tasks.**

In the second task to test their working memory, they were shown people's faces and then asked if a subsequent picture shown later on matched.

After using statistical methods to control for variables that could skew results, such as parental income, IQ and mental health symptoms, the team found that the video gamers performed consistently better on both tasks. As they performed the tasks, the children's brains were scanned using functional magnetic resonance imaging. Video gamers' brains showed more activity in regions associated

with attention and memory. "The results raise the intriguing possibility that video gaming may provide a cognitive training experience with measurable neurocognitive effects," the authors concluded in their paper.

Dr Chararani said, however, that it is not possible to know whether better cognitive performance drives more gaming, or is its result. The team hopes to get a more clear answer as the study continues, and as it looks again at the same children at older ages.

This will also help exclude other potential factors at play such as the

children's home environment, exercise and sleep quality. Future studies could also benefit from knowing what genres of games the children were playing - though, at age 10, children tend to favour action games such as *Fortnite* or *Assassin's Creed*. "Of course, excessive use of screen time is bad for overall mental health and physical activity," said Dr Chararani.

But he said the results showed video games might be a better use of screen time than watching videos on YouTube, which has no discernible cognitive effects. AFP

specialist	specialist	specialist
<p><b>Dr. GOH EYE SPECIALIST</b> Adj. Assoc. Prof Goh Kong Yong</p> <p>Cataracts, Lasers, Glaucoma, Diabetic Retinopathy, Retinal Disorders, Double Vision, Floaters, Child Myopia, Blur Vision, Dry Eyes</p> <p>Mount Elizabeth Novena Hospital #07-37 38, Irrawaddy Road, Singapore 329563 Tel: 6684 4140/ 9644 4830 (24 hr)</p>	<p><b>SPECIALIST PAIN INTERNATIONAL CLINIC</b> Dr Nicholas Chua Hai Liang, MBBS, MMed, Ph.D</p> <p>Special interests in complex spine pain, headaches, facial pain, nerve pain and severe cancer pain.</p> <p>Mount Elizabeth Novena Specialist Medical Centre 38 Irrawaddy Road, #07-22/23, Singapore 329563 Tel: (65) 6339 1880/ 8511 2119</p>	<p><b>SIOW NEUROLOGY HEADACHE &amp; PAIN CENTRE</b> Neurology and Pain Specialist</p> <p>Treatment for Headaches and Chronic Pain Disorders (Migraine, Tension Headache, Neck Pain, Fibromyalgia, Neuropathic and Myofascial Pain) Also for Strokes, Parkinson's Disease, Dementia, Epilepsy, Sleep Disorders, Muscle &amp; Nerve Disorders.</p> <p>Mount Alvernia Hospital, Medical Centre Bld. D, #08-59 820 Thomson Road, Singapore 574623 Tel: 6254 5289</p>
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