



3 REASONS FOR POST-STROKE FATIGUE

by Karen D. Sullivan, PhD, ABPP

There are three reasons post-stroke fatigue occurs:

1 Your immune system is working overtime to heal your brain at the cellular level:

When you sleep, your immune system can focus more on its job of clearing out the debris from the stroke. When we are awake, the immune system has to work on doing other things, like fighting against germs to which we are exposed. When we sleep, the immune system can work most efficiently. Remember, the driving force of our DNA is survival. The body and spirit are hardwired to get back to homeostasis or baseline. The brain is very aware that “something is wrong” and our best defense at getting us back to “normal” is our immune system. Scavenger cells called “microglia” attack damaged areas to remove foreign particles and clear away debris left by stroke damage, and stem cells are called in to help grow new cells. This process happens months after a stroke and would be expected to last longer in those strokes that involved bleeding.

2 You are spending more energy doing things now:

Everyday activities may take more energy than normal after a stroke, so you will get tired more quickly and need extra rest to re-energize.

3 You are processing emotional trauma:

A stroke is an emotionally traumatic event. One of the functions of sleep is to review recent life experiences against the backdrop of our whole lives. Two parts of the brain, the frontal lobes and hippocampus, literally compare notes all night long contrasting our history against our recent past until we figure out how to make sense of what has happened to us. This is especially true when a life experience involves anxiety and fear. Sleep is like free therapy!

