

# Study finds that nearly 30% of caregivers for severe stroke survivors experience psychological distress

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Stroke is an abrupt, devastating disease that instantly changes a person's life and has the potential to cause lasting disability or death. However,

the condition also has profound effects on the patient's loved ones—who are often called to make difficult decisions quickly.

A new study led by Michigan Medicine finds that [nearly 30%](#) of caregivers of [severe stroke](#) patients experience high levels of anxiety, depression or post-traumatic stress during the first year after the patient leaves the hospital.

The paper, "Long-term [psychological distress](#) among surrogate decision makers for Mexican American and non-Hispanic White patients with severe stroke," was published in *Neurology*.

"As physicians, we usually concentrate on our patients, and it is important to recognize that caregivers may have long-term consequences from a loved one's [severe illness](#)," said Lewis Morgenstern, M.D., professor of neurology, neurosurgery and [emergency medicine](#) at University of Michigan Medical School and professor of epidemiology at the U-M School of Public Health.

This research suggests that depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress are common among [family members](#) who make life and death decisions for their loved ones who are very sick. Post-traumatic stress may be more common in Mexican American caregivers, who made up about two-thirds of the study population.

The prospective study enrolled stroke survivors and their surrogates in Nueces County, Texas, who made decisions about life sustaining treatment after severe stroke between April 2016 and October 2020.

Between 17 and 28% of caregivers reported [high scores](#) on measures of psychological distress, which covered anxiety, depression and PTSD. Up to 16% of caregivers experienced all three conditions related to their role.

Post-traumatic stress was worse among Mexican American caregivers compared to white caregivers. Depression scores also improved more rapidly over time for white caregivers.

"There are important support systems for families in hospitals which include nurses, social workers and the patient's medical team," Morgenstern said.

"The role of family-centered care has received a lot of traction in recent years, and this research emphasizes how important that is."

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**More information:** Long-Term Psychological Distress Among Surrogate Decision Makers for Mexican American and Non-Hispanic White Patients With Severe Stroke, *Neurology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1212/WNL.0000000000207960](https://doi.org/10.1212/WNL.0000000000207960)

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