THE EXPERIENCE OF COUPLES WHEN ONE PARTNER HAS A STROKE AT A YOUNG AGE: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS
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Introduction
Stroke is the leading cause of disability worldwide, with approximately one quarter affecting those aged under 65 years (Warlow, 2007). Particular added strains for younger couples can include loss of employment and dependent children. Separation and divorce rates are also high (Daniel et al., 2009; Morris, 2011).

Stroke significantly affects both partners. Past research with partners has tended to use quantitative measures (e.g. questionnaire rating scales) rather than qualitative methods to obtain detailed accounts of their lives.

Method
• 8 couples took part in joint interviews about their lives and relationship following the stroke.
• Couples were recruited via Different Strokes, the Stroke Association and Facebook survivor-led support groups.
• Stroke survivors had been aged 55 years or under at the time of the stroke, which occurred at least one year ago.
• Interviews were recorded, typed up, and then analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al., 2009).

Aim - To explore the shared experience of couples when one partner has a stroke at a young age

Findings

Theme 1: “How’s this happened?” – Making sense of the stroke.
- Shock, disbelief: “It didn’t seem real; old people have strokes”.
- Striving to find causality to make sense of the stroke at a young age.
- Attributions of blame regarding health-related behaviours including sense of resentment from some partners.
- Surprise from other people which could lead to embarrassment and felt stigma.

Theme 2: “Is this what life is going to be like now?” – From partners to carer and ‘cared for’.
- Couples experienced a shift in responsibilities which changed their relationship roles from mutual partners to carer and ‘cared for’ – reluctance to accept from both sides.
- These role changes created tensions from both partners, including a sense of “doing everything” from partners and associated frustrations from the survivors.

Theme 3: “I lost being a man. I was a little boy being looked after all the time” – From partners to parent and child.
- Language indicated parent - child dynamic. e.g. “not allowed” (Survivor) and “I still tell him off” (Partner).
- Often motivated by partners’ urge to protect but often led to survivors feeling like children and subsequently, infantilised.
- Loss of role and relationship equality though maintaining these relationships.

Discussion & Clinical Implications
- Study highlighted the key significance of both partners in adapting to the chronic course of stroke.
- Stroke is a chronic illness with an abrupt start that clearly shocks both partners, significantly disrupting their life biographies, and triggering a sense-making process by both partners. CBT interventions for meaning-making could therefore be helpful for both partners.
- The findings highlight the need for both partners to adapt to their reciprocal identity and relationship role changes and therefore the vital importance of approaching the ‘couple’ as a focus for intervention.

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