



Royal Berkshire
NHS Foundation Trust

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Coping with traumatic experiences – a guide for families and friends

Understanding your feelings

This booklet is designed to help you understand your feelings following the admission of a loved one to ICU, and to help you cope with traumatic and difficult experiences.

First reactions

Often people feel numb and overwhelmed when unexpected life events happen. **This is a normal response to sudden traumatic events. When a loved one is admitted to ICU, the experience can be very overwhelming.**

Feelings and reactions you may be experiencing

- Feeling as though what has happened is not real
- Difficulties with sleeping and eating
- Difficulties to process new information, remember detailed information provided by the medical team

How you might feel following a traumatic event

- **Numbness:** you may feel as if you are cut off from your feelings
- **Anxiety:** you may feel anxious about things you were never worried about before
- **Sadness:** you may feel low in your mood, may no longer look forward to things, and feel little motivation to do your normal activities
- **Tiredness:** you may struggle with sleep and feel exhausted
- **Guilt:** you may feel you have not done enough to prevent your loved ones admission to hospital
- **Preoccupation:** you may experience reoccurring thoughts and images about the event that led to the admission of your loved one

You may experience some, all, or none of these symptoms. Your brain is trying to process the trauma and makes sense of what has happened. For many people, these symptoms lessen in intensity and then slowly fade in the weeks and months following the event.

For a small proportion of people, the symptoms can develop several months after the event has taken place.

If you do not experience a reduction in the intensity of these symptoms, you may benefit from therapeutic support to help your brain process the traumatic events.

Coping with your loved ones ICU admission

It is difficult to cope with a loved ones ICU admission and many people will struggle to eat enough, hydrate, and sleep. It is important that you look after your own body as much as possible, as the recovery journey for your loved one is often lengthy.

Try to avoid unhelpful coping mechanisms, such as drinking large amounts of alcohol or taking drugs. If you notice your own physical health deteriorating as a result of the stress of your loved ones admission, reach out to your GP as soon as possible.

You and other people

If you have positive and supportive relationships with your friends and family, let them know what has happened and ask for support. Sometimes, relatives can feel very overwhelmed by friends and family members asking for updates on your loved one. It can be helpful to nominate one family member to take on the task of communicating with everyone.

When family relationships are already strained, it may be helpful to make decisions about who should visit your loved one whilst they are on the ICU.

If you are employed, communicate early with your employer to inform them of the situation. You may need several weeks off and may require flexible working arrangements for some time.

Where to find help

If you have any questions about your Critical Care admission or about the Recovery after Critical Illness service, please do not hesitate to contact us on:

0118 322 7248 or email rbb-tr.raci@nhs.net

We also have a website that you may find helpful – either scan our QR code or use the link below.

www.readingicusupport.co.uk



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To find out more about our Trust visit www.royalberkshire.nhs.uk

Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.

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