



Coping with stress in hospital

A brain injury has an immediate effect on the family as they battle a wide range of emotions while coming to grips with the hospital system.

In this article

- Support in hospital
- Emotional reactions for the family
- Waiting for the prognosis - predicting the future
- Understanding medical information
- Coping strategies

Support in hospital

In the Intensive Care Unit (ICU), a registered nurse is always available and assigned to patients. Most hospitals should have a social worker available who can assist with information and coping with the hospital system.

Emotional reactions for the family

It is very stressful for families when a loved one acquires traumatic brain injury, stroke or similar brain disorder. A period of shock or disbelief is common at first. Many report a sense of unreality and being on "automatic" so it is hard to take information in. It can help to write everything down.

Everyone reacts differently - you may feel despair and blame yourself while another family member may be very angry and looking to blame others. Try to be supportive of each other despite the different ways everyone will cope.

Waiting for the prognosis - predicting the future

Predicting the level of recovery after a brain injury is difficult. Doctors are usually cautious about early prognosis. Family members and other visitors have the right to ask questions, express a point of view, and receive clear and timely information. Sometimes the answer may be "we don't know" and this may be the only honest answer available. Patience and persistence are required in the search for information.

Understanding medical information

Understanding medical terminology can be difficult, especially during times of stress. However, it is better to ask questions than not understand what is happening. If hospital staff use words you don't understand, ask them to explain it in a simpler way.

Some hospitals hold meetings with family members where you can ask questions. Write these down and record the answers. Examples include:

- What are your treatment goals?
- What is being done to achieve these goals?
- Do you have any idea of how much recovery can be expected?
- What ongoing effects from the brain injury are expected?
- How can the family help at this point in time?
- Should we be doing anything now to prepare for discharge?



Coping strategies

This is a very stressful and emotional time for family members.

Look after your own emotional and physical health so that you can provide support for the patient and each other in the weeks ahead. A common reaction is the family feeling they should be at the hospital as much as possible but remember to go home regularly and recharge your batteries for the long haul.

Tips for self-care include:

- Remember to eat well and get regular sleep
- Organize a rotating schedule for visits by family members
- Talk with others about your feelings and experiences
- Reduce other sources of stress in your life
- Accept support e.g. talking things over or help with housework
- Be aware others may deal with the situation very differently to you
- Maintain a sense of normality with routines and structure in your life
- Learn as much as you can about brain injury
- Ring your nearest Brain Injury Association about available support.