

## **Being on the Intensive Care Unit**

### **A psychological guide for patients & families**

Being on the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) can be very worrying and feel overwhelming at times. In this leaflet we outline some of the more common experiences that can occur, although as everybody has an individual experience of being in ICU, you may not relate to everything that is written here.

#### **For patients**

### **Changes in mood**

Many patients find their mood changes often during their stay on ICU and this is normal during critical illness. Your mood might be low at some points and this can happen for many different reasons. Adjusting to a critical event or illness can be an extremely challenging experience. It is normal to feel worried and anxious, particularly if your ICU stay was unplanned or longer than expected.

Please try to communicate with a member of staff if you have been feeling very low in mood or worried.

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### **Confusion and disorientation**

Some patients say that they experience a loss of sense of time whilst they are in ICU, or not knowing how many days or nights have passed. Some say their memories of being in the unit are hazy or fragmented, and some have no memories at all of coming to the unit.

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### **Hallucinations and paranoia**

Sometimes patients experience thoughts or images that are frightening, a bit like a nightmare but which can feel very real. This may include seeing or hearing things which aren't really there, or feeling as if people are trying to harm you. These reactions are often due to a combination of health problems, the recovery process and medication and improve once your physical condition recovers. These issues may cause you to sleep much more than usual or even feel agitated. If you have any unusual thoughts, images or

experiences during your stay please try to tell someone on the team so that we can help you.

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## **Communication difficulties**

Many patients say that one of the most frustrating aspects of being in ICU is being unable to speak and having limited ways to communicate. Being unable to talk can leave you feeling frustrated and isolated. In spite of this, staff will try and find a way to understand what you are saying and how you are feeling. We have a number of ways we can help you communicate, for example, by writing or typing, and we can also often understand a great deal through physical expressions and gestures such as nodding or shaking your head.

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## **Recovery and Rehabilitation**

The length of time it will take to recover generally depends on the severity and length of your illness. Some people find this process difficult, particularly if your mood has been low, but it is important that you participate as much as possible in your rehabilitation, for example physiotherapy, as what may seem like a small achievement at the time, is actually very valuable and a sign of good progress and recovery.

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## **Patient Dairies**

Some patients in ICU, particularly those who have stayed a bit longer, will be given diaries whilst they are on the unit; this diary is a record of your progress day to day and is designed to help you understand what has happened during your time in ICU. If you have a diary, your nurse and members of the team will write in it daily so that you have an account of events during your stay. You can also have photographs taken and placed in your diary. Many patients find this helpful as it enables them to understand what has actually happened to them. You and your family members can also write in the diary. The diary will be offered to you when you leave the unit.

<h2><b>For families</b></h2>
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### **Supporting families**

As a partner or family member, you might also experience different feelings. Common ones are:

- Anger
- Guilt
- Hopelessness
- Frustration
- Sadness
- Shock

All of these feelings are normal reactions to the stress of having someone you care about being very unwell.

Many family members also say they feel drained and exhausted during this time. It is important to look after yourself so that you can support your relative in ICU as much as possible. Psychological support is available to family members of patients in the ICU. You might want to talk to us about your relative's illness, your thoughts and emotions about your experience, or about how to talk to other family members about the situation.

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### **Things which may help your relative**

As a family member, you can help your relative by visiting and keeping them in touch with their life outside of the unit.

Some patients have found the following things helpful:

- Photos, pictures or reminders of people at home
- Music which is relaxing and calm
- Talking about news from home, even when communication is difficult
- Keeping a written record or diary during their stay in ICU
- Make entries in the patient diary if they have one on the unit
- Activities that the patient enjoys that might be suitable to do in a hospital e.g. reading books, puzzle books, crosswords, DVDs etc.

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### **Requesting psychological help**

Psychological support is available for all patients on ICU. If communication is difficult, we might talk to your family members with you to get some more information.

You can ask a member of staff involved in your care if you would like to see us and they can contact us.

Psychological medicine service

- Royal Brompton Hospital Tel. 0207 351 8060
- Harefield Hospital Tel: 01895 823737 ext 5259