

Psychological Difficulties and ICU: A resource sheet for patients, family and friends

Being on an intensive care unit (ICU) is an unusual and difficult experience for many people. Psychological difficulties are common in ICU patients, their family and friends. They may not happen but can be expected.

Psychological difficulties may not last long and may go away on their own. However, they could continue long after leaving ICU and need specialist mental health treatment.

There are lots of ways to help reduce the impact of any psychological difficulties relating to an ICU stay. This includes learning what to look for and where to access support. This leaflet is designed to help you do that.

Psychological difficulties related to ICU can include:

- Worry, stress and anxiety
- Agitation, frustration and anger
- Negative thoughts and low mood
- Low motivation and low energy
- Loss of interest in things or people
- Memory issues
- Bad dreams or nightmares
- Difficulties with sleep
- 'Foggy brain', struggling to concentrate and confusion
- Seeing, hearing or experiencing strange things, or having vivid hallucinations
- Behaving in a way that is unexpected or out of character
- Distress from traumatic or difficult experiences
- Experiencing past traumatic experiences as if they are happening right now (these can be called 'flashbacks')
- A mixture of the experiences above, which might be understood as ICU delirium or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).



Why some people experience psychological difficulties

Everybody is different but psychological difficulties can happen to any one of us as a result of time on ICU. This might be because of:

- The impact that the healthcare and ICU experiences are having on your life and others
- You have changed how you think about yourself, other people or the future
- Other things may have happened to you in the past, or several issues have all now added up
- You are finding it challenging to cope with, or make sense of events and difficult experiences.

Reasons for psychological difficulties related to ICU

Some people enter ICU with existing mental health issues. Others develop psychological difficulties as a result of being in ICU. Reasons for this can include:

- The nature of the illness or the reason for being in intensive care
- Complications, such as infections or unexpected events
- The healthcare treatment and medication that is provided
- Sedation and sedative medication
- The intensive care environment itself
- Poor sleep or diet
- Feeling out of control or not knowing what is going to happen
- Experiences of loss or grief
- Difficulties adjusting to health issues, diagnoses, care packages, mobility difficulties, visible scars or injuries, amongst many other reasons
- Worries about the future, other people, pets, finances, work/study, caring responsibilities, and other things
- Traumatic events before, during or after intensive care.

Talking about your experiences and seeking help

If you are experiencing psychological difficulties related to ICU, or have concerns about someone who is, it is important to talk to someone you trust about this. You can talk to a member of the ICU team or other healthcare staff about psychological difficulties related to ICU (e.g. GP or ward staff). The healthcare staff can consult on your behalf with Clinical Psychologists and other mental health professionals, if helpful. Discussions about psychological difficulties can be confidential. If you are worried about confidentiality, the healthcare staff can give you advice about this.

Some patients have an ICU diary started for them. ICU diaries are for staff and visitors to record what happens on ICU for the patient. ICU diaries have been found to be helpful for making sense of ICU experiences and reducing possible psychological difficulties after ICU. Please ask one of the ICU team about diaries.



Further sources of information and support

Below we have included a range of sources for further information and support. We have included weblinks and QR codes to help you access the pages using smartphone cameras (open the camera app, hover the camera over the QR code and a link will appear on the screen).

Experiences of other people - Healthtalk.org

See and hear other people (patients and their families) share their ICU experiences on film. This webpage will link you directly to the ICU resources. It includes sections on 'Sleep, dreams and hallucinations in ICU'; 'Emotional experiences in ICU'; 'Making sense of what happened'



<https://healthtalk.org/intensive-care-patients-experiences/overview>

Delirium Information Sheet - ICU Steps

This information sheet will explain what delirium is, what causes it, and what might help patients with delirium.



<https://icusteps.org/assets/files/information-sheets/delirium.pdf>

Videos on psychological problems and ICU - Royal Cornwall Hospitals NHS

Helpful and informative videos are provided at the bottom of this webpage to consider memory loss, stress and anxiety, nightmares, poor sleep and common psychological problems after ICU.



www.royalcornwall.nhs.uk/services/critical-care

Samaritans support charity

A charity that is available day or night, for anyone who is struggling to cope or who needs someone to listen without judgement or pressure. Samaritans are able to give people ways to cope, and the skills to be there for others. They have information and leaflets on their website as well as an email and helpline.



www.samaritans.org

Helpline: Freephone 116 123



Mental health and wellbeing information sheets and self-help tools - CNTW NHS Foundation Trust

Includes information on anger, panic, bereavement, anxiety, sleep problems etc.



<https://web.ntw.nhs.uk/selfhelp/>

The Mental Health Charity - Mind

Information and support relating to a range of mental health and psychological wellbeing difficulties.



<https://www.mind.org.uk/>

RUH Chaplaincy

Provides spiritual and religious care to all patients, families/carers. They are able to offer assistance to make appropriate contact for people of all faiths. The team comprises four chaplains and several honorary chaplains and spiritual care volunteers.



www.ruh.nhs.uk/patients/advice_and_support/chaplaincy/index.asp
01225 824039

RUH Critical Care Follow-up Clinic

The clinic offers medical, nursing, and psychological and physiotherapy support for patients who are having ongoing difficulty recovering from their period of critical illness, 2-3 months following discharge from the unit.

01225 825707 (11:00-13:00 Mon- Fri) email: ruh-tr.criticalcarefollowup@nhs.net

Royal United Hospitals Bath NHS Foundation Trust
Combe Park, Bath BA1 3NG
01225 428331 www.ruh.nhs.uk

Please contact the Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) if you require this leaflet in a different format, or would like to feedback your experience of the hospital. Email ruh-tr.pals@nhs.net or telephone 01225 825656/ 826319.