



At the hospital: Helping my child cope

Traumatic stress symptoms are common after a serious illness, injury, or hospitalisation. Even though it is your child who is ill or injured, your whole family can be affected. It's normal for you, as a parent or carer, to feel overwhelmed or unprepared to help your child (or yourself) cope.

Traumatic stress symptoms can include:

- being easily upset or angry
- feeling anxious, jumpy, or confused
- being irritable or uncooperative
- feeling empty or numb.

Things in the hospital that can be traumatic for children:

- being left alone or separated from siblings and pets
- being in pain or going through painful procedures, like needles
- seeing an injury to their body
- changes in appearance – hair loss, weight gain/loss, surgical scars etc.
- being exposed to medical equipment that looks or sounds scary
- thinking that being in the hospital is a punishment
- seeing other hurt or other sick kids
- not knowing what is going to happen
- being afraid of dying.

The hospital can be traumatic for parents too:

- Having a sick, injured, or hospitalised child often results in feelings of frustration, sadness, worry, or helplessness.
- It is a stressful time when relationships with medical staff take priority, and other important relationships and activities get interrupted or put on hold.
- Having a sick or injured child often challenges parents' innermost beliefs about the safety of their children.

Many parents and caregivers of hospitalised children tell us that:

- they worry about what will happen to their child, even though they don't always show it
- they feel unprepared to talk with their sick or injured child (or their other children) about feelings, fears, and questions.

Information for parents and caregivers

There are professionals at the hospital who have experience helping other parents and caregivers in your situation. If you are upset, have questions about how to help your child, or just need to talk, please seek out someone at the hospital who is available to help you and your family. This might be a social worker, a chaplain, or a mental health professional. Also, read the tips below to help your child cope while at the hospital.

Ways you can help your child cope while in hospital

1. **You are the best person to help your child.** Although it may be difficult at times, try to be calm and reassuring. Give frequent hugs and praise. Hold your child's hand during tests and procedures, and distract your child with stories and pictures.
2. **Be patient with your child.** Children's reactions can include crying, temper tantrums, whining, clinging and acting out in frustration. These feelings and behaviours are common but temporary. If your child's behaviour is becoming unmanageable, it's okay to set rules and limits like you would at home.
3. **Help your child understand what is happening.** Use simple words that he or she can understand. If your child needs to go through a painful procedure, be honest about the fact that it may hurt but also explain its purpose is to help them feel better.
4. **Allow your child to talk about worries or feelings about being in the hospital.** Remind your child that it's okay to be scared or to cry, but also help them talk about their feelings. Younger children are often better at expressing their feelings through play, drawing, or story-telling. Listen to your child and help your child understand that these feelings are normal.
5. **Talk about your feelings together.** Children often know more than they admit, but they can easily misinterpret information or other people's feelings. Ask questions to figure out what they know and what they imagine. Reassure your child that he or she has not done anything wrong.
6. **Help your child see the hospital staff as helpers.** Remind your child that the staff has a lot of experience helping children feel better. Encourage your child to participate by asking his or her own questions of the doctors or nurses. It's important for you as a parent to have accurate information, so ask your own questions too.
7. **Young children are often more affected by being left alone.** Have a family member or familiar adult stay with your child as much as possible. Always tell your child when you are leaving, why, and when you will be back.
8. **Take care of yourself.** If you are worried, upset, or not getting sleep, it will be harder to help your child. Don't be afraid to ask friends or family for help. Talk about your worries with other adults, such as family, friends, a counsellor, pastoral care representative or your doctor.

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Contact a qualified healthcare professional for any medical advice needed.

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