



At the hospital: Helping my teen cope

Traumatic stress symptoms are common after a serious illness, injury, or hospitalisation. Even though it is your teen who is ill or injured, your whole family can be affected. At first, as a parent or carer you might not feel prepared to help your teen (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 teens:

- uncertainty about what might happen next
- being in pain or going through painful procedures
- having a noticeable injury or being permanently injured
- fear about what others will think of them being sick or in the hospital
- fear of dying

The hospital can be traumatic for parents too

- Having a sick, injured or hospitalised teen often results in feelings of frustration, sadness, worry or helplessness.
- For parents, it is a stressful time when relationships with medical staff take priority, and other important relationships and activities get interrupted or put on hold.
- For both parents and teens, the hospital experience often challenges innermost beliefs about safety, vulnerability, and fairness.
- In addition, many parents feel unprepared to talk with their sick or injured teens (or their other children) about feelings, fears, and questions.

Special information for parents and caregivers of teens

There are professionals at the hospital who have experience helping parents, carers and teens. If you are upset, have questions about how to help your teen, or just need to talk, please seek out one of the family resources available at the hospital. This might be a social worker, a chaplain, or another mental health professional. It might be helpful to encourage your teen to talk to someone as well. Also, read the other side of this handout for tips on helping your teen cope while in hospital.

Ways you can help your teen cope while at hospital

- 1. You are the best person to help your teen.** Although it may be difficult at times, try to be calm and reassuring. Give frequent hugs and praise. Remind your teen that the medical staff has a lot of experience helping other sick and injured teens.
- 2. Be patient with your teen.** Intense feelings are common but they are only temporary reactions to the hospital experience. Remind your teen that it's okay to be confused, angry, or scared and to talk about his or her feelings. Recognise that your teen may want to appear 'grown up', while also feeling afraid and in need of your comfort and support.
- 3. Be honest with your teen.** Teens want information, even if they don't ask. If your teen needs to go through a painful procedure, be honest about the fact that it may hurt, but also explain that its purpose is to help them feel better. The more your teen knows what to expect, the more comfortable they will be.
- 4. Include your teen in medical discussions when possible.** Encourage your teen to ask their own questions of the doctors and nurses. Help your teen participate in decision making by planning how to cope with pain and stressful procedures in advance.
- 5. Talk about your feelings together.** Teens often know more than they admit, but can sometimes misinterpret information or other people's feelings. Gently ask questions to learn what your teen thinks and believes, and share your thoughts, feelings, and reactions.
- 6. Teens are self-conscious and will especially worry about how they will look and fit in with others, and about their privacy.** Reassure your teen, but be honest. Find ways of respecting and supporting your teen's privacy. Allow your teen to do some things on their own with regard to care.
- 7. Help your teen stay connected with old friends, as well as make new friends.** Ask the medical staff to help you introduce your teen to others in hospital with similar experiences.
- 8. Take care of yourself.** Your teen can tell if you are worried, upset, or not sleeping, which will make it harder on everyone. Don't be afraid to ask family or friends 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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