Wrightington, Wigan and Leigh Teaching Hospitals
NHS Foundation Trust

Looking after yourself - Advice for family, friends and carers

Version number: **2**
Last modified date: **12th November 2026**

Looking After Yourself: Advice for Family, Friends, and Carers

Patient Information

ICU Department

- Author ID: CM
- Leaflet ref: ICU 004
- Version: 2
- Leaflet title: Looking after yourself: Advice for family, friends and carers
- Date Produced: March 2025
- Expiry Date: March 2027

Coping with a Friend or Relative in Intensive Care

Having a friend or relative on the ICU can be a really stressful time. People can have a range of reactions to this, all of which are normal. People talk of feeling:

- Anxious
- Tearful
- Angry
- Guilty
- Sad
- Numb
- Helpless
- Frustrated

These are all normal responses to having someone close staying in Intensive Care. Sometimes these feelings may be difficult to control. You might find that you cry easily, feel shaky or find it difficult to think about anything else. These can all be frightening reactions, especially if you are not used to feeling like this. Remember, these are normal reactions and not a sign of your inability to cope or of you going mad. Talking to someone about how you're feeling may help give you some relief.

Physical Signs of Stress

Sometimes our bodies can react to stress, which can be very scary to experience. Physical signs of stress can include:

- Increased heart rate
- Dry mouth
- Difficulty concentrating
- Dizziness
- Shaking
- Indigestion
- Muscular tension or pain
- Headaches

These are all reminders to look after yourself in this difficult time.

Looking After Yourself

There is no right or wrong way of coping, but here are some ideas that may be helpful:

- What has helped you during difficult times in the past? It may be chatting to a friend, asking for help, finding out new information.
- Give yourself breaks and make sure you have time for yourself. This is especially important if you are looking after other family members during this difficult time.
- Do not feel like you have to be at the hospital all of the time, it's important to rest.
- Take some time to relax or to reduce tension.
- Try and make sure you are sleeping properly with a relaxing bedtime routine. Spend some time trying to wind down - have a bath, practise yoga or meditation.
- If you are unable to sleep, spend some time in a quiet place.
- Use support that is available to you such as family, friends, and colleagues. You may want someone to come with you to the hospital or stay with you at this time.
- Tell your support what you need from them - they may not know the best way to help and support you.
- Remember to eat and drink - you may not feel hungry, but it's important to keep your energy levels up.

Some people find it helpful to write in their relative or friend's Intensive Care Diary as a way of coping and communicating with their loved one. Ask the nurse if this is something you would like to do.

Support for You

Sometimes when difficult things happen, we want to bottle them up. This is not always helpful and talking to friends and family can help you cope with your emotions. They may need you to tell them how they can help you. If you have any questions, however silly you think they may sound, please ask the nurse caring for your relative. Hospital can be a confusing place and you may feel better if you know what is happening.

If you wish to speak to the medical staff, the nurse can help arrange this. If you feel you need to speak to someone about how you are coping, the nurse can help you arrange to meet the Intensive Care Psychologist. They can offer you a safe space for you to talk and advice on how to cope during this difficult time.

The hospital chaplains are also available if you would like someone to talk to. You don't have to be religious or of a particular faith to see them. The chaplain is located on the first left corridor through the Main Entrance. Alternatively, you can ask the nurse at the bedside

to contact the chaplaincy for you.

A Simple Breathing Exercise

This calming breathing technique for stress, anxiety, and panic takes just a few minutes and can be done anywhere. You can do it standing up, sitting in a chair that supports your back, or lying down. Make yourself as comfortable as you can. Loosen any clothes that restrict your breathing. Let your arms hang naturally or rest palms facing up. Have your feet planted to the floor if you're sat down or standing up:

1. Let your breath flow as deep down into your belly as is comfortable, without forcing it.
2. Try breathing in through your nose and out through your mouth.
3. Breathe in gently and regularly. Some people find it helpful to count steadily from 1 to 5. You may not be able to reach 5 at first.
4. Then let it flow out gently, counting from 1 to 5 again, if helpful.
5. Keep doing this for at least 5 minutes.



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