

What To Do When You Cannot Visit A Loved One In Hospital

Having a relative, friend or other loved one in hospital is a worrying time. It can be even more worrying when you are unable to visit them.

Restrictions have been put onto visitors due to Covid-19. This is to protect patients, families, friends and staff. This is incredibly difficult for all involved. One of the hardest things about this situation is the uncertainty, especially as things are changing around you every day. This lack of certainty will often cause anxiety. It is normal and understandable if this is how you feel.

The information written here has been put together, to help you manage some of the difficult feelings you might be having.

Emotions

At this time, it is normal to experience many different emotions. These may change several times throughout the day. You may feel:

- Anxious
- Upset
- Afraid
- Stressed
- Angry
- Low in mood
- Uncertain

It is OK to feel the way you do. Allow yourself to feel what you are feeling.

Different people will feel different things at different times. You might feel as you normally would at times, or laugh and experience some happiness. This is OK too.

Changes

Alongside difficult emotions, you may notice changes in how you physically feel, or how you function from day to day. You may experience some of the following:

- Difficulty sleeping, or sleeping more than usual
- Change in appetite – either a loss of appetite or an increase in appetite
- Arguing more with others
- Becoming more irritated with others
- Low motivation to do activities
- Difficulty concentrating on tasks
- Feeling agitated and unable to sit still
- Worried thoughts about the future, e.g. “what if...”

You may experience other changes that are not on this list. That is OK too.

Things you can do to

As challenging as the situation is, there are some things you can do to look after your own wellbeing. Trying to do the following things can help you to manage difficult emotions:

- Maintain a consistent routine. Have a set time to wake up and go to bed each day. Try to get washed and dressed as you would normally
- Eat 3 balanced meals a day, and drink plenty of water
- Limit the amount of alcohol you drink, or substances you might take
- Get some fresh air each day. Go on a walk if you can, maintaining social distancing, or spend some time in your garden if you have one
- Keep in contact with other friends or family, using phone calls, text messages or social media. Video call them if you can. You could have regular calls at certain times of the day, to help you keep a routine
- Consider reducing the time you spend watching the news or reading it online. We might do this to try and feel in control, but sometimes it can become unhelpful. Check for important updates once or twice a day, at set times
- If you are working, speak to a manager who may be able to put support in place for you
- Set aside time each day to do things that help you to relax and relieve stress.

You may also have useful coping strategies that you have previously used in difficult situations. If these were helpful, you can use these coping strategies again now.

Some other coping strategies are suggested on the next page. You may wish to try some of these, to see if they can help you too.

Managing updates from the hospital

The medical team who is looking after your loved one may have agreed with you a set time that they will call you, to provide an update. More likely, they will be providing updates when they are able to, with no set time agreed. This will add to any feelings of uncertainty you may have. You may be the only person getting this update, and may have to share it with other family members or friends. This might feel anxiety provoking. Here are some things you can do to manage this situation:

- Make sure your phone is switched on, and somewhere you receive good signal. Keep it on loud so that you will always hear your phone ringing
- Keep a notepad and pen somewhere easy to reach. If you feel able to, during the phone call you can then take brief notes, or you can do this just after the phone call too. This will help you to remember what was said on the call, so that you can remind yourself later, or so that you can share important details with others
- If you are sharing information about your loved one with others, agree a set time in the day that you will call them to provide an update. This might prevent you from receiving lots of calls or texts during the day asking if you have had an update yet. These questions might make you feel more anxious, but this can help you manage these questions.

Coping strategies

When you are feeling anxious, it can be helpful to turn your attention away from difficult thoughts, memories or worries, and focus on the present moment. The following coping strategies can be used to help you focus on this.

During a situation that feels uncertain and out of your control, as things perhaps do now, it can also help to focus on the things that are in your control right now. There will be some things that are within your control, such as the things mentioned above (having a routine, limiting the news, talking to family / friends). Focusing on these, and reminding yourself that you do have some control, can be helpful.

The following strategies have been taken from TherapistAid.com

5-4-3-2-1 Technique

Using the 5-4-3-2-1 technique, you will purposefully take in the details of your surroundings using each of your senses. Strive to notice small details that your mind would usually tune out, such as distant sounds, or the texture of an ordinary object.



What are 5 things you can see? Look for small details such as a pattern on the ceiling, the way light reflects off a surface, or an object you never noticed.



What are 4 things you can feel? Notice the sensation of clothing on your body, the sun on your skin, or the feeling of the chair you are sitting in. Pick up an object and examine its weight, texture, and other physical qualities.



What are 3 things you can hear? Pay special attention to the sounds your mind has tuned out, such as a ticking clock, distant traffic, or trees blowing in the wind.



What are 2 things you can smell? Try to notice smells in the air around you, like an air freshener or freshly mowed grass. You may also look around for something that has a scent, such as a flower or an unlit candle.



What is 1 thing you can taste? Carry gum, candy, or small snacks for this step. Pop one in your mouth and focus your attention closely on the flavors.

Categories

Choose at least three of the categories below and name as many items as you can in each one. Spend a few minutes on each category to come up with as many items as possible.

Movies	Countries	Books	Cereals
Sports Teams	Colors	Cars	Fruits & Vegetables
Animals	Cities	TV Shows	Famous People

For a variation on this activity, try naming items in a category alphabetically. For example, for the fruits & vegetables category, say "apple, banana, carrot," and so on.

Body Awareness

The body awareness technique will bring you into the here-and-now by directing your focus to sensations in the body. Pay special attention to the physical sensations created by each step.

1. Take 5 long, deep breaths through your nose, and exhale through puckered lips.
2. Place both feet flat on the floor. Wiggle your toes. Curl and uncurl your toes several times. Spend a moment noticing the sensations in your feet.
3. Stomp your feet on the ground several times. Pay attention to the sensations in your feet and legs as you make contact with the ground.
4. Clench your hands into fists, then release the tension. Repeat this 10 times.
5. Press your palms together. Press them harder and hold this pose for 15 seconds. Pay attention to the feeling of tension in your hands and arms.
6. Rub your palms together briskly. Notice and sound and the feeling of warmth.
7. Reach your hands over your head like you're trying to reach the sky. Stretch like this for 5 seconds. Bring your arms down and let them relax at your sides.
8. Take 5 more deep breaths and notice the feeling of calm in your body.

Mental Exercises

Use mental exercises to take your mind off uncomfortable thoughts and feelings. They are discreet and easy to use at nearly any time or place. Experiment to see which work best for you.

- Name all the objects you see.
- Describe the steps in performing an activity you know how to do well. For example, how to shoot a basketball, prepare your favorite meal, or tie a knot.
- Count backwards from 100 by 7.
- Pick up an object and describe it in detail. Describe its color, texture, size, weight, scent, and any other qualities you notice.
- Spell your full name, and the names of three other people, backwards.
- Name all your family members, their ages, and one of their favorite activities.
- Read something backwards, letter-by-letter. Practice for at least a few minutes.
- Think of an object and "draw" it in your mind, or in the air with your finger. Try drawing your home, a vehicle, or an animal.

Deep Breathing



Deep Breathing: a relaxation technique performed by purposefully taking slow, deep breaths. When practiced regularly, deep breathing provides both immediate and long-term relief from stress and anxiety.

How Deep Breathing Works

During periods of anxiety, the body triggers a set of symptoms called the **stress response**. Breathing becomes shallow and rapid, heart rate increases, and muscles become tense. In opposition to the stress response is the **relaxation response**. Breathing becomes deeper and slower, and the symptoms of anxiety fade away. Deep breathing triggers this response.

Instructions

Sit back or lie down in a comfortable position. Close your eyes, if you would like to do so. When you're learning, try placing a hand on your stomach. If you breathe deeply enough, you should notice it rising and falling with each inhalation and exhalation.



- 1 Inhale.** Breathe in slowly through your nose for 4 seconds.
- 2 Pause.** Hold the air in your lungs for 4 seconds.
- 3 Exhale.** Breathe out slowly through your mouth for 6 seconds.
Tip: Pucker your lips, as if you are blowing through a straw, to slow your exhalation.
- 4 Repeat.** Practice for at least 2 minutes, but preferably 5 to 10 minutes.

Tips

- If it isn't working, *slow down!* The most common mistake is breathing too fast. Time each step in your head, counting slowly as you do so.
- Counting out your breaths serves a second purpose. It takes your mind off the source of your anxiety. Whenever you catch your mind wandering, simply return your focus to counting.
- The times we use for each step are suggestions, and can be lengthened or decreased. Lengthen the time if it feels natural to do so, or decrease the time if you feel discomfort.