

Top tips for relatives/ supporters whilst your loved one is in hospital following an acquired brain injury (ABI)

When someone close to you is admitted to hospital with an acquired brain injury, you may feel a whole range of emotions – some have described this time as an emotional rollercoaster and relatives often talk of feeling:

- Frightened
- Bewildered
- Shocked
- Powerless
- Traumatized
- Disbelieving
- Overwhelmed
- Hopeful
- Sad
- Angry
- Exhausted
- Alone

and so many more.....



How can I cope?

- First of all, **accept your feelings**- they are legitimate. You will probably find yourself moving between emotions hour by hour and sometimes minute by minute at this time and this is normal.
- **Try to stay grounded** in the moment and deal with one day at a time. It is all too easy to leap ahead with worries and assumptions about the future. Try to deal with certainty, rather than wasting energy on 'what if's'.
- **Don't expect each day to be the same**. When someone is recovering from a brain injury, progress may be fast, or it may be slow, but it is almost never smooth and linear. Three steps forward may lead to one step back, especially if your relative is fatigued. This is normal.
- **Ask questions** and write them down as they occur to you. Whilst at the bedside, you will think of lots of questions you would like answered by the medics, only to forget them as soon as they arrive! It can be helpful to have a friend or another relative with you when you see the Doctor, so that they can pick up anything you have missed – your mind will be so full at the moment. Don't be alarmed if the medics are not able to discuss outcomes and

timescales. Unlike many other injuries, brain injury really is unique to every individual and recovery pathways can be difficult to predict.

- **Look after yourself.** Hospitals can be hot, dehydrating and draining. Make sure you are taking time out to eat, drink and have a break from the bedside. Where several relatives can visit, share the visits to give each of you recovery time and to ensure that your loved one does not become overwhelmed. Talk to others about how you are feeling. Bottling up your fears and anxieties will not help.
- Often, **friends and family want to offer practical help at times like this.** **Let them** and don't be afraid to direct them to what is most helpful to you. Ten lasagnes on the doorstep may be less helpful than a lift to the hospital, a grass cut or assistance putting the bins out.
- **Don't forget the children!** If you have children, however old they are, there is sometimes a temptation to shield them from what has happened. Generally, children become less anxious when they are given some age appropriate information about what is happening. Don't feel you have to put a brave face on – children can repress emotion and feel it is not okay to be sad if you hide all of your feelings away. Let Schools know what is going on and they can help to support your child through this.
- **Don't underestimate the importance of your own expert knowledge of your loved one.** You are likely to meet a range of staff in hospital who will all be making their own assessments of your relative (Occupational, Physio, Speech and Language therapists). Knowing what is normal for them will help the therapists plan a rehab schedule which will work best for them.
- **Do ask staff if you want to get involved.** Sometimes, therapy staff can teach or advise on small exercises you can do with your loved one – things like hand massages, speech and cognitive exercises, which can help you feel close and connected.
- **Keep a diary.** Jot down a few lines about what has happened each day – who has visited, information you have been given, how your relative is. Sometimes, progress can be hard to see when you are in the thick of it day in, day out. Keeping a diary will help you spot progress, patterns and triggers of fatigue and can be useful for the brain injured person too.
- **Don't overload yourself with too much information.** In modern society, we are used to searching for answers to anything online. A cursory google however can prove overwhelming, frightening and unhelpful. There is a wealth of information and many useful factsheets about ABI available on the Headway UK website:
<https://www.headway.org.uk/about-brain-injury/individuals/information-library/>
but the ebooklet entitled 'Hospital treatment and early recovery after brain injury, is particularly helpful at this stage. Hard copies are available free of charge to relatives of someone with a brain injury by phoning the Headway Helpline on: 0808 800 2244, or by emailing helpline@headway.org.uk
- **Contact us** – our Hospital Liaison service is available at Musgrove Park Hospital, Yeovil District Hospital and Somerset Neurological Rehabilitation Centre (SNRC). We are there to listen, inform, advise or signpost you to other

services, so that at this difficult time, you get all the information and support you need.

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*Please note, Covid 19 restrictions mean we are currently offering limited visits to the hospitals, but are available on the telephone or via email as above between 10-4 Monday to Friday