

Emotional support during or after your child's hospital stay

This leaflet has information about the children's or paediatric psychology service. We may give you the leaflet if your child is staying in hospital and has needed critical care. If you have any questions, please speak to a doctor or nurse caring for your child.

About the paediatric psychology service

The paediatric psychology service supports children, young people and their families who are seen by the medical teams at Evelina London Children's Hospital. Our team is made up of practitioner psychologists. Trainee, assistant and student psychologists sometimes help with our work.

We aim to support children, young people and their families with any challenges caused by a health condition or medical treatment. Some of the people that we work with ask for support with:

- managing feelings of difference from others
- having to take medicines
- dealing with the impact of a health condition on other areas of life, such as school or friendships
- coping with planned or unplanned stays in hospital
- needing difficult or new hospital procedures

Our service can support children and young people themselves. We can also give wider support to their parents or carers, and sometimes brothers or sisters.

Support available when your child stays in hospital

Sometimes, children and young people need treatment in our paediatric intensive care unit (PICU) or high dependency unit (HDU). There are many reasons why this can be an emotionally distressing experience:

- It can be very upsetting if your child becomes seriously unwell.
- Your child may need to come into hospital suddenly and unexpectedly.
- The hospital environment can be busy.
- Hospital teams may give your family a lot of new information within a short period.

The paediatric psychology service can support children and young people who stay in hospital, together with their families. We try to help families cope during and after unexpected or difficult stays in hospital.

You may meet us on the hospital wards, or we may call you when you have gone home to check how you are coping. If you would like to meet us but we have not introduced ourselves, please ask your child's medical team to refer you at any time.

Families can have different emotional responses if their child needs to stay in hospital. Not all families need extra support from our team. Some families only start to struggle with difficult thoughts or feelings after their child's hospital stay. We can sometimes support families after a child's stay in hospital. This is provided that the child is still under the care of an Evelina London consultant.

While your child is in hospital, you may find it helpful to read a booklet called "A caregiver's guide: Taking care of yourself while your child is in the hospital". You can find this booklet on the Healthcare Toolbox website at: [web www.healthcaredtoolbox.org/patient-education-parents](http://www.healthcaredtoolbox.org/patient-education-parents)

Common emotional reactions during or after a hospital stay

You may not be sure whether your child needs support with difficult thoughts or feelings during or after their hospital stay.

It is common to feel some distress during and after a stay in hospital. We have listed some reactions that children and young people often have at these times.

Common emotional reactions in younger children

Younger children may:

- want to be close to trusted adults, such as parents or teachers, more than usual
- feel more afraid of the dark or being left alone
- have nightmares or trouble sleeping
- have unwanted memories or intrusive images of their hospital stay
- relive the experience of coming into hospital as if it is happening in the present moment
- get easily irritated or have tantrums
- be more aware of possible danger and feel nervous or uneasy
- change their eating patterns
- wet the bed
- have unpleasant feelings in the body, such as headaches or stomach aches
- avoid things that remind them of their experience, such as hospitals, doctors and even some books or films
- not want to go to school
- struggle with tasks that they used to be able to do

Common emotional reactions in older children and young people

Older children and young people may:

- want to spend more time alone or with their parents or carers
- have nightmares or trouble sleeping
- have unwanted memories or intrusive images of their hospital stay
- relive the experience of coming into hospital as if it is happening in the present moment
- get easily irritated or more argumentative
- have difficulties with friendships
- be more aware of possible danger and feel nervous or uneasy
- change their eating patterns
- have unpleasant feelings in the body, such as headaches or stomach aches
- avoid things that remind them of their experience, such as hospitals, doctors and even some books or films
- not want to go to school or not do so well in their studies

Helping your child to cope with a hospital stay

There are several ways to help manage emotional distress during and after a child's stay in hospital. Children, young people and their family members can all use these techniques.

Keeping to your normal routines and boundaries

If you keep to routines that were in place before your child went to hospital, this can create a sense of safety. Stability is helpful when a lot of other things might feel uncertain. Regular routines can also help if your child's sleeping patterns have been affected.

Although it might feel difficult, it can also be helpful to keep usual boundaries in place. Boundaries can:

- help children and young people to feel secure
- make the world feel more predictable

Allowing your child and any brothers or sisters to share their experiences

It is important for your child to know that you will support them if they want to talk about how they feel. Younger children might share their experiences through play or drawing. Older children and teenagers might prefer to speak about their experiences.

If your child talks about their experience, this can help them to understand what has happened. It can also be a good opportunity to correct any misunderstandings about what happened and why.

As part of this process, you can help your child to label their emotions. You can ask them whether talking about their experience makes them feel frightened, sad or angry. Try to be honest with your child (using age-appropriate language) about what you know and how you feel as well.

Some people in the family might find it difficult to talk about the child's stay in hospital. This might be because they are worried about:

- upsetting others by sharing their feelings
- not being in control of their emotions

It is best not to force conversations. However, it can be helpful to talk about what has happened if your child raises the subject and you can manage this. Try to be guided by your child. If they do not feel that it is the right time to talk about their experience, this is OK too.

Grounding techniques

Grounding techniques can help to manage:

- big waves of distress
- flashbacks or intrusive images
- moments when you feel disconnected to what is happening around you

The aim of grounding techniques is to bring your focus back to the present moment. This can move the mind away from difficult thoughts about the past or worries about the future. Grounding can also be a good way to remind yourself that you are safe in the present moment.

The 5-4-3-2-1 technique helps to bring you back to the present moment by focusing on your 5 senses. To do this, try to notice and name:

- 5 things that you can see
- 4 things that you can hear
- 3 things that you can touch
- 2 things that you can smell
- 1 thing that you can taste

Doing something different

Doing a different activity can distract yourself from difficult thoughts. Some people find it helpful to try an activity that they enjoy and have to focus on, such as:

- building Lego®
- doing some arts and crafts
- dancing

The activity could even be something as simple as passing a ball from hand to hand, or playing catch with someone. Try to focus on the activity as much as possible. If you have a busy mind, you can also pay attention to what you see, hear, touch, smell and taste.

Thinking strategies

You may need to go somewhere that reminds you of what happened. If you avoid this, it could make your anxiety worse in the long term.

Instead, you could list what is different today compared with when you were last there and the bad thing happened. This can help your mind to focus on today rather than what happened before. The list could be in your head, on your phone or written down on some paper.

You could focus on big or small differences, such as:

- "The weather is sunnier today."
- "I am wearing different clothes."
- "We are in a different room today."
- "My child takes new medicine now."

Deep breathing exercises

When you feel overwhelmed, your breathing can become faster and shallower. If you slow down your breathing and take deeper breaths into your stomach, this can make you feel calmer.

To make sure that you breathe deep into your stomach, put one hand on your chest and one hand on your stomach. When you breathe in, the hand on your stomach should move outwards. When you breathe out, the opposite should happen. The hand on your chest should stay quite still throughout.

Younger children can practise the correct movement by lying flat and putting a small, light soft toy on their stomach. As with the previous example, the toy should rise when the child breathes in and lower when they breathe out. Some children may find it helpful to imagine a big balloon in the stomach that is blown up (when breathing in) and deflates (when breathing out).

Another quick and easy breathing exercise is called 5-finger breathing:

- Put one hand in front of you and keep your fingers separated.
- Slowly trace the index (first) finger of your other hand up the outside of your thumb. Breathe in slowly at the same time.

- Next, trace your finger back down the inside of your thumb. Breathe out slowly and fully at the same time.
- Do the same thing for the rest of your fingers. Breathe in as you trace your finger upwards and breathe out as you trace it downwards.

You can do this breathing exercise several times.

A parent or carer can support younger children with the exercise. To do this, you can either:

- use your own finger to trace up and down the child's hand; or
- let the child trace your hand with their finger

You can experiment to find out what works best for your child.

Getting support for your child during or after their hospital stay

If you want your child to be referred to the paediatric psychology service, please speak to a member of their medical team.

For most children and young people, we expect symptoms to improve gradually with time. It is important to tell your child's GP or medical team if their symptoms continue or have a big impact on them.

Taking care of yourself

During and after a child's stay in hospital, parents or carers often focus on their child's needs. It can be easy to forget to take care of themselves.

As a parent or carer, you might notice some changes in yourself too. You may:

- worry more about your child's safety
- feel more protective of your child
- need more reassurance that your child is safe (for example, by being with them as much as possible or checking on them regularly)
- be more aware of possible danger to yourself and your child, and feel nervous or uneasy
- worry about whether you can care for your child's medical needs on your own
- have unwanted memories or intrusive images of your child's hospital stay
- have nightmares or trouble sleeping
- change your eating patterns
- relive the experience of your child coming into hospital as if it is happening in the present moment
- avoid things that remind you of your experience, such as hospitals, doctors and even some books or films
- have changes in your mood, such as feeling low or guilty
- find it difficult to do activities that you previously enjoyed or found meaningful

It is important that you continue to eat a balanced diet, drink water, exercise regularly and get enough sleep. Try to make some time for yourself as well, even if it is only 5 minutes to do a relaxing activity. When we take care of ourselves, it can feel easier to take care of other family members too.

It can be helpful to find another adult who you can speak to if things feel difficult. Usually, it becomes easier to cope with time. However, if you need support with managing your own

emotional responses to your child's hospital stay, please speak to a GP. They can then refer you to local support services. This is particularly important if your symptoms:

- do not improve
- have a big impact on your daily life

Support and more information

You or your family can contact these organisations for support:

YoungMinds (for people under 19 years old)

web www.youngminds.org.uk/find-help/your-guide-to-support

ChildLine (for people under 19 years old)

phone 0800 1111 (24 hours a day, 7 days a week)

For support, **web** www.childline.org.uk/get-support/contacting-childline

For coping techniques, **web** www.childline.org.uk/toolbox/calm-zone

The Mix (for people under 25 years old)

web www.themix.org.uk/get-support/speak-to-our-team

Samaritans (for people of all ages)

phone 116 123 (call free from any phone 24 hours a day, 7 days a week)

web www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/if-youre-having-difficult-time

Contact us

If you or a family member have thoughts about wanting to harm yourselves or end your own life, ask a GP for urgent support and advice. In an emergency, **phone** 999 or go to your nearest emergency department (A&E).

For more information on conditions, procedures, treatments and services offered at our hospitals, please visit **web** www.evelinalondon.nhs.uk/leaflets

Evelina London medicines helpline

If you have any questions or concerns about your child's medicines, please speak to the staff caring for them or contact our helpline, **phone** 020 7188 3003, Monday to Friday, 10am to 5pm
email letstalkmedicines@gstt.nhs.uk

Your comments and concerns

For advice, support or to raise a concern, contact our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS), **phone** 020 7188 8801 **email** pals@gstt.nhs.uk. To make a complaint, contact the resolution department **phone** 020 7188 3514 **email** complaints2@gstt.nhs.uk

Language and accessible support services

If you need an interpreter or information about your child's care in a different language or format, please contact the department where they have the appointment.



Leaflet number: 5515/VER1

Date published: February 2025

Review date: February 2028

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A list of sources is available on request