

At the Hospital: Helping My Teen Cope With Illness

What Parents and Caregivers Can Do

Feeling distressed or having strong emotional reactions is common when teens are hospitalized. Even though it is your teen who is ill, your whole family can feel overwhelmed or unprepared to cope. With time, understanding, and support, most teens and families learn to adjust to the illness and cope with the hospital experience.

Things in the hospital that can be distressing or traumatic:

- Not knowing what will happen next
- Being in pain or going through painful procedures
- Fear of dying
- Side-effects or complications of treatment
- Concerns about relapse
- Changes in appearance - hair loss, weight loss or gain, or surgical scars, etc.
- Being separated from siblings, friends, and pets
- Seeing other sick teens or knowing others in the hospital who have died



Common changes in teens when distressed or hospitalized:

- Being irritable, more sensitive, or talking back
- Feeling empty or numb
- Problems with eating, sleeping or having nightmares
- Wanting to be alone or with you all the time
- Feeling left out, missing friends or family
- Worrying about looking different or what others will think

Parents and caregivers can get distressed too:

- They often get upset at seeing their teen in pain and can feel helpless or frustrated as a result
- They may not want to be away from their teen and always feel “on guard”
- They may have a shorter fuse, trouble eating and sleeping, or feel overwhelmed by their teen’s medical needs
- They may worry in private about their teen dying, but not want to share their worries with anyone

In addition, many parents and caregivers are unsure about how to talk with their sick teens (or with their other children at home) about their feelings, fears, and questions.

Special information for parents and caregivers of teens: It is common for teens and parents to feel overwhelmed and frustrated by the illness or hospital experience at first. It may even take a few weeks for these reactions to settle down. If your teen continues to be upset, if you have questions about how to help your teen, or if *you* need to talk, there are staff members at the hospital whose job it is to help. In addition to the doctors and nurses, mental health professionals (including social workers, counselors, psychologists, and chaplains) are skilled at helping teens and families cope. Also, read the other side of this handout for tips on helping your teen cope while at the hospital.

Nine Ways You Can Help Your Teen Cope While At The Hospital

- 1 You are the best person to comfort your teen.** Although it may be difficult at times, try to be calm and reassuring. Give frequent praise and hugs if your teen wants them. Understand that, at times, your teen may want to appear “grown up,” but also might be in need of your comfort and support.
- 2 Be patient with your teen.** Strong feelings are common but temporary reactions to the hospital experience. Remind your teen that it’s okay to be confused, angry, or scared. If your teen’s behavior gets to be too much, it’s okay to set rules and limits like you would at home.
- 3 Be honest with your teen.** Teens may want information, even if they don’t ask. Share the all facts about the illness and treatment –be realistic but hopeful. If your teen needs to go through a painful procedure, explain that it may hurt, but that its purpose is to fight the illness. The more your teen knows what to expect, the more prepared he or she will be.
- 4 Include your teen in medical discussions when appropriate.** Address any questions or concerns that your teen may have about the illness - from the biggest worries to the smallest hassles. Encourage your teen to ask questions of the doctors and nurses. Help your teen participate in decisions by planning how to cope with pain and stressful procedures in advance.
- 5 Talk about your feelings together.** Teens can sometimes jump to conclusions or misjudge what others are thinking. Gently ask questions to learn what your teen thinks and believes, and be a good listener. Be open to their feelings and what they have to say, even if it is upsetting or hard to hear. Sharing your feeling lets you teen know that it is okay to share theirs.
- 6 Teens are self-conscious and like to feel in control of their lives.** They will especially worry about how they will look and fit in with others. Reassure your teen, but don’t dismiss his or her concerns – even the small ones. Because many aspects of the illness are unpredictable, allow your teen to make choices and do some things on his or her own, which can provide a sense of accomplishment and control.
- 7 Help your teen stay connected with old friends and make new friends.** Being in the hospital can increase feelings of loneliness. Encourage your teen to keep in touch with friends by phone or email on a regular basis. Talk ahead of time about how to explain the illness and answer questions. Also, ask the medical staff to introduce your teen to others on the floor with similar experiences.
- 8 Take care of yourself.** Your teen can tell if you are worried, upset, or not sleeping, which makes 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 counselor, a member of the clergy, or one of the medical staff.
- 9 Create a familiar environment.** Hospitalized teens feel more comfortable when surrounded by things that are familiar. Decorate the hospital room with stuff that helps your teen stay connected to his or her world back home. Also, work with the medical staff to plan a daily routine that is predictable and allows time for privacy and keeping in touch with friends and family.

