

# Help with your thoughts and feelings during/after a stay in intensive care

Department of Critical Care & Therapy

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Information for Patients, Relatives & Carers

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## Introduction

This leaflet gives information about thoughts and feelings you may have during and after a stay on an Intensive Care Unit (ICU).

This booklet will cover some common experiences from ICU like:

- delirium
- flashbacks
- side effects of medication

Being on intensive care can be frightening for patients, relatives and visitors. It could be useful for relatives and other visitors to read this booklet to help understand your journey better.

## Recovering from your ICU stay

Spending time on an Intensive Care Unit can be hard. Every experience is different. Your journey is unique to you. Some people have no memory. Some have memory gaps or some try to forget about it. An ICU stay can be traumatic and it may take time to process it.

It can take up to 18 months to fully recover from a serious illness. This can be very tiring for both your mind and body. It is common to have thoughts like wanting to be 'back to your old self' or 'feeling as though you have changed'. Feeling low in mood is common when you think about your experience. Support from others can be useful during this time.

**Health information and support is available at [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)  
or call 111 for non-emergency medical advice**

Visit [www.leicestershospitals.nhs.uk](http://www.leicestershospitals.nhs.uk) for maps and information about visiting Leicester's Hospitals  
To give feedback about this information sheet, contact [InformationForPatients@uhl-tr.nhs.uk](mailto:InformationForPatients@uhl-tr.nhs.uk)

## Common feelings:



## Common worries:

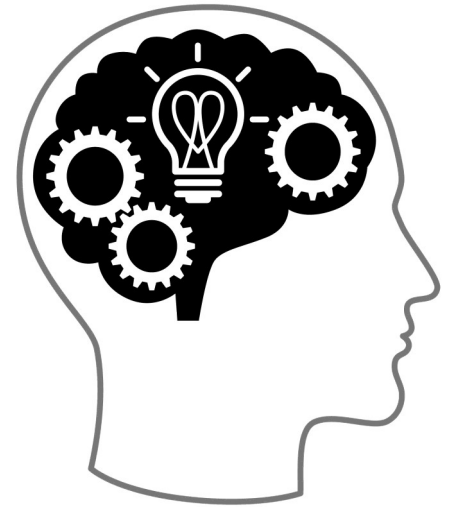
- Understanding how unwell you have been
- Loss of appetite
- Feeling a loss of confidence
- Vivid dreams, nightmares or flashbacks
- Becoming unwell again
- Difficulty returning to a normal sleeping pattern
- Losing interest in personal appearances
- Not being able to remember everything
- Having unexpected memories of a stay on ICU
- More effort to move about
- Daily tasks taking longer
- Feelings of hopelessness

## Flashbacks and intrusive thoughts

After being unwell on intensive care it is common to have flashbacks. These are normal responses to traumatic experiences and should reduce over time.

A flashback or an intrusive thought is the brain's way of making sense of an experience. It reminds you that your experience has become a past memory. It is not a current threat.

Ongoing flashbacks that are difficult to process can be a sign of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). One way to help cope with them is by using grounding techniques like the APPLE technique. This is described on the next page.



## Delirium

Delirium is the name for a short term state of confusion and less awareness of surroundings.

It is very common for intensive care patients. It is sometimes described like being in a dream or a nightmare. It can feel very real and sometimes scary. It is caused by strong medication (like sedatives), infection, poor sleep or the affect of being so ill.

### Common experiences of delirium:

- Feelings of being somewhere else: like on a boat , flying in a spaceship or back at home.
- Hearing or seeing things that are not there (hallucinations).
- Thoughts about being kidnapped or hurt.
- Not trusting staff: believing that they are pretending to be someone else or there to harm you.
- Difficulties concentrating or poor memory.

These experiences of delirium can become mixed with real events from ICU. Sometimes it can be hard to know what was real and what was delirium.

Patients may act very differently with delirium. Some are very active and restless (hyperactive delirium). Some are withdrawn and quiet (hypoactive delirium).

Symptoms of delirium can change quickly. Mixed delirium happens when a person moves between the two types. Some people may find it helpful to have a daily routine, regular physical exercise and good sleep pattern to reduce the effects of delirium.

For more information about delirium please visit [ICUsteps.org](https://www.icusteps.org) for their delirium handout.

## The APPLE technique: to help manage worries and thoughts

### Acknowledge

Notice the thought as it comes in to your mind.

### Pause

Do not react straight away. Pause and breathe instead.

Breathe in for 5 seconds and breathe out for 5 seconds.

### Pull back

Recognise the worry. It is only a thought or feeling. It is not a true or definite fact.

### Let go

You do not have to respond. Try to imagine them floating away in a bubble. Let it go.

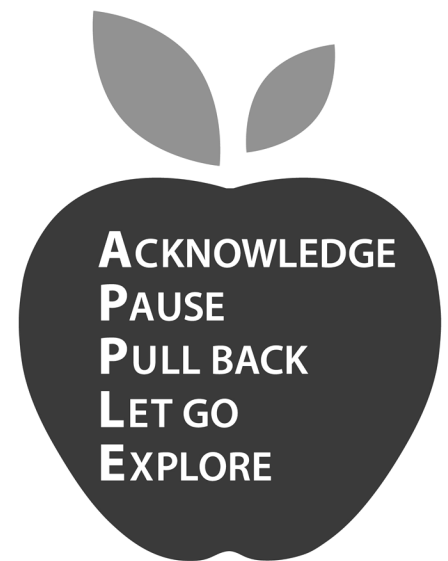
### Explore

Explore the present moment because right now, in the moment, all is well.

Notice your breathing and how it feels. Notice the ground beneath you. Plant your feet on the floor.

Look around. Notice what you see. What do you hear? What can you touch? What can you smell?

Shift your attention to something else: what do you need to do? What were you doing before you noticed the worry? Or do something else mindfully with your full attention.



## Take 5: finger breathing

This is a quick technique you can use to calm yourself in the moment:

- Stretch your hand out like a star.
- Use a finger on your other hand to trace around your hand.
- Start at the bottom of your thumb. Take a breath in and slide your finger along the side of your thumb. Pause and hold your breath at the top. Breathe out and slide down the other side.
- Continue to the index finger and then the middle finger and so on. Do this until you reach the bottom of your little finger.
- Slide your finger slowly, watch it move, notice how it feels.
- Repeat again. Breathe in through your nose as you slide up and breathe out through your mouth as you slide down.

Keep going until you feel calmer and your breathing feels under control.

## Take it at your own pace

- It can take some time to recover from a serious illness.
- Slowly build up physical activity to improve your strength.
- Remember to work on things that bring you joy along with the things that you should be doing. It is important to get the balance between doing activities and resting.
- It is helpful to rest during the day as activity levels increase and feelings of tiredness may increase.
- Try to eat regular, balanced meals and drink plenty of fluids. If this is difficult try to eat and drink little and often.

## Sleep and relaxation

- During an intensive care stay, sleeping patterns change and it can take time to get back into a normal sleep routine.
- Avoid sleeping for too long. Avoid sleeping in the day as this can affect your sleep at night.
- You may have difficulty falling asleep or staying asleep.
- Sometimes it is worry that keeps you awake or wakes you. There are ways to manage this such as using a diary to write any worries or talk to family and friends.
- Vivid dreams are common. This can be upsetting. How often they happen should reduce over time.
- Things should return to normal as you become stronger and more active.
- Some people find using apps helpful. Apps like Headspace or CALM. Practicing relaxation techniques everyday can lower anxiety and stress.
- Try activities like having a bath, drawing, spending time with a pet or going for a walk.

## ICU steps

ICU steps was established in 2005 and became a registered charity in 2006. It is made by former intensive care patients and relatives. It aims to improve the care and support available to patients recovering from critical illness during their long recovery.

There are many resources, information and links on their website to support with delirium, exercises and diet: [ICUsteps.org](https://www.icusteps.org)

## When should I seek professional help?

Most thoughts and feelings will get better over time. They will go away by themselves after a few weeks. If you are still finding it hard 1 month after you have been at home, you can speak to your GP. They may be able to offer you support. They can help with:

- Feeling anxious, scared or worried every day.
- Feeling low in mood every day, which affects your motivation and your thoughts about yourself, your life and the future.
- Not sleeping well, including nightmares or flashbacks.
- Behaving very differently to before you were unwell.
- Feeling unable to work or look after your home and family.
- Experiencing relationship difficulties.
- Using drugs or drinking too much.

In some cases, patients (or relatives) can have extreme symptoms of stress after their treatment in ICU. This is known as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Some signs of PTSD may be:

- Very distressing memories, sensations or images of being unwell which enter your mind unexpectedly.
- Anxiety and panic (sometimes extreme) when you are exposed to reminders of being unwell.
- Nightmares of ICU or thinking you are still in danger.
- Staying away from hospitals and healthcare providers.
- Feeling like you can not talk with other people.
- Feeling numb or disconnected from those around you or the world.
- An intense fear of becoming ill again or a feeling that your life will be cut short.

## ICU follow up clinic

ICU can offer some support. They offer a follow up clinic for anyone who has stayed on ICU. You can talk about your progress and any issues you may have. If you would like to find out more you can email the Follow Up Clinic: [LRIITUFollowUpClinic@uhl-tr.nhs.uk](mailto:LRIITUFollowUpClinic@uhl-tr.nhs.uk)

## VitaMinds

If you are experiencing extreme worry, low mood, depression, anxiety or a lack of motivation then VitaMinds can help. VitaMinds works in partnership with the NHS to give talking therapy services and counselling in Leicester. This is known as Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT). We can give advice and guidance on the best options for you. We aim to help improve the mental wellbeing of people suffering from:

- Depression
- Low mood due to a physical condition (such as diabetes or pain)
- Excessive worry or anxiety
- Panic attacks
- Sleep problems
- Stress
- Phobia(s)
- Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)
- Experience of a traumatic event



**VitaMinds** is a **free** and confidential service and you don't need to visit a GP to get help. The fastest way to get support is by making an online self referral [www.vitahealthgroup.co.uk](http://www.vitahealthgroup.co.uk) or you can call us on 0330 094 5595.

## Contact details

Adult intensive care therapy team: Monday to Friday, 8am to 4pm:

Leicester Royal Infirmary	0116 258 6825
Leicester General Hospital	0116 258 4101
Glenfield Hospital	0116 258 3389

اگر آپ کو یہ معلومات کسی اور زبان میں درکار ہیں، تو براہ کرم مندرجہ ذیل نمبر پر ٹیلی فون کریں۔  
على هذه المعلومات بلغة أخرى، الرجاء الاتصال على رقم الهاتف الذي يظهر في الأسفل

જો તમને અન્ય ભાષામાં આ માહિતી જોઈતી હોય, તો નીચે આપેલ નંબર પર કૃપા કરી ટેલિફોન કરો

ਜੇ ਤੁਸੀਂ ਇਹ ਜਾਣਕਾਰੀ ਕਿਸੇ ਹੋਰ ਭਾਸ਼ਾ ਵਿਚ ਚਾਹੁੰਦੇ ਹੋ, ਤਾਂ ਕਿਰਪਾ ਕਰਕੇ ਹੇਠਾਂ ਦਿੱਤੇ ਗਏ ਨੰਬਰ 'ਤੇ ਟੈਲੀਫੋਨ ਕਰੋ।

Aby uzyskać informacje w innym języku, proszę zadzwonić pod podany niżej numer telefonu

Previous reference:

If you would like this information in another language or format such as EasyRead or Braille, please telephone 0116 250 2959 or email [equality@uhl-tr.nhs.uk](mailto:equality@uhl-tr.nhs.uk)