

Understanding trauma following COVID-19

A guide for you, your family and friends

Why have I been given this leaflet?

This leaflet contains information on:

- The long-term effects of coronavirus (long COVID)
- Trauma responses that may happen during recovery
- How to take care of yourself or a loved one
- What to do if the problems persist and where to find more information

What is Long COVID?

- The length of recovery time from COVID-19 varies from person to person.
- Many people will feel better in a matter of days or weeks and most people will make a full recovery within 12 weeks. However, some people may take longer to fully recover.
- People who had mild symptoms at first can still experience long-COVID
- **Signs and symptoms of long COVID include:**

Fatigue, breathlessness, problems with memory or concentration (brain fog), joint pain and depression and anxiety

What is Trauma?

Trauma describes the common reactions that people experience after being in stressful and traumatic situations. Traumatic experiences can happen to anyone and it is completely normal for a time after to feel distressed, suffer bad dreams or experience unpleasant memories. This is your mind trying to make sense of the experience to make it easier to move forward.

COVID-19 and Trauma

We know that about a quarter of patients who are cared for in an Intensive Care Unit will develop symptoms of trauma that go on for more than a few months (sometimes called Post Traumatic Stress). Recent studies show similar levels of trauma for patients who are treated in hospital for COVID-19. We are also seeing signs of trauma in people who remain at home when they are unwell with COVID-19, particularly if they experience breathlessness. This leaflet aims to provide you with information to support you to cope with early symptoms.

Common Trauma Symptoms

Physical responses to trauma	Emotional responses to trauma
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fatigue• Trouble falling or staying asleep• Getting startled by loud noises or unexpected events• Feeling shaky or sweaty• Feeling your heart pounding• Chest pain	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Self-blame and guilt• Anger• Shame• Fear and anxiety• Feeling as if the trauma is happening again (flashbacks)• Bad dreams and nightmares• Loss of interest

ICU Delirium

People who have had ICU delirium can develop post-traumatic stress disorder. The word “delirium” is used to describe a severe state of confusion. Delirium often causes patients to feel frightened, angry, lonely and ashamed.

Signs that I had delirium:

- Could not think clearly
- Had a hard time understanding what was going on
- Saw or heard things that were not there (hallucinations).
- These things seemed very real.

Delirium is common. About 2 out of 3 patients in ICUs get delirium. Seven out of 10 patients get delirium while they are on a breathing machine or soon after. Delirium appears to be caused by a change in the way the brain is working, due to:

- Less oxygen to the brain
- Chemical changes in the brain
- Certain medicines
- Infections and Medical illnesses
- Severe pain
- Alcohol, sedatives, or pain killers

From: <https://www.icudelirium.org/patients-and-families/overview>

Seeking Help

The signs and symptoms of a trauma response may last days, weeks, months and occasionally longer.

Some people may find it beneficial to talk about what they have experienced, with friends, family or a professional. Others prefer not to discuss it. Find a strategy that works for you.

It is a good idea to seek help if your trauma symptoms are not improving after 3 months and are still impacting your daily life. You can contact any of the Long-COVID team (if you are with our service) or your GP.

What can I do to manage my trauma symptoms?

Remember the basics – drink lots of water and remember to eat regular meals

- Stick to a 'normal' **routine** as much as you can
- **Do something relaxing** – this can be anything as long as it allows you to unwind; for example, reading, taking a bath or listening to music
- **Be grounded** – sit in a chair, feel your feet on the floor, back against the chair. Notice – 5 things that you can see, 4 sounds that you can hear, 3 things you can feel/touch, 2 smells and 1 taste
- Try **mindfulness exercises** to help with focusing on the present (see the apps below for ideas)
- **Keep in touch** – stay connected with friends, family and people you trust
- Try to keep a reasonable level of **activity** (exercise is good for your mental health)
- Try not to bottle things up; **express your feelings** to someone you feel comfortable with. But remember, you don't have to tell everyone everything.
- Try to **avoid drinking too much alcohol**
- Set yourself **realistic goals**- having goals you can achieve will give you a sense of purpose and make you feel good when you complete them

Helpful Websites

- Learn to relax and improve your wellbeing - <https://www.nhs.uk/apps-library/chill-panda/>
- Learn how to manage feelings - <https://www.nhs.uk/apps-library/catch-it/>
<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/stress-anxiety-depression/>
- Promoting health and wellbeing in North Cumbria - <https://www.healthyhopes.co.uk/>
- Mental health support in North Cumbria - <https://www.cntw.nhs.uk/services/first-step/>
- An NHS resource for Long-COVID - <https://www.yourcovidrecovery.nhs.uk/>

Mindfulness Apps: Headspace, Smiling Mind, Insight Timer.

Useful contact numbers:
Mindline Cumbria Offers support and guidance about mental health over the phone 0300 561 0000 or text 'Mind' to 81066
Cruse helpline Offers specialist bereavement support 0808 808 1677
Samaritans Free 24/7 support for anyone in emotional distress or at risk of suicide 116 123