Medical Trauma: A Guide for Support Persons

Overview

- Medical trauma happens when you or a loved one experience a major medical event such as an injury, brief or ongoing pain, serious illness, a life changing diagnosis, medical procedures, or any frightening treatment experience.
- It can result from a single event (e.g., emergency surgery) or a series of difficult experiences (e.g., frightening procedures like intubation or progressive illness like cancer). Afterward, people might also deal with other problems (e.g., money problems, body changes) that can make coping more difficult. The effects of medical trauma can occur in hospitals, treatment centers, and at home.
- Medical trauma can affect patients as well as their support persons. A support person is anyone providing emotional, practical, or advocacy support to the patient, including family, friends, caregivers, community members, or others meaningful to the patient.

Impact on the Patient

A serious medical condition, whether sudden or not, can be traumatic, placing your loved one in a new and sometimes frightening reality that feels outside of their control.

- Your loved one may:
    - Be navigating a new way of seeing themselves
    - Fear how to manage all the details of their medical experience
    - Worry about how changes in their health affect family and friends
    - React strongly to situations that don't seem connected to the medical event

- Signs your loved one may be struggling can include:
    - Isolation from family and friends
    - Changes in appetite, sleep, energy, and motivation
    - Attempts to numb feelings to cope such as using food, television, scrolling the internet, substances, or other means to temporarily change how they feel or avoid difficult thoughts and/or emotions
    - Re-experiencing the trauma through unwanted memories or nightmares
    - Avoiding people, places, or things that remind them of what happened
    - Struggling with fear, sadness, anger, shock, denial, or numbness
    - Feeling anxious, on edge, or disconnected from others
    - Loss of trust in medical providers or avoidance of medical care

Impact on the Support Person

- Just like your loved one, you are likely also adapting to new realities, thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. You are also likely trying to find a balance of self-care and caring for your loved one.
- You might:
    - Have had to make fast, high-stakes medical decisions on their behalf
    - Witnessed your loved one in pain, confused, or acting in ways that were frightening or unfamiliar
    - Experienced feelings of fear, helplessness, shock, or denial, during and after their medical crisis
    - Have a strong sense of guilt when a medical procedure you consented to, hoping to help, led to emotional or physical pain
    - Feel overwhelmed with how to help manage the many parts of the medical event (whether brief or ongoing)
    - Be carrying the weight of caregiving responsibilities that disrupt your sleep, routine or mental health
    - Struggle with ongoing uncertainty or anxiety about their recovery or future health
    - You too may re-experience trauma responses including frightening memories, nightmares, or ruminate on “what ifs”
- These reactions are common and valid. Just as your loved one may need support to heal, you may need support as well. Acknowledging your own emotional response is a key part of coping and sustaining your ability to care.

Impact On Your Relationship

Medical stress and trauma can strain even the closest relationships. You and your loved one may both be coping with fear, confusion, or grief in different ways. You might:

- Feel emotionally disconnected or find it harder to communicate
- Take on new roles or responsibilities that create stress or imbalance
- Struggle with a new role in your relationship and how you each use your time and energy as individuals and together
- Worry about your loved one’s future, and possibly yours as well
- React to the trauma differently – one of you may want to talk, the other may withdraw
- Experience moments of tension, blame, or anger especially when emotions are high
- Feel pressure in deciding how to communicate with children about the event and related changes
- Be seen as a protector and sometimes as part of painful experiences, especially if you had to make hard choices or couldn’t stop something distressing

- Be affected by lingering confusion, hallucinations, or memory distortions where your loved one may recall you as passive or even harmful, despite your efforts to help

How to Help

- One major source of stress for support people is feeling unprepared to help their loved one navigate all the practical and emotional stressors that come with a medical crisis.
    - Feeling ready to support someone during and after medical trauma can help protect your loved one's wellness as well as your own.
- Caring for your own wellbeing is not a distraction from your loved one's recovery; it's a foundation that allows you to show strength and compassion over the long haul.
- Adjusting responsibilities and commitments will be necessary to be fully prepared to provide care for a loved one. Give yourself and your loved one grace in this process.

Ideas for How to Provide Support

Be Present, Not Perfect. You don't have to have the right words your presence is powerful.

- Acknowledge their pain and validate their feelings
- Resist saying things like "At least it's over" or "You're lucky it wasn't worse"
- Reassure them that you are in this together and they are not alone

Listen Without Fixing. Give them space to talk or stay quiet.

- Reflect what you hear: "That sounds really scary"
- Avoid jumping to advice or trying to fix their feelings
- Allow space to grieve losses or setbacks
- Ask if they would like you to listen or to brainstorm solutions

Learn About Trauma Responses. Understand that trauma can affect memory, mood, sleep, and relationships.

- Their reactions are not about you; they are responding to a deeply distressing experience
- Understanding these responses will inform how you respond in the moment

Support, Don't Push. Medical trauma often takes away a person's sense of control and agency.

- Remember the basics - encourage healthy habits like rest, connection, and routine, but don't pressure
- Offer help with logistics (appointments, errands) if they feel overwhelmed.
    - Keeping a notebook with questions and notes from visits can help your loved one and others sharing caregiving responsibilities understand what is happening
- Highlight opportunities to enhance their sense of agency and independence

Try Not to Avoid the Hard Stuff. It is natural to want to protect your loved one (or yourself) by avoiding conversations about what happened. You might worry that bringing it up will upset them, or that you won't know what to say.

- Staying silent can sometimes make things feel more isolating or unresolved. Talking openly, even a little at a time, can help you both feel more connected and supported.
- You don't have to dive into everything all at once. Start small:
  - "That visit seemed overwhelming. How are you feeling about it?"
  - "I've been thinking about what happened. Do you want to talk about it?"
- Being present and willing to talk shows your loved one they're not alone, even if you don't have all the answers.

Prioritize Tasks. When everything feels urgent, it's easy to become overwhelmed. Sorting through what needs attention *now* and what can wait can help focus your energy where it's needed most and lower stress over time.

Write It All Down. Together with your loved one (if possible), list all the tasks and worries that are taking up space in your minds, no matter how big or small.

Level of Urgency	Tasks
Red **Immediate Needs**	*Tasks that must be addressed within hours or days. These are often survival or system tasks (e.g., filling prescriptions, submitting insurance paperwork, paying urgent bills)*
Yellow **Upcoming Needs**	*Tasks that need attention within days to weeks. They're important, but not immediately urgent (e.g., scheduling follow-up appointments, planning time off work).*
Green **Low Priority**	*Tasks that can wait or be handed off to someone else (e.g., organizing files, returning non-urgent calls, sending thank you notes).*

Focus Your Energy Wisely. Start with the red tasks. When they're complete or in progress, turn to the yellow ones. Green tasks can be scheduled later or passed to someone else in your support network.

- Acting as a body double and partnering up with your loved one on tasks (e.g., making phone calls, picking up prescriptions) as able can help get tasks done and build your loved one's practice in completing tasks.

Promoting Caregiver Wellness and Resilience

Overview

- Being a caregiver after medical trauma is emotionally and physically demanding. You may be focused on helping your loved one, but your own wellness is equally important.
- Caring for yourself helps you feel more equipped, resilient, and able to support others without becoming emotionally depleted. You deserve care too.

Ideas for How to Cope

Recognize your emotional needs. It's okay to feel overwhelmed, scared, sad, or even angry. These emotions are valid.

Stay connected. Isolation can increase stress. Lean on your support system including friends, family, clergy, or community groups.

Seek professional support. Therapy, counseling, or support groups can provide a safe place to process what you've experienced.

- There are many foundations that are designed to offer support, search online for your loved one's condition plus "family support" to find resources or ask a healthcare provider.

Set boundaries. It's okay to say no or ask for help. Overextending yourself can lead to burnout. Accept help from your family and friends; you don't have to do it all on your own.

Build in moments of relief. Take intentional breaks. Even small moments of rest, quiet, or laughter can restore your energy.

Celebrate small victories. Take time to celebrate milestones and small victories along the way so you can see how far you've come on your journey.

Engage in restorative practices. Breathing exercises, mindfulness, walking, journaling, or spiritual practices can build resilience over time.

Seek help. Most people have some reactions after a medical trauma. However, these reactions get better over weeks or months. If you or your loved one continue to have lots of negative feelings and thoughts that are staying the same or are getting worse, seek out professional guidance from a doctor or mental health professional.

Fill your cup. Find things that feel life-giving, joyful, or purposeful to you – anything that helps you feel present, grateful and rejuvenated.

Grieve if needed. Allow yourself to grieve, if needed. Holding back grief only postpones emotional processing. Acknowledge how life has changed and give yourself permission to feel the emotions.

For further information and support check out:

Canadian Centre for Caregiving Excellence for resources and advocacy in Canada.

Carer Gateway and Carers Australia for emotional and practical support for carers in Australia.

Carers Trust for emotional and practical support for carers in the United Kingdom.

Eurocarers for emotional and practical support for carers in Europe.

Family Caregiving for resources on the care of older persons in southern Africa including Botswana, Malawi, Namibia, and South Africa.

Global Initiative to Support Parents for support and resources for parents and caregivers in Pakistan, Philippines, South Africa, and Tanzania.

Heartsight for support resources designed for survivors and co-survivors of cardiac arrest.

International Caregivers Association for dementia caregiving support worldwide.

Masoc Care for caregiver training grounded in cultural wisdom of Australasia and Asia (available worldwide) and practical caregiver resources for those living in Malaysia.

Medical Trauma Support for medical trauma resources for children, teens, and adults (worldwide) and support groups for those living in the United States.

National Child Traumatic Stress Network for ways to support children and teens impacted by medical trauma.

Red Latinoamericana de Gerontología for courses and guides for family caregivers in Latin America.

Finding caregiver support near you. If you don't see an organization for your country or region, try these ideas:

- **Ask your doctor or local clinic** for help finding caregiver services
- **Search online** for "caregiver support" plus your city or country
- **Check community centers, churches, or charities** which may offer free groups or support
- **Contact local government** - some have programs or financial help for caregivers
- **Join social media groups** for caregivers in your area

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