

Someone I love is very unwell in hospital, what do I do?

Information for family and friends

If your loved one becomes very unwell and their medical team are uncertain whether or not they will recover, they may start to talk with you about end of life care. This is a very difficult situation to accept and please be assured that staff at Great Western Hospital will continue to do everything they can to support you and your loved one during this time.

Visiting in this situation

One family member will be able to visit your loved one in hospital for a period of time each day, as long as they themselves are not required to self-isolate due to coronavirus (COVID-19). We are sorry that we cannot accept more visitors right now and we thank you for helping to keep others safe.

What you might notice about your loved one at this time

If you speak to your loved one over the phone, it is possible that they may seem disorientated or confused and that they may tire very easily. Hearing your loved one like this may be upsetting for you. Please be assured, staff are familiar with people being confused when they are unwell and they will know how to respond.

It may be best to keep conversations short and to let your loved one speak without trying to correct them or finish their sentence. Hearing your familiar voice is likely to be helpful even if at the time the conversation seems a little muddled or unusual. Of course this may not happen and you may be able to have normal conversations.

If they do not have a phone please talk to the ward they are on and the team there will do what they can to help with supplying a tablet or phone to use for this call or video call.

Alternatively, you could record a voice or video message and the team on the ward will do what they can to help your loved one see or hear this.

Some ideas for things to share with your loved one:

- How much you love them and how you are thinking of them.
- Family jokes or memories.
- You could just tell them about your day, what you've been up to, what you had for dinner, who you've spoken to.
- Sometimes it's the little things about home that are comforting: the dog barking, the microwave pinging. A recording of some of the sounds special to your home can help your loved one feel connected.



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What staff at GWH will be doing right now to support your loved one?

- Ensuring their time is as peaceful and dignified as possible. This may involve giving appropriate medication to help with any symptoms they may be experiencing, such as shortness of breath or pain.
- Making sure their choices and preferences are being honoured as much as possible. Please contact us if you know there are things important to them.
- Inviting someone from the GWH 'companions' service to sit with your relative if they/you would find this helpful. The 'companions' are health professionals who can sit with people whilst they are in hospital. They can do all sorts for your loved one such as listen to music, read to them, paint their nails, hear stories about their lives or just sit quietly holding their hand.
- Arranging virtual contact with your loved one if you wish to see them during this time, this is through the use of a tablet, which we can use for this purpose.

How to communicate or say goodbye if you cannot be at the bedside

- **We can support video calls** on your loved one's own device or one we supply.
- **Knitted hearts:** we have pairs of matching knitted hearts at the hospital, we can give one to you and your loved one can have the other one. Please ask the ward if you have not been offered this.
- **You could send something** comforting in for your loved one to keep close. Children could give it a cuddle first, and then it could be given to your loved one to keep close to them. You could give it a spray of your favourite aftershave or perfume so that it smells of you.
- **Letters from home:** Please see our [letters from home page](#). Writing a goodbye letter to your loved one can feel incredibly hard to do but it can help to express your feelings and emotions. You can tell them everything you would if you were there yourself and sometimes it is easier to say exactly what you want by writing it down. This can be read out to your loved one if they are unable to read it themselves.
- **Beyond the door visualisation:** Over the phone, ask your loved one to look towards the door of their room or the curtain of their cubicle. You can say something like 'Beyond that door, not too far away, I am here, thinking about you, sending you all my/our love. Just beyond that door, you should be able to feel it from where you are, you are not alone. I want you to remember that if you feel worried or lonely later, you are not alone.' You may prefer to explain this in your own way. This will help your loved one remember the love and connection in their life even when you are not physically there with them. When you speak to your loved one on the phone, as you end your call, you might like to again remind them 'Don't forget, we are just beyond the door, thinking of you and sending you love'.



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Talking with children while a loved one is in hospital

Families may wonder about what information to share with children about a loved one who is in hospital.

- Keeping information away from the child will mean they do not know what is happening, which may increase their anxiety.
- Explain what is happening to the child in a clear and straightforward manner.
- Avoid using euphemisms and try to use the sorts of words that they would most likely use themselves.
- Encourage the child to ask questions so you can understand what they want to know.
- If a child stops asking questions, this is them letting you know that they have heard enough for now.
- They may start the conversation up again at another time and ask more questions when they have had a chance to think about what they have been told.
- If children will be speaking by video with the person, prepare them for what they may look like and what they might see in the room. For example, that they might be lying in bed with an oxygen mask on.
- It is OK for a child to see you upset – this will help children to learn about normal emotional reactions. If you feel overwhelmed by your emotions most or all of the time, maybe talk to friends or family about how you're feeling and what you can do to support yourself during this challenging time.
- The Invisible String is a children's book that describes the connections between people, even at a distance. If you have children in the family, you might like to have a look at the book which is free to download. You could share it with the children and use it to introduce some of the ideas, explaining that these are ways of keeping your 'invisible strings' in place.

Other helpful resources are available at:

<https://www.childbereavementuk.org/resources-for-children-and-young-people>

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