

# PSYCHOLOGY OF COVID-19 CRITICAL CARE PATIENTS: STAFF GUIDE 1

## Background

Research shows that many patients may be distressed in the ICU. Delirious patients are often especially fearful. Patients may have emotional difficulties such as anxiety or post-traumatic stress during a long recovery period. Being in ICU during the Covid-19 pandemic may be even more challenging.

## The good news

Emotional support and good communication/information from staff help to give patients a sense of calm, safety, connectedness, confidence and hope. This is called **Psychological First Aid** – see Staff guide Part 2 to enhance your skills.



**Below are the main issues that could arise for COVID-19 patients in ICU**

## Anxiety and fear

Fear of breathlessness; being ventilated; dying; strange environment. Fears for safety of loved ones in the pandemic.

## Effect of anxiety on breathing and recovery

Feelings of suffocation, panic, fast respiratory rate; all of which could slow down weaning from ventilation, and recovery.

## Isolation

Effects of separation from loved ones: Waking up alone in ICU, increased disorientation, decreased sense of self and sense-making, lack of family support – touch, familiar faces and voices, cards, jokes, family news.

## Personal protective equipment

Sedated/delirious patients waking up to see staff in PPE could increase sense of alienation/ common delusions of being experimented on, kidnapped by aliens and so on. PPE limits speaking, eye contact, smiles, facial expressions.

## Prolonged ventilation, proning, deep sedation, paralysis

Fear, pain, discomfort, inability to communicate, waking up unable to talk or move without knowing why.

## Delirium

Confusion from Covid-19 fever, delirium from deeper sedation/longer ventilation with hallucinations, delusions, nightmares. Use of benzodiazepines for sedation could increase incidence. It is important for patients to be weaned off sedation as soon as possible.

## For alert patients

Seeing other patients on ventilators or dying

## Positive emotions

In spite of challenges, many ICU patients feel hope, relief to have survived and deep gratitude for the kindness and help they receive from ICU staff. Such support and kindness can feel like a lifeline in a dark time.