



Managing whilst your child is in hospital

Tips for parents from the psychology service





Looking after yourself during your child's hospital admission

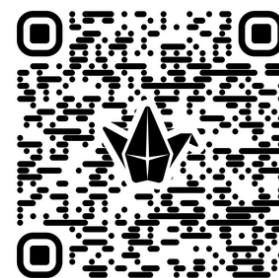


Before and during your child's stay in hospital, you might feel a mixture of different feelings. This might include anxiety, sadness, relief, pride, or anger. Often, parents tell us they feel understandably overwhelmed. As you are required to prioritise your child's needs, it is likely that your own well-being might not be a priority for you. However, caring for your child requires you to also be the best version of yourself that you can be in this difficult situation and environment. It is therefore important to pay some attention to your own well-being as well.

This workbook has five ways of looking after yourself before, during and after your child's hospital stay: Checking-in, Connection, Control, Cortisol, and Compassion. It is designed to be a workbook with prompts to help you to apply our tips to yourself.



There are also a range of additional resources that can be accessed which are mentioned throughout this booklet. The QR code to access this resource page is here.



Checking-in

Often, parents understandably describe being in “survival mode” when they are in hospital. Our minds are often good at jumping to the worst case scenario, and between things that have happened in the past or that might happen in the future.

If you can, try to take things one day at a time, and focus on being present in the moment where possible. It can often be helpful to try to develop a routine for hospital that considers your own needs for support, nutrition, rest, exercise, and emotional support.

One way of looking after your own needs can be to try to regularly check-in with yourself by asking yourself the following questions:

- How am I feeling right now? *e.g. I am feeling anxious*

- Where can I feel this in my body? *e.g. I can feel tension in my shoulders*

- What do I need right now? *e.g. I need food and a break from the ward*

- How can I look after myself right now? *e.g. Eating and going for a five minute walk*

Three-minute Body Scan

You might also find the below three-minute exercise helpful to bring you back to the present moment:

- Sit in a comfortable position and close your eyes.
- Focus on your feet. Notice how it feels for you feet to be touching the floor. Do they feel warm or cold, tense or relaxed?
- Move your attention up to your legs. How do they feel?
- Notice your back against the chair. Feel the chair supporting your body weight.
- Notice your arms. How do they feel? Is there any tension in your shoulders?
- Move your attention up to your jaw. Does it feel tense or relaxed?

Connection

Your support network during your hospital stay

We know that a hospital admission can often be a stressful experience for most families. Support from your family, friends, and usual support network has been shown to be a protective factor that helps families manage when they are in hospital. Sometimes, we can find it difficult to ask for support, but it can often make a difference when managing a hospital admission.

When thinking about support, it can be helpful to break it down into practical and emotional support. You might find it helpful to complete the below grid to help you to think about who you might need to ask for support.

You do not need a lot of people in each of the below sections, the quality of these support relationships is more important than the number of them.

People who can give you practical support

People who can give you emotional support

How will you ask them for support?

How will you ask them for support?



Connection



Connecting with your child

It can feel understandably difficult for families to feel connected to their child whilst they are in hospital due to medical equipment and having different healthcare professionals involved. However, we know that it is really important and beneficial for the well-being of both children and parents to feel connected.

If you can, try to remind yourself that despite being in this more challenging setting, there are small ways that you can connect with your child that can also be beneficial for your well-being.

You might find the following ideas helpful to connect with your child:

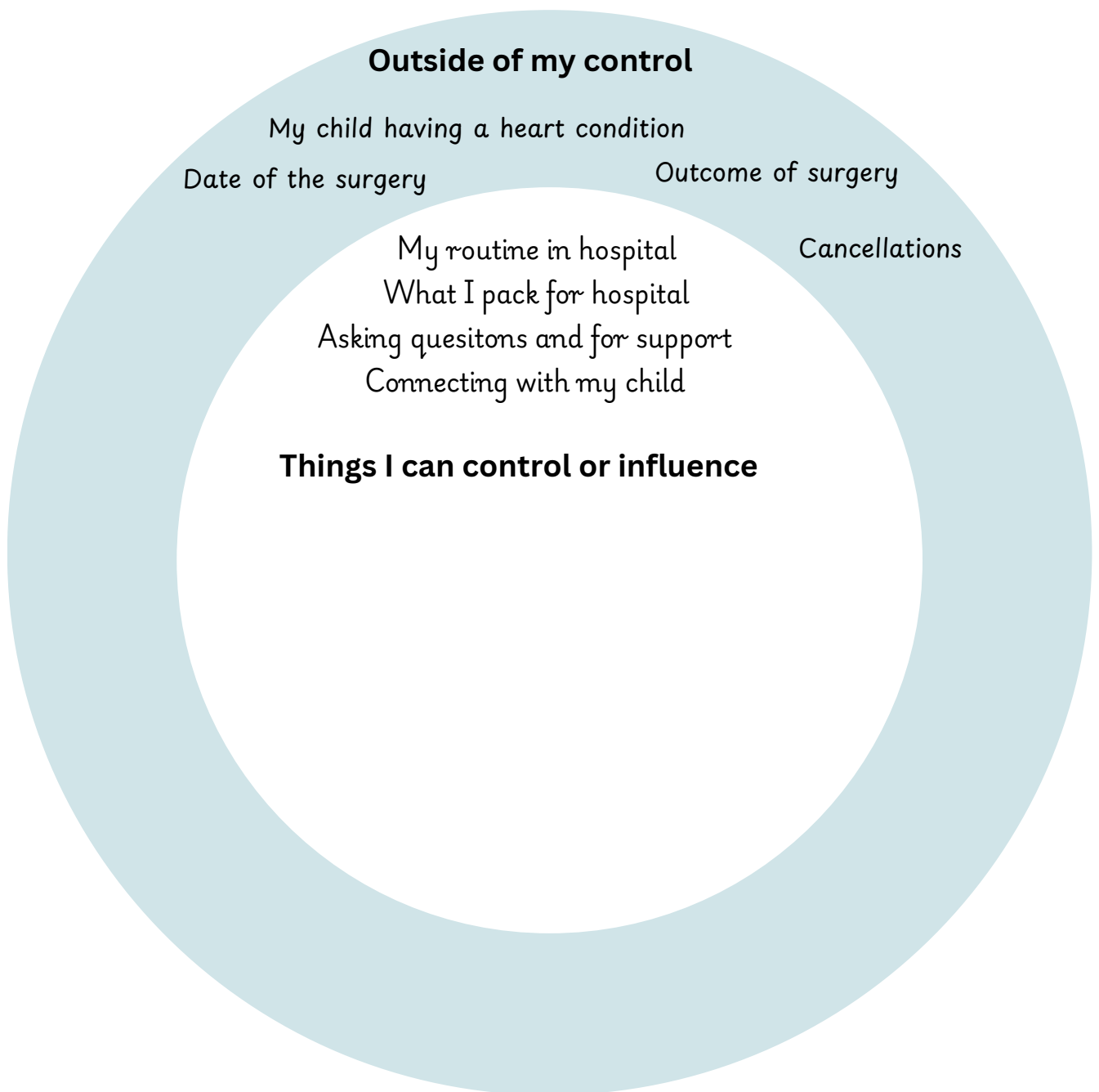
For younger children, you can connect with your child by talking to them, singing to them, or engaging with them in sensory play. You might also want to use sounds (e.g. a rattle) or touch (e.g. gently tickling them), or sight (e.g. blowing bubbles).

For older children, reading with or to them, watching something together, or playing a game with them (e.g. I spy..) might help you to feel more connected.

Control

During a hospital admission there are likely to be many stressors. There will also be things that you cannot control, which can often result in feeling understandably overwhelmed. As humans we often use control as a strategy to help us to feel safer. It can therefore be helpful to ask yourself that in this difficult situation where many things are out of your control, what can you control and where can you make a difference?

You might find it helpful to look at the circles below and add some of your own ideas about things that are outside and within your control.



Cortisol

It can be helpful to think about our three systems that regulate our emotions - our drive, our threat and our soothing system. For our well-being to be it's best, we want these three systems to be as balanced as possible. Often, when parents are in hospital these three systems will look like this with their drive and threat systems over-activated:

Drive system is working really hard to accomplish tasks and organise things.

Parents feel driven and have lots of dopamine, which can make it hard to switch off or rest.

Soothing system is under-activated making it hard to feel safe or content or connected. Less Oxytocin.

Threat system is working really hard to protect their child and manage the threats.

Parent is feeling anxious, scared, shame, anger, and disgust. This is linked with increased levels of cortisol, which can make it hard to switch off or rest.

It is understandable that your three circles might be out of balance before, during, or after your child's hospital stay. It is also helpful that your drive and threat systems are activated during this time to help you to get through. However, sometimes it can feel very uncomfortable when your threat system is working really hard and your body is experiencing increased levels of cortisol.

If possible, it can be helpful to notice this and to see if you can do anything to reduce this stressed or tense feeling. Some people find exercise, such as a fast-paced walk or jumping on the spot a helpful way of managing this. Other people find it helpful to have a cold drink, or cold shower to manage this feeling. You might also find the progressive muscle relaxation exercise on the next page helpful.

Cortisol

Progressive Muscle Relaxation

Start by focusing on your arms. Clench your fists as tightly as you can. Tense your arms.
Hold this tension for 10 seconds.

Release the tension and let your arms go floppy.
Notice how this feels.

Next, focus on your legs. Clench your toes.
Tense your legs.
Hold this for 10 seconds.

Release the tension and let your legs go floppy.
Notice how this feels.
Repeat this process again.

You might also find these movement videos created by Belfast Children's Hospital helpful. Scan this QR code to access them.



Compassion

Our drive (blue) and threat (red) systems are activated by a hard-wired and automatic response that we all have as humans. We therefore do not need to actively try to activate these systems. However, our soothing system, which is just as important, requires us to actively choose to do things to activate it to help to balance out the three circles. Sometimes our soothing system can seem like less of a priority, but all three systems are equally important for us to function at our best.

One important way of activating our soothing system is through self-compassion. This means being more understanding about ourselves and treating ourselves in the same way that we would treat a good friend. It can be helpful to ask yourself, what would you say to a friend who is in your situation? What would you do to look after them? Can you do that for yourself?

Some other ideas of how to activate your soothing system are included below. You might find it helpful to add in some of your own ideas as well.

Focus on your breathing

Have a break

Go for a walk

Picture someone who is kind.

Have a warm drink

What would they say to you right now?

Soothing System

Returning home

Many people find their child being in hospital a difficult experience. Sometimes people might experience the following after the hospital stay:

- Re-experiencing what happened in hospital through nightmares or flashbacks
- Being hyper-alert and aware of any signs of danger. This might be being hyper-alert to any signs of problems with your child's or your own health.
- Not wanting to talk or think about your experiences in hospital, or go to places that remind you of it.
- Changes in your mood, such as, feeling more withdrawn, low in mood, numb, or irritable.

All of these responses are completely understandable and are a normal response to an abnormal situation. Often they can be a consequence of your brain working hard to process what has happened. Usually, these experiences improve over time and it can be helpful to try to reassure yourself that they are an understandable consequence of what you have been through.

Sometimes you or your child might need some professional support to process these experiences. It might therefore be helpful to contact the Psychology service if you think this might be helpful for you. Our contact details are included on the final page of this booklet.

Sharing your story

Research suggests that sharing your hospital story with other trusted people and using your own experiences to help other people struggling with the same challenges can be beneficial for your own well-being. You might therefore also find it helpful to share your story with some people that you trust.

Getting Further Support

Some parents find it helpful to have support from the Cardiology Psychology service during their inpatient admission.

What can the Paediatric Cardiology Psychology Service offer?

The paediatric psychology service can support children and young people, and their families to manage during their stay in hospital. We specialise in supporting families to manage the emotional impact of a hospital admission.

What will the Psychologist do?

The Psychologist will meet with you on the ward. They will ask you about your experiences in hospital and make suggestions of things that might be helpful to try during your time in hospital.

The Psychologist might meet with you once, or multiple times on the ward. They might also follow-up with you via phone after you return home to see how things are going.

How can I speak with a Cardiology Psychologist?

If you would like to access parent support from the Psychology service during your child's hospital admission then you can ask your Cardiac Nurse Specialist or Consultant Cardiologist to refer you to our service.



This workbook was created by the South Wales Paediatric Cardiology Psychology team

To help us to improve our resources, we would really appreciate your feedback on this workbook. To share your feedback with us, please scan the below QR code:



A special thank you to all of the healthcare professionals and families who have taken the time to feedback on and help to develop this workbook with us.