

Speech and Language Therapy Department

Leaflet about disorders of consciousness

You have been given this leaflet because someone you know has low awareness or impaired levels of consciousness after a brain injury. This leaflet will explain the possible symptoms of impaired consciousness and what you can do to help.

What is a disorder of consciousness?

This is a term used to cover several different states of awareness. Consciousness requires both wakefulness (eye opening, reflexes) and awareness (complex thought processes). It takes time to accurately assess and diagnose someone's level of impaired consciousness and this may change over time.

The main disorders of consciousness are:

Coma: A state of unrousable unresponsiveness in which a person is unconscious and cannot be awakened, fails to respond normally to painful stimuli, light or sound, lacks a normal sleep–wake cycle, and does not initiate voluntary actions.

Vegetative state: This term is used to describe someone who is awake but unaware of themselves or their environment. A person in vegetative state will open their eyes, demonstrate sleep-wake cycles and basic reflexes, such as blinking when they are startled by a loud noise. However they do not demonstrate any purposeful response to sensory or cognitive stimuli, such as following an object with their eyes or responding to commands.

Minimally conscious state: This describes a person who is showing inconsistent awareness where they may respond to commands or communicate, such as moving a finger when asked.



What is locked in syndrome?

This is a rare condition which usually results from damage to the brainstem which disrupts the voluntary control of movement without disturbing either wakefulness or awareness. Patients who are 'locked in' are paralysed but fully conscious, and can usually communicate using movements of the eyes or eyelids. *This can often be confused with a vegetative or minimally conscious state.*

These patients may be able to communicate following assessment and support from a Speech and Language Therapist.



What can I do to help communicate with a person with a disorder of consciousness?

A person with impaired consciousness can be sensitive to over stimulation, therefore it is important not to overload their five senses. These guidelines will help your relative or friend from becoming over stimulated, overtired or anxious:

- Stimulation should focus on pleasant experiences such as favourite music, gentle massage and familiar topics of conversation. Show them relevant items (e.g. photos, newspapers and magazines) and try to talk around these subjects. Use a simple, normal voice as if they were able to reply.
- Try to keep visitor numbers to a maximum of 2 and ensure only 1 person speaks at a time. Activities or visiting times should last no longer than 30 minutes and allow at least 30 minutes rest without any disturbance, both before and after activities or visitors.
- If appropriate, make physical contact with the person, such as holding his/ her hand.
- The person may gain some comfort from hearing familiar voices and knowing loved ones are close by.
- Minimise background noise/distractions where possible including turning off music or T.V before talking.
- Try not to talk over the patient as if they weren't there.
- Relatives and friends will also need to have regular breaks and sleep in order to look after themselves.



Where can I go for more information?

Your local Speech and Language Therapist will be able to provide you with more information about communication difficulties following brain injury



Useful Organisations

Brain and Spine Helpline

Provides information and support on neurological conditions for patients, carers and health professionals.

Brain and Spine Foundation
3.36 Canterbury Court
Kennington Park
1-3 Brixton Road
London SW9 6DE
Tel: 0808 808 1000

Website: www.brainandspine.org.uk

Headway

Provides local help and support for people affected by brain injury

Headway House
Methodist Church
Roseberry Road
Norwich
NR3 3AB

Tel: 01603 788114

Head Injury Helpline: 0808 800 2244

Website: www.headway.org.uk

You can download comprehensive information for family and close friends of people with a disorder of consciousness on the Royal College of Physicians website.

