TAKING CARE OF YOUR FEELINGS

A burn injury causes changes in your life. Even though the event or accident that caused the burn may be over, you may still experience strong emotional or physical reactions. It is very common and normal for people to have a wide range of emotions after they have passed through an upsetting event like a burn injury.

The feeling of loss is one of the emotions you may experience. When someone suffers a loss, it is common to experience what is called the grieving process.

Briefly, the stages of grief are as follows:

- **Shock, denial, disbelief**
- **Anger, rage, hostility**
- **Bargaining** (from, "No, not me." To, "Yes, me, but…")
- **Guilt**
- **Depression, sadness**
- **Acceptance, resolution**

You may not experience all of these stages. Sometimes they overlap and don't always come in the same order. Sometimes you will find yourself re-visiting a grief stage that you thought you had already passed. Others in your family or circle of friends may also be grieving. Their experience may be different from yours, this difference can be subtle or drastic and recovery takes time. Give yourself time to work through the grief. Resources for counseling are available.

The person who has experienced a burn injury also experiences a unique emotional process as he or she recovers from the injury. Briefly, the stages are as follows:

- **Survival Anxiety**: begins when you are consciously aware of injury, focus is on whether survival is possible or not.

- **Problem of Pain**: focus is perceived pain and its relief; this may also include sadness, depression, anger, fear and anxiety.

- **Search for Meaning**: recounting the event until you find a cause-and-effect sequence that makes sense and is emotionally tolerable to you.

Chapter 10
**Investment in Recuperation:** focus on understanding and participation in activities related to recovery and independent functioning.

**Acceptance of Losses:** focus is defining and understanding long-term and permanent losses due to injury, which may take years because not all losses are known immediately.

**Investment in Rehabilitation:** focus on tasks of resuming your own unique life and lifestyle, return to maximum functioning in physical/social circle despite altered appearance and/or capabilities.

**Reintegration of Identity:** focus is to determine the impact of these changes upon your ongoing concept of identity and sense of self.

Keep in mind a patient may be at a different stage than family members. This is especially true if the patient has been sedated while in the intensive care unit. While many of these feelings are uncomfortable and sometimes distressing, they are normal.

Many people who are burned feel a lot of stress and anxiety during the first weeks following the injury. The following are some common signs of a stress reaction:

- Nightmares, intrusive images and flashbacks (e.g. memories of the burn keep coming back to you)
- Difficulty paying attention and concentrating or difficulty with memory
- Fear
- Anxiety
- Irritability
- Intense Anger
- Emotional Outbursts

**COPING TECHNIQUES**

You are having normal reactions; don’t label yourself “crazy”.
Talk to your family, friends, and health care providers about the injury and about your feelings.
Be aware of numbing your emotions with overuse of illegal drugs or alcohol.
Spend time with others.
Keep a journal and write about what you’re feeling and experiencing.
Try not to make any big life changes or decisions.
Eat regular meals, even when you don’t feel like it.
WHEN TO GET PROFESSIONAL HELP

Most people who are burned have the above emotional reactions for about a month or less, and then usually the emotions become less intense. Occasionally, these emotions last longer than a month and may even get worse. They may start to interfere with your ability to resume your normal life and functioning. If this happens, it does not mean that you did anything wrong. It just means that the emotions are too powerful to handle by yourself and you may need some help from a professional.

If you have several of the following symptoms almost every day, then it might be time to get help:

• depressed or sad mood
• inability to enjoy the things you used to
• significant change in appetite
• not able to sleep or sleeping too much
• feeling very restless or very slowed down
• feeling worthless or guilty
• difficulty thinking or concentrating
• thoughts about death or harming yourself

Additionally, you may need professional help if you are experiencing the following symptoms for more than a month after your burn:

• repeated intrusive images or flashbacks of the burn
• frequent dreams or nightmares about the burn
• acting or feeling as if the accident were happening again
• becoming very upset when you see or hear something that reminds you of the accident
• trying to avoid activities, places, or people associated with the accident
• can’t remember an important part of the accident
• feeling distant and detached from your friends and family
• feeling as though your life will be short
• irritability or outbursts of anger
• being easily startled e.g. by loud noises

If you are having the above symptoms and believe you may need some professional help, please talk to your primary care physician or to the psychology staff at the Burn Clinic. They can assist you with finding a mental health professional who can help you on the road to feeling better.
FAMILY MEETINGS

Family meetings may be scheduled on a regular basis to keep family members informed of the patient’s progress and provide a forum to ask questions or voice concerns. Doctors, nurses, social workers and other support staff may participate in these meetings. You may request a family meeting at any time and one will be arranged.

CAREGIVER COPING TECHNIQUES

Get plenty of rest.
Eat regular meals.
Share visitation with family and friends.
Ask questions regarding your loved one's progress.
Select a spokesperson for friends and family who are not present. If this is not possible, consider screening calls with an answering machine. Update the message daily.
When your loved one is sleeping take a break from your visit and go outside, get something to eat, exercise - do anything that you find relaxing.
If you want to be involved with care let the nurse know.

Allow the Burn Team to support you by listening, teaching and helping you get through this difficult time.

Short-term counseling is available from a Clinical Psychologist and a Licensed Clinical Social Worker. Do not hesitate to use these individuals, they are here to help and support you while your loved one is hospitalized.

A FRIEND IN NEED

Many times family and friends are eager to help but don't know how. Some tangible ways family and friends may help are to provide childcare, prepare a meal for the family to have at home or at the hospital, provide transportation, run errands, donate blood (to the account of the patient) and answer phone calls. Assistance with gardening and household chores may also be appreciated.

BURN SUPPORT GROUP

For anyone who has experienced a life-changing event it is often helpful to talk with those who have also experienced a similar event. Burn Support Group is a monthly
meeting where burn survivors and their families meet to share experiences, recovery tips, and provide support to each other. Some of the members of the group are trained peer-counselors and they visit patients while they are in the hospital. Ask the Burn Unit Staff for information. (See Aftercare programs)