

How To Help A Person With A Serious Burn Injury

BY KATHY J. EDWARDS, PHD

Burn survivors say that a strong support system of family and friends is one of the most important factors in a successful recovery from a burn injury. Many burn survivors report surprise that people they didn't know very well before their injury turn out to be helpful and caring, while others they thought of as good friends seem to disappear. One of the most important things you can do for a burn patient is to make contact in some way. A hospital visit isn't the only way to show you care. You can also call or send a card. The most important thing is to let the person know you're thinking about them.

HOSPITAL VISITS

Check with the hospital to find out whether or not the patient is allowed to have visitors and the best time to visit. Sometimes patients are not allowed to have visitors if they are undergoing surgery, are heavily medicated, or if they have had too many visitors. Once patients have recovered from surgery they begin a rigorous physical therapy routine. In general, late afternoon or early evening are good times for visitors but the hospital can give you more exact information.

Flowers? Many burn units do not allow patients to have flowers in their room because flowers can carry bacteria and burned patients have an increased risk of infection. If real flowers are not allowed, patients may be allowed to have artificial flower arrangements or plants in their rooms. If you are visiting and want to take a gift, the following items are recommended:

- books, especially humorous books or books on tape
- drawing supplies and/or a blank journal to write

in; even people who don't normally draw or do a lot of writing may use a journal to record thoughts after an accident

- pictures, posters, or something to hang in the hospital room, especially something that has significance to the patient or reminds them of an experience you've shared together
- small toys or coloring books for children
- a meal or favorite food item; burn patients need a lot of calories to heal
- a present for the caregiver who is spending most of their time at the hospital

What to say/what NOT to say: Burn survivors differ when it comes to the subject of talking about their injuries. It's a good idea to let the patient take the lead in talking about the accident. If they want to talk about it, be there for them as a listener. If they don't want to talk about it, don't pry.

Be positive and hopeful but don't minimize the seriousness of the injury. DO say things like "this is tough but I believe you can get through it." DON'T say things like "it's not that bad." Sometimes it's helpful to point out to the person that "it could have been worse" to help them focus on what happened in a more positive light. But most patients will respond better to this kind of statement if you also acknowledge the seriousness of their injury.

Show *empathy*, not *sympathy*. Many people are offended if you say "I know how you feel" when you have not been through a similar experience. It's better to say something like "I can see that this is a really difficult time. I'll be here for you."

Watch your nonverbal cues. Most patients appreciate visitors unless the visitor has a strong

negative reaction to the patient's appearance. Burn patients may be self-conscious about their appearance. Be aware of the messages you may be giving out with your body language. Try not to look shocked or afraid. DON'T stare at the patient, but DO make eye contact with them. Both staring and averting the eyes may be upsetting to patients.

ALTERNATIVES TO HOSPITAL VISITS

If you cannot visit while the patient is in the hospital, call, send a card, or volunteer to do something to help the patient and/or the family. Remember that immediate family members may be spending a lot of time at the hospital with the patient and unable to fulfill their normal responsibilities. There are many things you can do to help.

- help with child care
- help with yard work or household chores
- take a meal to the family members who are at home

WHEN THE PATIENT GOES HOME FROM THE HOSPITAL

Many people assume that when a burn patient goes home from the hospital the worst part of the recovery is over and soon life will return to "normal." In fact, most patients say that the hardest time for them is when they first go home from the hospital because they don't have as much help and support as they did while in the hospital. Adult patients often cannot drive for several weeks after returning home from the hospital. Almost all burn patients are required to go back to the hospital or to an outpatient clinic for physical therapy and check up visits. It is usually several weeks before the patient will have the energy or the mobility to do

everyday chores for themselves, and it is hard for most burn survivors to ask others for help. You can make it easier by calling the person and asking "what can I do to help?" It's even better to call and offer to do something specific and ask "what would be a good time for you?" Choose something you feel comfortable doing for the person. Here are some suggestions:

- provide transportation
- take a meal to the patient/family
- help with yard work or household chores you feel comfortable doing
- help with child care
- help with pets, claws are hard on new skin!
- make a "welcome home banner"
- organize a "welcome back" party when the person returns to school or work
- remember to ask how the person is doing even several months after the accident
- be a supportive listener

If you are a primary caregiver for a burn survivor, remember that it is important to take care of yourself, too. Take breaks occasionally when needed and learn how to let others help. You don't have to do it all.

A strong support system of family and friends is invaluable to a burn patient. Most burn patients say the things people DO are more important than the things people SAY when showing support. When in doubt, volunteer to help out!

Kathy Edwards is a burn survivor and professor in the Department of Communication at Weber State University. Suggestions in this article are based on a survey of the Burn Survivors Online e-mail discussion group and the author's personal experience.



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