Can Coping-Skills Training Help Patients Who Have Received Intensive Hospital Care to Cope with Depression and Anxiety?

Principal investigator
Christopher Ethan Cox, MD, MPH

Organization
Duke University

What was the research about?
Every year, nearly 1 million patients in hospital intensive care units (ICUs) get life support from machines that help them breathe. When these patients are well enough to leave the hospital, they often need help to deal with depression or anxiety.

In this study, the research team compared how well two programs worked to help patients cope with depression or anxiety after being on a breathing machine in an ICU:

- Coping-skills program that included weekly phone calls with patients and families to discuss how to cope with symptoms, plus online education materials
- Educational program that included online materials about the cause and treatment of the patient’s illness

What were the results?
For most patients and their families, neither program helped improve symptoms of depression or anxiety. But, for patients with high levels of depression and anxiety, the coping-skills program helped improve depression or anxiety symptoms more than the educational program.

What were the limits of the study?
Many patients who joined the study became too ill or died before they could complete the study. As a result, the study may not have been able to detect some differences between the two programs. Future research could find out more about how the programs work for different groups of people.

Who was in the study?
The study included 175 patients who had been on a breathing machine in a hospital ICU for at least two days. The study also included 86 of the patients’ family members, who were mostly spouses or parents. The average age of patients was 52.

What did the research team do?
The research team assigned patients to one of two groups by chance. In the first group, patients received 30-minute phone calls every week for six weeks. During the calls, a psychologist gave patients advice about how to manage symptoms and develop coping skills. Patients also had access to online materials. In the second group, patients received six informational videos and materials about their illness. Patients in the second group also had two calls with a member of the research team to ask questions about the study.

The team interviewed the patients and their families before assigning them to groups, and then three months and six months after the study started.

How can people use the results?
Hospital ICUs could consider using a program to teach coping skills to patients who are very depressed or anxious at hospital discharge from the ICU.

To learn more about this project, visit pcori.org/Cox042.