



Coma stimulation: suggested activities

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Introduction

It is quite common for family members to feel 'useless' when a relative is in a coma, and to be desperate to do something to help. A coma stimulation programme (sometimes called a coma arousal programme) is an approach based on stimulating the unconscious person's senses of hearing, touch, smell, taste and vision individually in order to help their recovery.

There is still controversy over how effective it is to try to stimulate a person in coma. However, most would say that such programmes have some beneficial effect, even if only to provide something constructive for the family to do. It is very important that the activities used would have been enjoyable for the patient before the injury. For example, only play music they like and talk to them about subjects they are interested in. Try not to do anything for too long in order to avoid tiring the person out.

A stimulation programme must only be started after discussion with the clinical staff, who will advise you what might be appropriate at any particular stage in the recovery process.

Activity suggestions

Here are some examples of activities that could form part of a coma stimulation programme:

- Make sure that a few friends and family members visit regularly, rather than in large groups at a time.
- Help nursing staff with simple tasks, such as wiping the person's face.
- Make physical contact with the person, such as holding his/her hand.
- Talk or read to your relative, e.g. tell them about your day, or what is happening at home; talk about their favourite sports team; speak of familiar names, places, interests and experiences that the person has had in the past.



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- Show the person familiar photographs of family, friends and pets.
- If allowed, play the patient's favourite music. Try not to play it too loud or for too long.
- Place objects in the person's hands. Use objects with pleasant tactile sensations and different textures such as soft toys, silk scarves or books.
- Be aware that – even if the person does not make any response – they may still understand what is being said to them, or even said about them over the bedside. Talk to them sensibly, in a normal voice, as if they were able to reply.
- Patients often say, when they are at last able to communicate, what a comfort it was to them to hear a family member's voice.

It is important that friends and relatives do not feel that they have to spend all day at the person's bedside. The patient will need quiet periods as well and it is important not to 'over-do' the stimulation - short periods are enough. Relatives and friends will also need to get regular breaks, sleep and remember to look after themselves. Try to have some time for yourself for activities you find enjoyable and don't feel guilty about doing so.

To discuss any issues raised in this factsheet, or to find details of our local groups and branches, please contact the Headway helpline free of charge on 0808 800 2244 (Monday - Friday, 9am-5pm) or by email at helpline@headway.org.uk.

You can also find more information and contact details of groups and branches on our website at www.headway.org.uk/supporting-you.

First published July 2011. Last reviewed February 2013. Next review date August 2017.