

Top 10 Tips for Staff Supporting Patients with Learning Disabilities or Autism during Covid-19

1

Clinical Frailty Scale limitations

Clinicians working in critical care should be aware of the limitations of using the Clinical Frailty Scale (CFS) as the sole assessment of frailty. The CFS should not be used in people with learning disabilities or autism. An individualised assessment is recommended in all cases where the CFS is not appropriate. Follow [NICE guidance](#) for further details.

Wellbeing in the community

People with learning disabilities or autism can leave their homes more than once daily for exercise with carers, as part of an agreed plan, and not more than once for essential goods. Consider promoting fun and engaging activities and virtual opportunities for maintaining social connections. Ideas can be found on the [KHP Covid-19 learning disabilities or autism resources page](#).

2**3**

Testing for Covid-19

When testing for Covid-19, reassure your patient that it is OK to be worried about having a test and explain that you are there to help them feel better. Allow for additional time and make any reasonable adjustments as necessary such as allowing more time, building a rapport and using language that is easy to understand. Ease any sensory sensitivities by showing them what is going to happen. [Books Beyond Words](#) have a range of free Covid-19 related publications.

Contact the specialist learning disabilities or autism team

Upon admission, contact the specialist learning disabilities team or liaison learning disabilities nurse and find out about the additional needs/preferences of the patient. Consider whether the patient has a hospital passport, find out details of their carer/next of kin, ensuring that such details are included within daily management plans whilst in critical care. Hospital visitor policies have been updated to allow visitors for patients with learning disabilities or autism. Ask the patient for their [NHSE's Grab and Go](#) Covid-19 emergency health passport.

4**5**

NHS clinical guidelines and Coronavirus Act 2020

Whilst the Coronavirus Act 2020 has brought about easements in delivery of the Care Act 2014, several areas remain unaltered. Ensure that wellbeing is promoted, safeguard against harm, provide advocacy support, prevent escalation of need, provide advice to social care and families and involve people who use services and their carers in decisions about their care. NHSE has produced a [clinical guide](#) for front line staff to support the management of patients with a learning disability, autism or both during the coronavirus pandemic – relevant to all clinical specialities.

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6

Wellbeing and mental health needs when in hospital

Can your patients connect virtually with family and friends when in hospital? Are there any activities they can do on the ward, such as listening to music, reading or drawing? Have you asked how they are feeling? Consider using pictorial mood and pain charts—access via your learning disabilities or autism specialist team. Be mindful of the potential for diagnostic overshadowing. Follow Mental Capacity Act (MCA) principles to secure the rights of people who lack capacity to decide on their care and treatment.

Communicate and reassure patients

Communicate why you are wearing a mask and protective equipment as the way you look might make them feel worried – consider having a picture of you on your apron with your name badge, introduce yourself and give your name. Anxiety may be communicated in different ways – including behavioural changes. Refer to the patients hospital passport, use easy read and other accessible information formats.

7**8**

Hospital environment stressors

Consider the hospital environment – are there ways to make the environment more relaxing for the patient, including considering noise levels, avoiding bright lights and pointing out where the toilets and nursing station are. [Visitor guidelines](#) allow for patients with learning disabilities or autism to have visitors – see NHS England's website for further details.

Discharging patients

Include Covid-19 advice on discharge letters and ask patient if they have a preference for how community teams can reach them i.e. a mobile phone or via social media, and what are the plans for transport home? If being discharged to supported living or residential care home, has a support worker or carer been informed? Consider what clinical assurances a supported living or residential care home may need from you post-Covid-19.

9**10**

Look after yourself

During these challenging times, it can be hard to focus our own mental health and wellbeing. A range of resources are available on the [KHP Covid-19 staff support pages](#). For further support, visit your trusts wellbeing zones (GSTT), wellbeing hubs (KCH) or rest and recoup hubs (SLaM). Details of opening times can be found [here](#).