

Hospital Recovery Myths: Whoopi Goldberg's Near-Death Battle With Sepsis



By Jamie Wells, M.D. — March 15, 2019



By David Shankbone, via Flickr ^[1]

Comedian, actress and “The View” talk show host Whoopi Goldberg survived, but is still recovering from, a harrowing ordeal. She stopped by the show to address her precarious health status after a more than month long absence that culminated in a three week hospital stay for double pneumonia and sepsis - for which her doctor alerted her how close to death she came (to watch her compelling video remarks, see [here](#) ^[2]). It is clear she comprehends the gravity of the picture and appreciates the challenges along her path forward.

Given the confusion and quick-to-judge falsehoods that abound whenever such scenarios arise with a public figure, it is important to clarify the many myths surrounding hospital length of stay and recovery. You don't have to look far to encounter perpetuation of faulty narratives, consider Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg's recent post-operative cancer recovery and the opinions with respect to the speed of her clinical course (review [here](#) ^[3]). Or, recall when the First Lady Melania Trump was admitted for a kidney procedure and pundits galore speculated endlessly about her hospital length of stay (read [here](#) ^[4]).

What Goldberg describes is quite serious. In her [own words](#) ^[2],

“You think you can push through because you got a little cold, you say, ‘I’m just gonna keep going, keep going.’ And you think because you’ve healed quick before, that something crazy can’t happen. Well, it can,” the star explained. “I had double pneumonia and sepsis ... And so they had to pump a lot of stuff out of me. This is a

cautionary tale for all of us. You must really take care of yourself, because there is little tiny stuff out there that will kill you that you never think of.”

She makes a crucial point. There is a false sense of security with illness that what happened before is set to repeat itself when, in reality, each disease follows a unique path. Fortunately, she knew something was very wrong and went to the hospital. For those challenged by such profound lung infections and the accompanying fluid that amasses to suppress further a person's breathing and oxygenation, progression to dire events can be precipitous. Then, there is sepsis. This is a life-threatening response to infection that overwhelms the body and can cause tissue damage to multiple organ system failure. When this is particularly severe, septic shock can ensue which reflects circulatory collapse and an increased risk of death.

Like most conditions, symptoms and severity can appear along a wide array. However, certain populations are more at risk of falling on the extreme side (e.g. older adults, infants, those with underlying problems like kidney disease, impaired immunity or diabetes). Depending on the severity, some patients require amputation or to be placed on a ventilator to assist their breathing. People experience a change in mental status, disorientation. But, the good news is many recover completely.

Though a return to normal is possible for many people, the path can be significantly challenging for others. Rehabilitation can involve initial assistance with daily living (e.g. help with sitting up, standing or the bathroom) with the goal of getting you back to your baseline. Enduring intensive medical care for a protracted period can induce significant stress on the body. People are often weak, have muscular atrophy, are less resilient to acquiring infection and so on. They can find walking, getting around and sleeping, even eating challenging. Breathlessness and body aches are not uncommon when recovering. Feelings of anxiety and constant worry can be present, as can confusion and being unsure of oneself. Frustration with the rate of progress and an inability to concentrate can be problematic.

These hospitalizations can be traumatizing for people. Fortunately, there are tools to make future prospects optimistic again. It is simply important to manage expectations as recovery can be slow-going at times along a windy, sometimes bumpy road. Families can help fill in gaps from patients' memories about the ordeal. Long-term issues can arise from organ dysfunction, loss of limbs, and diminished cognition as well as panic attacks and nightmares. To learn more, see [here](#) [5].

But, the time it takes is the time it takes. This is not uniform between individuals and it is not a competition. There can be setbacks as a normal part of recovery and no right or perfect road. For anyone, surviving the event and being out of the woods is quite a promising start.

COPYRIGHT © 1978-2016 BY THE AMERICAN COUNCIL ON SCIENCE AND HEALTH

Source URL: <https://www.acsh.org/news/2019/03/15/hospital-recovery-myths-whoopi-goldbergs-near-death-battle-sepsis-13879>

Links

[1] <https://www.flickr.com/photos/shankbone/3026904000>

[2] https://pagesix.com/2019/03/14/whoopi-goldberg-returns-to-the-view-after-near-death-illness/?utm_campaign=SocialFlow&utm_medium=SocialFlow&utm_source=NYPTwitter

[3] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2018/11/08/justice-ruth-bader-ginsburg-breaks-ribs-after-fall-what-does-mean-13584>

[4] <https://www.acsh.org/news/2018/05/14/melania-trump%E2%80%99s-hospitalization-reflects-medical-progress-12960>

[5] <https://www.cdc.gov/sepsis/signs-symptoms.html>