

## Respiratory Failure and Ventilator Dependency Surviving One Breath at a Time Until the End

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### COLUMN ARTICLE

Respiratory failure and ventilator dependency go hand in hand when the body is no longer capable of breathing adequately. Hypoxemia- low blood oxygen levels and hypercapnia- high carbon dioxide levels can cause significant decompensation ultimately resulting in death if intervention is not implemented. As time passes, the body's natural drive to breathe weakens. The struggle to breathe brings on unrelenting fear and panic sets in as life becomes the only focus. Alternative options become a fleeting thought as the body cannot sustain what is needed. As a result, the need for ventilatory support becomes the only option for survival.

Respiratory failure is a debilitating condition that occurs due to inadequate gas exchange in the body. The respiratory system works harmoniously as we breathe. We inhale and exhale without a thought as it is a normal process, however when the body fails to adequately oxygenate and ventilate, the drive to breathe becomes affected. The body becomes distressed. The inability to adequately oxygenate results in hypoxemia, thus depriving the blood, body, tissues and organs of oxygen. The lack of ventilation results in an increase in carbon dioxide causing hypercapnia, thus preventing the exhaled air from releasing. The body tends to become dangerously sleepy. The body's drive to breathe is depressed as levels worsen. Living, loving and breathing become an unsuccessful struggle. End of life becomes more than a

thought and fear becomes the anchor to decisions needed to survive without considering the consequences.

Ventilatory support due to the inability to maintain adequate ventilation and oxygenation is frustrating and frightening. The change in life and the fear of the unknown brings on a flood of emotions. The simple pleasures in life are lost. Decisions that were once an afterthought become the focus of survival. Life priorities change and reality sets in as the struggle to take each breath becomes an unpleasant reality. These feelings bring on many unexpected changes of events which lead to uncertainty. Is life worth living? Will the struggle to live become easier with time on a ventilator? Is the pain and hurt worth the fight to survive? Should it end now? Will there be relief? Can there be a peaceful end? No one can answer those questions except for those living the reality. So many changes to accept and so many hurdles to overcome. When is it time to say enough? Would this decision fall on the medical team? Should life decisions be addressed with family members or should we discuss the inevitable expectations with the person affected by the changes that are happening? Ultimately, the ventilator will no longer sustain life and the long struggle ends. Peace will come. To all who have witnessed the struggles of Respiratory Failure, the end always comes. One can only hope that a peaceful end will be welcomed.

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