

Tips For Being Present With Those Who Are Dying

By Norman Mitchell

A common fear for the terminally ill is that they will die alone. By nature, we are a species that prefer to be with others, seek meaning and fulfillment in relationships, therefore, why would death be viewed any differently? But sitting with those who are dying is often difficult for family members, friends and clergy to actually do. Being present for those who are terminally ill can actually be quite simple.

- **Introduce yourself** if it has been a while since you have seen this family member or friend. Remember that towards the end of life memory lapses are normal and should not be taken personally.
- If the individual is not awake, alert and/or oriented, **talk to her/him** as if they are. It is well accepted in the hospice community that hearing is the last sense to leave a person, so even if she/he does not respond, never be afraid to talk and share stories.
- **Keep the environment comfortable** – based on the individual's wishes or preferences.
 - Use music that is meaningful to the patient/family
 - Use the environment to assist and comfort (family portraits, knick-knacks, sentimental treasures)
 - Reduce distractions in order to create a calm and peaceful environment
- **Simple acts of compassion** are some of the most special gifts you can give
 - Placing a cool cloth on a warm forehead
 - Applying a soft tissue to wipe a person's chin
 - Softly stroking the person's hair
 - Gently touching her/his hand

- Be aware that touch may be irritating or uncomfortable at times. Watch for non-verbal cues such as pulling away, jumping/startling when touched, grimacing or frowning and/or restlessness
- **Have empathy** for the person / family's suffering
 - Know and learn how to sit and be with emotional pain without having to eliminate it or fix it (if this is difficult, the hospice social worker is a wonderful person to talk to)
 - Appropriately share your experiences and emotions as they relate to your purpose in being with the patient and family.
 - Honor the spiritual and cultural aspects of the individual who is dying
 - Keep the moments intimately personal
- **Listen** unconditionally and attentively
 - If the individual is conscious and can communicate, listen more than you talk
 - If she/he interrupts you, stop and listen
 - If the person is not conscious, be cognitive of changes in her/his physical condition that may indicate a need to call the hospice nurse

Always remember to slow down and share the silence. Be comfortable in saying nothing – when nothing needs to be said.

“What I have learned most from my experiences with the dying person is that the most important aspect of the vigil is that I am there with them and present in the moment.” Frances Weld Peabody

References

1. Author unknown. “Supporting a grieving person” Helpguide.org. www.helpguide.org/mental/helping_grieving.htm. 07 April 2013.
2. Education for Physicians on End-Of-Life Care. Participants Handbook. Module 12. Last Hours of Living. 1999. Print.