



Supporting someone who is dying

It is a natural instinct to help a dying family member or friend.

Your care, empathy and compassion shown in practical support will be challenged in witnessing their suffering. At the same time we may worry if we are doing the “right thing” in meeting the needs of the person who is dying and not causing harm or distress. As a result, you may be unsure about how best to help.

Dr Simon Noble, a British palliative care physician, writing in the book ‘How to Have a Good Death’, advises: “One way to approach the question of what the dying person needs from you is to consider what he or she needed from you when they weren’t dying.

“If you are the person’s partner, that’s what he or she still needs: someone to be there. If he or she

was your mate who you went down to the pub and talked rubbish with, that’s what he or she needs now: someone to hang out with.”

He adds: “From conversations with patients who are dying, it seems that the thing they value most from friends, loved ones and professionals is openness and honesty.

“Admitting that you don’t know what to say is more valued than some banal comment offering false hope or promises. They are not looking for you to make it all right. They just want you to be you.”*

*Henderson, D. et. al (2006) How to have a good death (London: Dorling Kindersley), p59-60.

For more visit livingwelldyingwell.org
or call CatholicCare on 13 18 19.

Being by the bedside of someone you love who is dying is a unique privilege, but it isn't easy.

To help a little we have drawn on the wisdom and experience of those who have done it before. We have taken advice from leading palliative care consultants, nurses, chaplains, friends and relatives.

- Be attentive to what your loved one wants – you are there to support them.
- If something concerns you about your loved one, seek out help or advice.
- Sitting at the bedside can be exhausting so try to eat, drink and take regular breaks.
- Aim to create some personal space around the bed, particularly if your loved one is in hospital.
- Don't feel you have to sit in silence – gentle background conversation or music can be comforting.
- Organise a regular email or set up a WhatsApp group to update family and friends.
- Consider bringing small children for a brief visit and inviting older ones.
- Let your loved one sleep – they may be sleeping a lot in the last days.
- The dying person may speak about dead relatives coming to meet them – listen and don't be afraid.
- Remember those important last words that you, and they, might like to say: 'thank you, I'm sorry, I love you'.
- Holding your loved one's hand is often more powerful than words.
- Don't be surprised if your loved one dies when you are out of the room – it happens a lot.
- Be prepared for a change in breathing patterns – it's normal for your loved one to stop breathing and then restart and this may sound like a gasp. It indicates the terminal phase of their illness.
- Be prepared also for their breathing to sound laboured and for a gurgling sound caused by fluid building up at the back of their throat.
- Reassure your loved one that they are free to let go – this 'permission' is often taken.

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