

Saying Goodbye



Saying good-bye to a dying loved one doesn't come naturally to most of us. All they ask from us are: words of candor, reassurance and love.

Lesson #1: Don't wait until the last minute

It's hard to say good-bye, but putting off meaningful conversations is perhaps the number one source of regret. Spend time telling them what they mean to you. Dying people want to hear four very specific messages from their loved ones: "Thank you." "Please forgive me." "I forgive you." "I love you."

Lesson #2: It's OK, even comforting, to let on that you know the end is nearing

Realize that the dying person usually knows what's happening. The person who's dying starts to wonder if anyone else gets it. This stresses them—they have to think about others' needs instead of dealing with their own. It helps to reassure them that you understand and in a way, you're granting the person permission to die peacefully.

Lesson #3: Follow the dying person's lead

If the person talks about impending death either directly or indirectly through a metaphor, a helpful response would be to say: "Tell me more." If they are expressing anxiety about finishing certain tasks, you can always follow with reassurance: "You've done a good job, you're all set." Sometimes the person may ask, "Am I dying?" as a way of gauging your feelings. You can reflect the question back: "I don't know. How are you feeling?" Others refuse to discuss death and their wishes should be honored.

Lesson #4: Truth is good — but so is a little white lie

Being reassured that their loved ones will be fine in their absence helps them feel that they can go peacefully. It may help to say: "You look tired, sweetheart, please don't worry about me." It's also common for them to seek reconciliation with people, with God or the universe, or within themselves. They often ask directly about particular relationships or express a desire to see someone they have been in conflict with. Telling them that they made a difference to their family and friends will fill their need to know that their life had meaning and purpose.

Regrets and Guilt

Many feel that they let their loved one down by not being in the room the exact moment of death. They blame themselves for allowing the person they love to die alone. In many cases they had been there for days and had only stepped out for a moment.

Passing away often happens after a loved one leaves the bedside, almost as if the dying person wanted to spare them that final moment. Also common is the dying person that seems to hang on waiting for that special person to arrive. Most dying people seem peaceful at the end and the moments before death are calm. They seem to naturally go into a profound and deep sleep before they die.

Caregiver's Heart

It is common for the health of caregivers to become compromised. Sometimes help for caregivers can be difficult to find but Hospice Volunteers go willingly into homes to relieve the caregivers as needed. When the need is there, it is natural to do all that is required for a loved one, but later the survivor's underlying health problems may begin to surface.

Caring for a loved one whose life has been shortened is challenging work that most of us are untrained or prepared for. The emotions, the worry, the uncertainty about treatments, caring for children and the social isolation are sometimes more than any person can bear.

Most of us know caregivers who just need a little encouragement to live a healthier lifestyle. Take them out to lunch and let them talk, offer no advice, express concern about their health in a gentle way and spend some meaningful time together. If ever there is a time in a person's life when understanding, acceptance and a respectful attitude are necessary, this is it.

Sometimes it is helpful to share your own story – about being exhausted, frustrated and the endless demands, and in the end it being the most rewarding time of your life. Exhausted and frustrated because you had to do a host of things for which you had no training or experience. Demanding as you make sure they get their rest while handling the endless phone calls, visitors and the never ending juggling of medication.

Remember that Hospice and Palliative Care have services that can help and that you're not alone – you don't have to do it all by yourself. Our loved ones are received with love, caring and the expertise to help them live out their lives free of pain and in dignity.

Anticipatory Grief



Have you ever noticed how much of life is spent anticipating events that are about to happen? What many people don't understand is that when we learn a loved one is dying we begin to grieve the loss even while he or she is still alive. This experience is known as anticipatory grief.

What might you experience during the period of anticipatory grief?

- Sadness** You will experience an intense sadness knowing that someone you love is dying and some of your plans will go unfulfilled.
- Frustration** One day you will be in denial. The next, you may be hopeful your loved one will beat the illness. This ambivalence can be very frustrating.
- Guilt** You may have said or done things that make you feel guilty. Take steps now to reduce the guilt. You still have time to say things you have always wanted to say to the one who is dying.
- Anger** You may be angry with the doctors, with the one who is dying or even God.
- Loneliness** You may already be experiencing loneliness because the person is no longer able to stay at home.
- Fear** You are entering unknown territory. You may be afraid of how the disease will run its course. You may fear what life will be like after your loved one has died.
- Hope** Many people in this situation find a great well of inner strength. You may find strength in your spirituality, your friends and in your own life experiences.

Fight the “survivor’s guilt” and seek to be happy because you are still here. It’s natural for your mind to compare yourself with others and to find their lives are better. Don’t neglect your health – eat three meals and socialize to help control your stress. Treasure your memories: both the ones in the past and the ones in your future.

Eulogy



Giving a eulogy isn't easy, but it's something you will never regret doing because it's your chance to celebrate the person – and to say goodbye. Of course you'll be nervous but people are there to honor this person – not to evaluate your speaking skills.

- Give the eulogy a beginning, middle and an end. Remember to keep it short as the average eulogy is about 3 to 5 minutes long.
- Briefly introduce yourself by stating your name and describing your relationship to the deceased and/or their family.
- Don't just list qualities that they possessed. Instead, mention a quality and then tell a story to highlight it.
- Try to relax and focus on the points you want to make. Tell yourself that you're not there to win any contest or to impress anyone. You're there to share your feelings.
- Make eye contact and connect with the audience by not rushing – read slowly and pause briefly between paragraphs.
- Look up between sentences and focus on the back of the room to avoid distractions.
- Rehearse the eulogy before the big day. Read the draft of your eulogy aloud to someone as practice. Words sound different when they are spoken out loud.
- Have a standby for backup in case you're not emotionally prepared.
- Be sincere and do your job to honor and comfort those listening.
- Don't worry about being perfect – it's an honor and that's what counts!
- Be careful with humor as feelings are fragile at this time.
- Make sure you say something specific about the family of the deceased – write out their names and say something directly to them.