

The Gift of Presence: Tips for Visiting Someone Who is Dying

By Jeanette Stehr-Green, Volunteer Hospice of Clallam County

We sometimes avoid visiting friends or family members who are terminally ill. We make lots of excuses. We don't know what to say. We don't know how to act. We don't want to be a bother.

The hard truth is that dying, the final stage of life, can be a lonely experience without the presence of family and friends. A visit during this time can bring comfort to the dying person and their family. It can also provide an opportunity to share feelings, reminisce, and say goodbye.

Visiting a dying person seems difficult because most of us lack experience. It only takes a little courage and a few ideas to create a meaningful moment.

Arranging the visit

Although there are physical signs that death is approaching, it is often difficult to predict exactly when someone will die. Do not put off your visit with a dying person; you might miss the chance to see them again if you wait.

If the dying person is at home, call ahead to make sure that the person is up for a visit and that your visit will not interfere with caregiving or other activities. If the dying person is in a facility, make sure to arrange your visit during routine visiting hours.

If spending time alone with a dying person seems overwhelming, see if others with a connection to both you and the dying person can join you such as mutual friends or co-workers. With others in the room, the visit may be more light-hearted, and you may feel less pressure.

Whether you visit alone or with others, plan on a short visit (e.g., 15 minutes or so). If the visit is going well, you can stay longer but be conscious of the dying person's needs. Be ready to step away gracefully if you notice that they are getting tired.

How to act

It is important to remind yourself that you are visiting the person, not their disease, diagnosis, or prognosis. Visit with no agenda in mind.

Try to bring a sense of calm into the room. Greet the dying person as you always would and announce yourself if they seem confused or nonresponsive.

Sit down, close to the dying person, if possible. Being nearby allows your attention to center on the dying person, not their family or caregiver. Try to position yourself at eye level to make it easier for the dying person to see you and maintain a balance in the relationship.

A big part of the visit will be spent talking. (See below.) The time, however, can include looking at photos, listening to music, singing together, reading aloud, or spiritual care. If asked, you might help with comfort care for the dying person (e.g., combing their hair, massaging their hands or feet) or light household chores.

Sadness is likely to be at the surface during the visit and does not need to be hidden from your loved one. Tears express love, as well as sadness, and can help the dying person know what they meant to you. Anger has no place during your visit with a dying person.

Visitors often want to hold a dying person's hand to feel more connected with them. Start by asking the person if it is okay to hold their hand and then tell them what you are doing. You can also put their hand on top of yours. If the person does not like the feeling, he or she can pull away.

What to say

Finding the "right" words can be hard; just speak from your heart and let the conversation flow naturally.

If the dying person is willing to talk, let the conversation go where they want it to go. Listen actively and encourage them to say the things they need to say. A helpful response is "Tell me more."

If the person talks about their impending death allow them to talk. Be honest about the situation. It will be easier for the dying person if you acknowledge what is happening so that they do not feel like they need to hide their thoughts or be strong to support you.

If the dying person does not take the initiative in speaking, a casual conversation is also fine. Talk about mutual friends, shared memories, or even the weather. You do not need to entertain or chatter.

If the dying person is unable to talk, you can still make your visit count. Just sit quietly and be present. Say a few words to let the dying person know when you arrive and when you leave. Even if they don't respond, they might hear what you say.

Saying goodbye

You never know when the end is near. Take advantage of the time together to share how the dying person has impacted your life and what they mean to you.

If your relationship with the dying person has been troubled, deal with regrets by saying, "Please forgive me." Free yourself of hard feelings by saying, "I forgive you." Dying helps put things into perspective, and you might find that small quarrels or disagreements now seem trivial.

Visiting a dying person may seem daunting, but you don't have to know exactly what to say or do. Simply show up, pay attention, and tell the truth. Your presence alone will be the greatest gift of all.

Jeanette Stehr-Green volunteers at Volunteer Hospice of Clallam County (VHOCC) along with a host of other community members who provide respite care, grief and bereavement support, and access to free medical equipment.