

Being There, How to Help a Dying Friend

Your First Response

When you first learn that someone close to you is dying, the fears and sadness that well up inside are often paralyzing. You want to do something to make everything right again, yet you feel powerless to help. This is certainly a common response. These feelings are normal and valid.

Addressing Your Fears

Often the news that a friend is dying brings with it a sense of vulnerability; you realize that this could happen to you. You need to recognize these fears so you can cope with your own sense of vulnerability. Sometimes your own losses are so recent that you may need to pull back and wait to help until you have healed your own hurts and worked through the pain of your own grief.

However, you may not want to wait until you feel entirely "comfortable," but rather go expecting that you may have some feelings of discomfort.

Importance of Doing Something

As difficult as it may seem, it is important that you **do something** immediately to acknowledge that you care and want to help. A card or phone call can be the most appropriate place to begin. Many times people who are dying feel isolated from friends and family. They sense people are "whispering" about them, and they long to be included. A contact that says "teach me how I can help you" will dispel these feelings of isolation.

You can share many of the same things you shared in the past when you adapt creatively. You can walk together at a slower pace or shop for a briefer period, closer to home and in a mall where there are benches to rest if a break is needed. If you used to dine out together, you can share a homecooked meal or bring in Chinese food or pizza. You can rent a videotape or watch a movie on television if you can no longer go to the theater together.

Simple Things are Best

If you feel the need to do something "significant," you might "spin your wheels" looking for the perfect way to help and pass by the many smaller things you could easily do. You could send a card or note as these messages are very special when they keep coming week after week. You can bring a rose or a handpicked bouquet, a loaf of bread or a game to share. You can offer to do something you know needs to be done, whether it's running an errand or raking leaves.

Remember that specific offers of assistance are best because they are easier to accept. If you say, "Call me if you need something," it puts the burden back on the person needing help. It is better if you can be gently assertive and suggest what might help. If you take the initiative and reach out, your friend only needs to say "yes" or "no" to each offer of assistance.

Give What's Comfortable

It's important to give what you feel most comfortable sharing. If you are uncomfortable, your discomfort will be apparent. This does not mean that you should limit yourself to those things that are easy, but rather that you begin where you are most comfortable and stretch from that point. The gift of your presence is often more appreciated than anything money can buy.

Faithfulness is a Must

You need to follow through with those things you have promised to do. If you say you will stop by to visit, you must honor that promise. If you have time constraints that limit your availability, you need to be realistic about those limitations. The most important thing you can do is to be dependably faithful... faithful to your promises and faithful in your presence.

Tears are Healing

Tears should be allowed to flow without interference. Pushing tissue toward someone or patting a back can be a non-verbal cue that says it's time to stop crying. You will be of greater comfort if you sit quietly and let your friend know that you are willing to stay until the tears have stopped. Holding someone can often be of comfort. Your own tears are also an indication of your love and concern and can be healing when shared, but you need to be careful not to overwhelm your friend with your own sadness.

Laughter is Appropriate

Although sadness may be what you expect to feel at all times, laughter may be very helpful if it is natural. If you or your friend have an active sense of humor, laughter will come if you allow it. The release of tension it brings will be both helpful and healing. Things that might encourage laughter are cartoons, puppies, balloons, stories about daily happenings or news about friends.

Why Listening is so Vital

As hard as it may be to listen to the pain of a friend, it is important that you allow that pain to be expressed. Often just being there is more valuable than any words you might share. Listening eases your friend's pain by allowing it to be shared.

It may be helpful to encourage your friend to reflect on life. For some this verbal journey through time can help sort through both good and bad experiences. This process is always most therapeutic when shared with a caring friend. Stray thoughts that roam the mind are clarified when verbalized so that trials are put in perspective, and joys are multiplied. If this journey is shared, all that is required of you is to listen and show a genuine interest in what is being said.

For some, this process of life review may be too painful. You need to remember that your friend may choose not to share those remembrances, or not to share them at this time. Always respect your friend's wishes and timing.

Active Listening

The most helpful listening is done with an open heart and a closed mouth. It is rarely helpful to expound at length on your own experiences unless your friend asks you to share these stories. A simple nod can be more encouraging than a lengthy review of what has been said. Opening your eyes wide in interest, looking at the person who is speaking and even leaning slightly forward all say non-verbally that you are interested in every word your friend has to share.

At times your friend may choose not to talk, and you need to respect that silence. It may take time before you feel comfortable sitting in silence and not filling the quiet with chatter. You may need to practice this skill.

Allow Questions to be Expressed

Sometimes you feel responsible for answering questions like, "Why me?" or "Why now?" These are very difficult questions and often have no answers. Questions may need to remain questions. Awkward as it feels to not have an answer, simply acknowledging that the questions are both real and difficult can be comforting.

Easy answers or responses such as, "You shouldn't feel like that" sound judgmental and build barriers between friends. Such responses may also reduce the honest sharing feelings between the two of you in the future.

You can ask how your friend might answer that question. The answer given may help both of you understand better what prompted the question.

Unfinished Business

Most people are unprepared for death. Many things are left to be finished when news comes that life itself is at risk. As a friend you can be of great assistance by helping sort out what is most important on the list of things left undone. You can begin by helping your friend verbalize these things and by recording them on a list. Often there are many things that can be completed easily in the time that

remains.

Letters can be written and goodbyes can be said. Photographs can be put in albums for children or friends. Lists can be made of where important papers are kept such as insurance policies or immunization records. You can help your friend pass on special skills to those who will be left behind. Teaching a spouse to cook or a child to mend can help dispel the fear that they will not be able to cope. Visits can be made to special places. Wounds or broken relationships may be healed. Forgiveness and reconciliation can be very comforting.

Gentle probing questions can help identify a friend's unfinished business and can give you direction as to how you can be of help. As you make these lists, remember to include all the dreams and hopes your friend has. The priorities will sift themselves. You need not intrude a heavy reality on this process and thereby limit hope.

Hope is Appropriate

Even when recovery is beyond "hope," you need not give up all hope. You may change what you hope for, but hope is still actively present. You can hope for a peaceful death for your friend, or for the opportunity to do something special together one more time. Hope is always appropriate.

Issues of Faith

Your faith or belief system can be a real source of comfort in times of trouble. Faith in God can bring great solace. Your own beliefs may help you accept pain and sorrow, but you need to remember that if your beliefs are not shared by the person who is dying, they can sound hollow and insensitive.

To say to a friend that illness or death is "God's will" can be traumatizing and harsh. It can crush hope and leave your friend feeling abandoned. It is kinder and more sensitive to say, "I know this is a difficult time. My faith has helped me through hard times in the past. Do you have a source of spiritual support that might be of help to you now? Would you like me to pray for you?" If these questions are asked, you must be willing to accept "no" as an answer and respect your friend's wishes.

Care for Yourself

You give best when you give from a full cup. This happens when you have taken time to care for yourself by meeting your own needs. You have to get enough sleep, enough joy and enough laughter and love in your own life. When you have the tender care of family and friends, you can best support someone who is dying. You need to be sure you take care of yourself because only you can give freely from the overflow of your own joy.

Help is Available

Fox Valley Hospice has cared for dying persons and their families since June 1981. They are available to help directly or to assist in finding other appropriate resources. A call to the Geneva office, 630-232-2233, can put you in touch with that help when someone close to you needs assistance.