

FACING DEATH

FINDING OUT THAT SOMEONE is going to die brings with it a wide range of emotions. Your dying relative may fear death, pain or simply the unknown. You may have fears about seeing someone who is close to you suffer, and you may worry about being left alone once he has died. These fears are understandable; talking about them openly may help you begin to cope.

DO'S & DON'TS

The quality of care you provide will improve if you also look after your own needs.

✓ **Do** acknowledge your own grief. It is a sign of human strength, not human failing.

✓ **Do** turn to healthcare professionals for their support, and take advantage of their experience and expertise.

✓ **Do** seek the help of volunteer carers.

✗ **Don't** feel guilty if you are angry or frightened that your relative is dying. These emotions are natural, but try confiding in others rather than depressing your relative.

✗ **Don't** bottle up your emotions as this may create even more stress.

✗ **Don't** regard yourself as useless. You are providing essential support in a difficult time of need.

WHEN THE NEWS IS BROKEN

You may be one of the first people to be informed that your relative is terminally ill, but it is the responsibility of the healthcare professional, not you, to inform him of this. You will, however, need to be prepared for how you handle this delicate subject.

Be informed If possible, try to be present when your relative receives the news: by listening and learning about his condition you may be able to provide comfort and support later.

Be honest If your relative asks you to expand on any detail, try to tell the truth as sensitively as possible. If there are any questions you cannot answer, seek the advice of a healthcare professional.

Be discreet Your relative may not wish to discuss death, or may even refuse to believe he is dying. If you need to talk about it, discuss the issue with the rest of the family or with an outsider, such as the GP.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION

As death approaches, it is important that the dying person is encouraged to share his feelings.

Talking Do not be put off if he is unable to speak; listening to you talking can be very soothing.

Listening If he is able to express his wishes and sentiments, listen patiently and carefully; this is one of the most important things you can do for him.

Writing If he finds it difficult to talk, suggest that he writes down his feelings.

Touching Hold his hand; this can soothe anxieties and communicate reassurance and affection.

Counselling Your relative may benefit from talking to someone outside her family and close friends, such as a professional counsellor.

PRACTICAL CARE

WHEN YOU ARE CARING for a dying relative, one of your main aims will be to give him the best quality of life possible. This means making sure that he is comfortable, free of pain and, to alleviate boredom and depression, has enough to keep him occupied. Always try to respect your relative's wishes and encourage him to be as independent as possible.

PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

You may feel unable to give enough time to your relative, offer adequate care or cope with the many demands on your own. In this situation, you may need to seek part or full-time professional help. Consult the GP and Public Health Nurse for advice and information on what help is available.

Think ahead Anticipate when you might need the extra help and try to make the necessary arrangements before you find yourself in a crisis situation.

Seek short-term help Some local health authorities and charities have agencies that provide short-term care.

Seek full-time help Hospices, nursing homes or specialist organisations provide care for the terminally ill, and help and advise those looking after the person.

COMFORTABLE SURROUNDINGS

If your relative is confined to bed or to the house, personal space will be extremely important to him. You can help by trying to make him feel comfortable and in control of his surroundings.

THE ROOM

For your relative's comfort, make sure his surroundings are kept clean and pleasant.

Ventilate the room A stuffy room can be unpleasant: open the windows, but avoid creating a draught.

Find the right level of light Arrange the curtains so that as much or as little light comes into the room to suit your relative's needs.

Make the room look pleasant Fresh flowers will add colour and fragrance, and liven up the room. Potpourri and scented candles may freshen the air.

VISITORS

Before encouraging friends or relatives to visit, make sure your relative wants to see them. Ideally, visits should be restricted to people with whom your relative feels comfortable. Do not be afraid to cancel visits if you feel that he is unable to cope. Remember, also, that too many visitors may put a strain on you, as the carer.

Monitor the length of visits Short, frequent visits are better than irregular, drawn-out ones that may be exhausting for your relative.

Restrict numbers of visitors One or two visitors at a time may be less overwhelming than large groups.

Prepare visitors Try to prepare visitors for your relative's appearance and attitude. They may find it awkward or feel shocked or upset if he is physically different or very depressed.

DAILY CARE

Encourage your relative to eat and drink, keep clean and generally look after himself. Accept, however, that he may not want to do so. Inform the GP if your relative has any uncomfortable symptoms, such as bowel problems, vomiting or pressure sores.

EATING AND DRINKING

Eating meals He may prefer small, appetising snacks at frequent intervals rather than three large meals a day. Make a note of any changes in appetite, and report them to the healthcare professional.

Drinking fluids Even if your relative does not wish to eat, encourage him to drink plenty of fluids.

PERSONAL HYGIENE AND APPEARANCE

Washing Encourage your relative to wash and bathe for his personal comfort and dignity. If confined to bed, he may require a bed bath.

Personal grooming You can help by offering to wash and brush your relative's hair and cut his fingernails and toenails. A man may feel better if he has had a shave, and a woman may require assistance with applying make-up, especially when visitors are expected.

Getting dressed Unless your relative is confined to bed, it is not necessary for him to stay in nightwear. Encourage him to get dressed, as this can give dignity and bolster confidence.

Using the toilet Encourage your relative to get out of bed to use the toilet. If he cannot, obtain toilet aids that allow maximum independence.

LIVING LIFE TO THE FULL

Mobility If your relative is able, he should be encouraged to be mobile, even if this only means getting out of bed to sit in a chair.

Hobbies If he is physically able, try to stimulate interest in pastimes that you know he enjoys. This may give pleasure, and encouragement to live the remainder of his life to the full.

HELPING TO MINIMISE PAIN

A dying person's greatest fear may be the prospect of coping with pain.

Reassure your relative

You can reassure your relative that from the time of diagnosis, and throughout his care, he will be given medicines to minimise pain.

Act promptly Should he suffer pain at any time, inform a healthcare professional so that the situation can be rectified as soon as possible.

Find out about specialist equipment

The use of specialist equipment will be explained to you, and administered under the supervision of a healthcare professional. For example, a pain-relieving device such as a TENS (Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulator) may be recommended, or syringe pumps may be used to administer pain-relieving drugs. Speak to the GP about what is suitable.

Consider alternative therapies

Your relative may prefer to try techniques such as reflexology, aromatherapy and visualisation.