

CAREGIVER TIPS & INFO SERIES



What Do You Say to Someone Who Has a Life-Threatening Illness?

This question is asked over and over by both family members and professional health care staff. Unfortunately there is no standard formula.

Each person has special needs and copes with his destiny in his own way. Someone with a life-limiting illness is no different. Don't let concern for saying the "wrong thing" keep you away from a friend or loved one who is facing death. By simply being with this person and remaining sensitive to his or her needs, you can help that person along this unfamiliar path, and learn a lot about living too.

Here are some suggestions to assist with this difficult communication:

- Remember that each person has individual needs and feelings, often different from your own. Allow the person to guide your conversations and actions.
- Don't be afraid to relate person to person when you are talking. Be willing to be humorous and light-hearted as well as serious.
- Hear not only what the person is saying, but also what he is not saying. Use your ears, your mind, your eyes and your heart to listen.
- Recognize that people have long-standing patterns of communication and different ways of dealing with difficulty in their lives. Allow for individuality.
- Respond to expressed concerns with compassion and honesty. If you do not know the answer, say so. Many times people aren't really looking for answers but simply want to be able to articulate certain thoughts, or want to know what you think.
- Don't be overly concerned about saying the "wrong" thing. A loving intent speaks louder than specific words.
- Don't be afraid of sadness. Laughter and tears often share conversations at important times.
- Appreciate the person's need for rest or privacy. Never force communication.
- Talking of past accomplishments, memories, or stories that make up each life are often soothing and healing to people.

(continued)



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Here are some suggestions to assist with this difficult communication: *(continued)*

- A person with a life-threatening illness often feels isolated or lonely. Touching, such as holding hands, can fill the need for affection and connectedness.
- Many people want to be treated “normally” for the rest of their lives.

Here are some things to say:

- I hate the news about your health.
- Thank you for...
- I'll never forget...
- I'm sorry...
- Your life has made a difference to me.
- You've taught me...
- How might I be helpful to you at this time?
- How are you doing (Physically, emotional, spiritually) at this moment?
- What are your sources of hope, strength, comfort, or peace?

Here are some things NOT to say:

- “Everything happens for a reason,” “It’s God’s will,” or other platitudes.
- Don’t give false assurances.
- Don’t force a person to convert to a belief, make a confession, or renounce long-held beliefs or values.

