

NEARING DEATH AWARENESS

Nearing death awareness is a special communication of the dying where they seem to drift from this reality into another and back, with relative ease. Their attempts to share the wonders of these experiences are often obstructed by our lack of understanding of the symbolic language they use. Often they are talking while the experience is actually happening. Sometimes observers are quick to label this communication as jumbled, and therefore either discount it or medicate it. Once caregivers are equipped with the tools to recognize this type of communication, they may experience the benefit of participating in this transformative process.

SIGNS OF NEARING DEATH AWARENESS

People who are experiencing nearing death awareness may:

- Say that they have spoken to someone who has already died
- Converse with people who are not visible to you
- Describe another place of beauty and light
- Reach or grasp for unseen objects, wave to unseen beings, and/or make hand gestures
- Describe spiritual beings
- Appear confused and disoriented
- Talk about taking a trip or going on a journey
- Tell you exactly when they will die

These behaviors do not mean that they are hallucinating, confused, or having reactions to medications. They often have specific meaning to the patient's life, and the person who is closest to the patient may best understand what is being said and what it means.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- Be present with the person. Simply sit with them and be open to their attempts to communicate.
- Ask: "Who do you see?"; "What are you seeing?"; and "How does that make you feel?"
- Listen to and validate their experience.
- Do not contradict, explain away, or argue with them. These experiences can be very comforting to the patient.
- Discuss these communications with your hospice team.

This common phenomenon, well-documented in the book *Final Gifts* by Maggie Callanan and Patricia Kelly, means the person is beginning to transition from this life. When patients experience nearing death awareness and describe death as peaceful, they are providing others with a better understanding of the death experience.

