



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 their destiny in their own way. Someone with a life limiting illness is no different. 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.

The following are suggestions to assist with this difficult communication:

- Remember that each person has individual needs and feelings, often different from your own.
- 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, stories that make up each life are often soothing and healing to people.
- A person with a life threatening illness often feels isolated or lonely. Closeness, touching, holding hands can fill the need for affection and connectedness.