



When someone we love is nearing the end of their life

By Kristen Rohm, Spiritual Care Counselor

It is such a hard time when someone we love is nearing the end of their life. Each moment feels precious and yet we can be exhausted or feel like we're moving through mud, because of all the emotions. We don't know what to say or do to support our loved one or ourselves as we face the dying process. It becomes even harder with physical distancing without the comfort that comes with in person visits. Additionally, the Spiritual Care Counselor or Clergy person also may not be able to visit to offer vital support during this vulnerable time.

Those who are dying need love, care-filled listening, and witness -- being with someone without judgment or agenda as they let go of all they love and know to move into the unknown. We understand this can be hard for close family members because of our own feelings and memories. Please know that some inner struggle is natural for everyone during this process. Be kind to yourself and be as present as you can with your loved one. And remember Hospice of Santa Barbara is here to support you, we are only a phone call away.

Hospice of Santa Barbara offers these suggestions to families:

Your loved one's energy will wane and their focus will turn inward. They may want fewer people around and less distractions. Please honor this need.

Time of meaning making and leaving a legacy:

Many who are facing their death like to talk about and tell stories of their life, so it's a good time to go through photo albums and share memories. Even if we've heard stories many times, it's good to listen with fresh ears, often new things are told, some for the first time. Speak openly about love and care, about what you've learned from them and what will carry on after them. Allow them to share their hopes for the family in the future.

Preparing for peace:

Some may need to reach out to an estranged family member or friend. Please support this when it comes from your loved one rather than try to make it happen for them. Others may need to express a painful memory. These are often shared with the Spiritual Care Counselor or Clergy person, but if they are unable to visit, you might hold this role and space for a dying loved one. If you hear something heavy or hard, please respond with compassion and know that it is in preparation for a peaceful death to be able to acknowledge challenging situations

from the past. As they draw nearer the end, they may be release the past. This is the time to simply sit quietly with them.

Saying farewell:

In this tender time, it is important to say goodbye and also to assure your loved one that you and others will be alright when they are gone. It can be helpful to say something gentle, clear and permission-giving such as, "It's OK to let go, you can die in peace, we will be alright, we will take care of each other."

Some may also want to hear that they will be alright after death. Use the language of comfort from their and your religious or spiritual beliefs. (*We know you will be in heaven, your spirit will be free, you will live on within the cycles of Nature or in the hearts of loved ones, your Spirit will be at peace, you will be with loved ones who've died, you will be with God/Allah, you will become one with Love or the Light.*)

Goodbyes can be done over the phone, FaceTime or Zoom. A letter of farewell can be read to a loved one in the last days or hours. A letter of gratitude can also be meaningful. Be specific about what you are grateful for and how you will always carry this with you. This sharing is possible even if the loved one is sleeping most of the time or non-responsive. Hearing is one of the last senses to fade.

It is not unusual for those nearing death to see or hear things others can't, usually someone from their past who has already died. You do not need to agree with them or argue with them, simply allow their experience to happen.

During these times of physical distancing, some or all family members may not be able to be with a loved one in their last days. Being unable to sit vigil at the bedside can make our ability to understand the dying process more frustrating and our grief more complicated. Do as much over the phone or video conference as possible. Writing down all you wish you were able to share and all you are feeling or experiencing can help. Talking with a supportive friend or family member about all you are going through is an important way to care for yourself. Please be very kind to yourself, practice self-care often and allow comfort in wherever and whenever you find it.

Call Hospice of Santa Barbara for support during these tender days or afterwards for help with bereavement. You are not alone, we are here for you.