

What do you say to someone who is dying?

Although it can seem difficult, communicating with someone who is dying provides tremendous support and helps ease some of the pain. Even when you don't have the answers, feel helpless because you can't "fix it", or have nothing to say at all, initiating a conversation gives your loved one the opportunity to be heard and reassures them that they are not alone in this experience.

- **Let your loved one set the mood.**

Follow their lead on what to talk about and be yourself.

- **Encourage sharing and discussion.**

Ask open ended questions, this gives the individual the opportunity to share as much or as little as they like. Some ideas: "What is this like for you?", "What times are most difficult?", "How do you feel now?"

Pick a topic of interest for either of you or ask if you can read to them. There are numerous possibilities if you are open to them.

- **Stay close to the individual after they share with you.**

This shows that you listen, understand and support the loved one's feelings, and that you are not judging them. Immediately leaving or avoiding them can cause feelings of shame or embarrassment.

- **Try not to be offended if the person does not want to talk.**

They might be tired or have just had another visitor. Before starting a conversation ask them if they feel like talking and reassure them that it is okay to stop the visit if they feel like being alone.

- **Use words of comfort and support.**

"I love you", "You are special to me", "I'm thinking of you and am here for you", "I am ready to listen if you need to talk".

- **Silence is okay.**

Sometimes sitting in silence is comforting. Remain close to the loved one and offer a hand to hold or an arm around the shoulder.

- **It is normal to feel uncomfortable or unsure.**

You are going through a stressful time. Don't be afraid to tell your loved one that you are unsure of what to say or find this process difficult.

- **Reminisce on happy and meaningful times in the past.**

Retell funny stories or remember a great vacation or event that you and your loved one shared together. Bring in props, music or pictures that you talk about.

What do you say to someone who is dying? (continued)

- **Practice *active listening*.**

Body language and eye contact are important! Leaning in, eye contact and head nodding all suggest that you are being attentive. Focus efforts on listening; don't spend the time thinking about what to say next.

- **Show that you have listened and understand what they are saying.**

Repeat or paraphrase what they have just said to check that you have interpreted correctly: "Do you mean that..." or "If I understand correctly..."

- **Reflect on the feelings they are communicating.**

"It seems that you feel..." or "How does that make you feel..."

This can make the patient feel more comfortable expressing their fears and helps them work through emotions.

- **Avoid offering advice when it is not asked for.**

Comments like, "I think you should..." imply that you are an expert in the situation and know how the individual feels. In reality, you don't know what the loved one is experiencing; everyone is different. Instead convey that he/she is loved, cared for and will be supported.

- **Don't be afraid of humour.**

Humour and laughter are good coping mechanisms for difficult times. Laugh with the loved one over their jokes instead of using your own.

REFERENCES:

- Robert Buchman - "I don't know what to say..." *How to Help and Support Someone Who is Dying*.
- Terese A. Rando - *Grief, Dying and Death: Clinical Interventions for Caregivers*.