



Written by
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Being present with someone who is dying

- Be a reassuring presence
- Bring the sense of close family when they cannot be present
- Never assume someone cannot hear
- Keep prayers simple and memorable
- Take care of yourself

Background

Whether or not someone has a professed faith, they want to be offered comfort when facing death. It is a privilege to be alongside the dying, but not an easy path. Following the suggestions below will hopefully help the person seeking to be present, as well as the dying person. It is natural to retreat from activity and to prefer peace and quiet as the end of life draws near. Towards the end, the dying person is likely to become sleepy. Times of slumber may turn into prolonged unconsciousness; a praying presence remains important throughout.

1 Be a reassuring presence for the dying person, and support family and friends

You provide comfort by being a reassuring presence. The person will need to be kept warm but make sure

the room is well ventilated and smells fresh. You might place a flower arrangement within their sight or play quiet music of their choice. Consider lighting a candle (or using a battery-operated candle). Place an object special to them by their side – a teddy bear, Bible or holding cross perhaps. Family might suggest an item that has been significant. This helps create a sacred space that reflects the importance of this journey towards the end of someone's earthly life.

If the person is agitated, ask family or friends what might be troubling them. It may be anxiety about a broken relationship. Peace can be described as good relationships with family, with friends and with God. The dying person will often relax and die after the one with whom there was a broken relationship (an estranged sibling or child, for instance) has been in touch or visited.

2 Bring the sense of close family when they cannot be present

If relatives of the dying person are not able to visit, you could suggest they send short one-sentence memories of their loved one, or a list of things they love about them. You can then read these thoughts to the person (even when their eyes are closed). *'Marilyn remembers you teaching her how to knit teddy bears.'* *'Tom loves the way you always cheered him up.'* *'Emily loves you very much.'* This will be a comfort to relatives who may be feeling helpless at home, unable to visit. You could also ask if they know of a favourite poem, hymn or Bible reading their loved one might like to hear. If family are present, offer to pray with them, and for them, as well. Encourage them to be physically close to the person, holding a hand or giving hugs, if this is appropriate.

3 Never assume someone can't hear – continue to speak gently, even if they appear asleep or unconscious.

We know hearing is often the last sense we lose. Even if someone can no longer see, they may well hear what's going on around them. Bear that in mind in case something is said within earshot that could cause offence or distress. Maintaining a normal tone of voice is calming. Reassuring phrases could include: *'God is watching over you'*, *'You are in God's hands'*, *'Be in peace'*. Tell them why they are special, sharing happy memories of time spent with them. You can smile and even laugh as you voice these things.

4 Say prayers that are simple and memorable

The prayer most people know from their childhood onwards is 'The Lord's Prayer'. Often, someone will stir and join in when they hear the words 'Our Father...' They might have enjoyed hymns, and words of familiar ones will be well-known even as their life ebbs away. Try 'Morning has broken', 'Guide me O thou great redeemer' or 'Be still for the presence of the Lord'. Psalms are also a rich source of prayers: Psalm 23, 'The Lord is my shepherd', or Psalm 139, 'O Lord, you have searched me and known me'.

5 Take care of yourself

Sitting with someone who is dying is a privilege but can be emotionally demanding. Most deaths are peaceful, but aspects of the experience can be distressing. It is important that you have someone to whom you can go for support. You are part of a team (of friends, family and professionals) supporting the person in their final hours, each fulfilling a special role; looking after one another is important. Remember God is with you in this time and place of ministry.

Further resources:

With the End in Mind: How to live and die well by Kathryn Mannix (Harper Collins, 2019).

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