CARING FOR LOVED ONES AT LIFE'S END

Surround them with love, support, and companionship that are "anchored in unconditional respect for their human dignity, beginning with respect for the inherent value of their lives."

To Live Each Day with Dignity, USCCB



An old Irish proverb says, "It is in the shelter of each other that the people live." Indeed, we are created to depend upon one another and walk together in suffering. But when family members or friends approach life's end, we may not know how best to "shelter" them. Here are some concrete ways we can compassionately care for them.

1. Invite God In

Pope Francis has said that "praying in difficult situations is like opening the door to the Lord, in order that he might enter."[1] The dying process is a sacred time—a final season to seek closure in this life and prepare for the next in the hope of sharing in Christ's Resurrection. As you enter into this season with your friend or family member, ask God to accompany both of you.

2. Listen

Try to discover your loved one's values and how best to honor his or her wishes. This requires true empathy. It can be hard not to assume he or she wants the same thing you *think* you would want if you were in the same situation. Listen with a non-judgmental ear so your loved one feels free to speak openly.

3. Inform Yourself

Be aware that a person's wishes for refusing ordinary or proportionate treatment[2]—or for pursuing assisted suicide—are usually rooted in fears of dependency, helplessness, or pain. Make yourself available to discuss these or any concerns. Know that hospice care focuses on alleviating pain and other symptoms, meeting basic needs, and providing comfort. Seek to understand the Catholic Church's teaching on end-of-life care, which can help you provide authentically loving support that respects life.*

4. Be Steadfast in Compassion

As Pope Francis reminds us, "Compassion means 'suffer with'."[3] Your friend or family member will likely face ups and downs. Recognize these as part of a natural process. Surround him or her with love, support, and companionship that are "anchored in unconditional respect for their human dignity, beginning with respect for the inherent value of their lives."[4] The patient's suffering can be alleviated by your empathy, as well as by quality hospice care by medical personnel.

5. Help Them Achieve Closure

Help your family member or friend define the unfinished personal projects, financial concerns, unresolved relationships, or other matters that occupy his or her mind. Due to changing circumstances, some goals may need to be reframed. Creating and accomplishing this list of unfinished business can help the person discover a sense of purpose and feel more at peace.

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6. Provide Opportunities for Resolution

Ira Byock, a hospice medical director, illustrates in his book *The 4 Most Important Things*** how saying "I love you," "I'm sorry," "I forgive you," and "Thank you" can promote much-needed healing during the dying process. You can help ensure a peaceful transition for your loved one by facilitating opportunities for reconciliation with others and for mutual expressions of love and gratitude. Consider offering to invite a priest to hear his or her confession and to administer the Eucharist as viaticum[5] and the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, all of which heal the soul and prepare us to meet the Lord.

7. Reminisce

Our appetites may diminish as our bodies experience a decreased need for food and fluids when we near life's end. Provide smaller amounts of your family member or friend's favorite foods. Even if unable to eat them, he or she may still enjoy the aromas and reminisce with you about special memories they evoke. Think of other small comforts you can provide that would spark meaningful memories, like special photos or mementos.

8. Provide a Peaceful Presence

There comes a time of natural withdrawal from surroundings when dying persons may lose interest in many activities that used to be enjoyable. Your own quiet, patient presence can provide important support as your loved one prepares emotionally and spiritually for his or her passing. Hearing can become very acute, so placing the phone in another room, playing favorite music, reading a favorite passage, praying together, or simply sitting quietly with him or her can all be very soothing.

9. Show Tenderness

Those who are dying remain in need of the tenderness of personal human contact. Ask if you might gently brush your loved one's hair, apply lotion to her hands or feet, or simply hold his hand. Tell stories, laugh, and share memories to reassure the person he or she is a cherished gift, not a burden in any way.

10. Bear Their Transition Patiently

Transition, the time immediately preceding death, may bring rapid physical changes, such as in breathing patterns, as well as changes in mental or emotional states. Try to be patient, and allow the "how" and "when" of death to be between God and your loved one. Ask God for the wisdom to know what final words to say—if any—and when. As you are able, give your loved one permission to make the transition. For example, you might say, "I love you. It's okay to go home now."

Accompanying a loved one in his or her last days is enormously important, but we do not need to fear our own limitations. Pope Francis tells us, "[God] comes to assist us in our weakness. And his help consists in helping us accept his presence and closeness to us. Day after day, touched by his compassion, we also can become compassionate towards others."[6]

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*As our bishops teach, "Respect for life does not demand that we attempt to prolong life by using medical treatments that are ineffective or unduly burdensome."[7] At the same time, intentionally hastening death—whether through drugs or deliberate neglect of basic care—offends our God-given dignity and is never morally permissible. More information: **www.usccb.org/ToLiveEachDay**

**References do not indicate endorsement.

[1] Pope Francis, *Morning Meditation in the Chapel of the Domus Sanctae Marthae: Choosing the Better Part, 8 October 2013*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013).

[2] More information: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services*, 5th ed, (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2009). United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *To Live Each Day with Dignity: A Statement on Physician-Assisted Suicide (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011)*

[3] Pope Francis, *General Audience, Wednesday, April 27, 2016*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016).

[4] United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *To Live Each Day with Dignity: A Statement on Physician-Assisted Suicide*, 10.

[5] Viaticum is "the Eucharist received by a dying person. It is the spiritual food for one's 'passing over' to the Father from this world. With Penance and the Anointing of the Sick, the reception of Holy Communion as Viaticum constitute the 'last sacraments' of the Christian." (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Glossary.) See also *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1331, 1392, 1517, 1524-25.

[6] Pope Francis, *Misericordiae vultus*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), no. 14.

[7] United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *To Live Each Day with Dignity: A Statement on Physician-Assisted Suicide*, 10.

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Item #1845