

Eighteen Ways to Be Present When a Loved One is Near Death

By David Tillman – December 2022

1. **Create a sacred space.** This can include prayers, meditation, and rituals, displaying sacred and meaningful object(s), quiet and uplifting music, hymns, scripture readings, silence, and poetry.
2. **Be present and open to all feelings and emotional expressions expressed,** like sadness, anger, regret, love, fear, blame, and anxiety. Acknowledge the emotions underneath their words. You could say, “so difficult” (or: so amazing, so scary, so exciting, so frustrating, so joyful, so confusing, so sad). Talk about the “good times you have had, the lessons you learned from them, or anything else that is supportive.”
3. **“Have only one or two people speak to him or her.** Keep things simple and calm.”
4. **Take conversations that are not needed to be heard by your loved one out of the room.** This would include any conversations about their care or funeral arrangements. Keep family drama low if possible.
5. **Think about what your underlying reasons are for being with your loved one.** This is a time for him or her to feel loved. A time to believe that their family will be all right after their death. Share words of forgiveness, love, comfort, and peace. Let your loved one talk. Listen and honor what they have to say.
6. **“Give him or her some time to be alone** with no one else in the room. Sometimes the soul needs complete privacy to rest deeply and commune with God as part of the transition process. Give them a half-hour of privacy several times a day. This can be time for self-care, to go relax...or a cup of coffee.”
7. **Talk directly to them, even if they are not verbally responsive.** A person’s hearing is one of the last things to go. Gently hold a hand and say loving and heartfelt words. Notice if they are communicating through their hands or body. If they become agitated, acknowledge the discomfort, and stop talking.
8. **Sit with your loved one alone and say the phrases below or meaningful phrases of your own.** You may choose to say one of the phrases below. Then sit in silence. This is not a time for a lot of words.

“I love you”

“Thank you”

“I will miss you”

“I (we) will be ok”

“Please forgive me”

“I forgive you”

“It is ok for you to go”

There are some things that a person being alone will say, or hear from, their loved one, that may not be said in a larger group. Ask others if you can spend some time alone with your loved one.

9. **Notice if there is anything special about the day or time of year.** As a chaplain, I have seen so many people wait to die on their (or another’s) birthday, anniversary, or holiday. Some people wait to die until a child, another relative, or friend has arrived or talks to them on the phone.

10. **“Have times of prayer** when you pray familiar prayers, spontaneous prayers, read Psalms or other sacred texts, read poetry, or sing [play] hymns.” Invite your religious leader to join you at your loved one’s bedside.
11. **“Your gentle, loving touch** can also communicate more than words. Soothing touch conveys a sense of feeling of peace and lets them know you love and support them.” “It is ok to have times of quiet.”
12. **Let your loved one know that everything will be all right after he or she dies.** “Let them know that everything will be OK, that their practical matters will be taken care of...Sometimes a loved one will linger on if there is anything unresolved. Try to have these conversations sooner rather than later.”
13. **“The tone and feel of the room are important.** Quiet, soothing music and soft lighting foster relaxation. Also, reduce clutter within their eyesight.” Let your loved one see any meaningful pictures and remembrances of their life. Turn off all screens: TV’s cell phones, computers, etc.
14. **Around your loved one’s bedside, tell uplifting stories.** Tell uplifting childhood stories, vacations, holidays, and times when they were there for you. Share how much they mean to you and that you love them. Listen and watch how they and others respond. Acknowledge theirs and others expressed emotions.
15. **“It is ok to give them permission to let go of their body and go to the light of heaven [or your beliefs and understanding].** This helps you and them acknowledge and accepts the reality of what is happening”
16. **The actively dying process may take a day or many days before death.** There are physical signs that the doctors, nurses, and other care providers see that tell them where your loved one is as they near death. Sometimes a loved one may suddenly become very alert and talkative. This may last for minutes or hours.
17. **For yourself, after your loved one has died, be present with your emotions.** Allow your emotions to naturally flow. Crying, tears, numbness, anxiety, gratitude, love, emotional connection, feelings of relief, and sleeplessness may be some of the emotions which naturally arise in you. Take whatever time you need to be present with your own and other people’s feelings. Our grief most often gets better over time; yet the loss of our loved one will always have a place in our heart and mind. After your loved one has died, your care provider (funeral home staff, religious leader, and others) will assist you to what is next.
18. **Take time to grieve.** Hospitals, hospices, nursing homes, religious leaders/communities, city/county/state/national organizations, professional grief counselors/psychologists, and others offer grief support. Either one-on-one support or small group grief support. Dealing with grief will be different for everyone. Stay in contact with each other. Find someone you can talk to about how you are feeling. Birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays can bring up grief that you had thought was behind you.

Be loving and gentle with yourself and others at this time of grief and loss. Blessings on your sacred journey.

Note, parts of this article in quotations were taken from “Creating a Peaceful, Sacred Space for Your Loved Ones,” Optage Hospice, Roseville, MN, (points 3, 6,10,11,12,13, 17), and “As Death Draws Near” from Allina Health, Minneapolis, MN (point 8), where I previously worked as a hospice chaplain and hospital chaplain. Special thanks for these uplifting and informative words.

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