

## VISITING THE DYING. WHAT SHOULD I DO?

If fear of what to say or do prevents you from visiting a person who is dying, take heart. Following are suggestions taken from interviews with Mission Hospice caregivers; vice president Trish Hooper; Valerie Young, counseling program director of Kara, and John Ruark, a psychiatrist at Stanford Medical Center.

1. Show that you still consider the person among the living. It's alright to be frank about what you are feeling, but don't make the dying person feel isolated or deserted.
2. Don't expect to make things better. The sick person probably doesn't expect solutions but may well hope for your presence.
3. You don't need an agenda for the visit. You must be willing to follow the sick person into whatever context is desired. Learn to just "be there." Silence is alright. You might sit with your friend, read aloud, read to yourself, meditate.
4. Don't plead with the person not to leave you. Pleading with the dying person traps him, making it a sin to die, an act of abandonment.
5. Be real. Say what you feel. It's alright to say, "I feel really scared and I don't know how to act around you right now." Let the dying person be real with you. Show that you will listen even when things aren't going well. Don't be afraid to cry.
6. Show that you care. Make it clear that it is a genuine pleasure to visit, so that it doesn't look or seem like an act of duty. "We've had some good times together," reflects this attitude.
7. Support the dying person's sense of control. Feeling helpless and out of control is bad mental health.
8. Try to consider what death means to this person. Death may mean release or separation. Whatever it means, it is always individual and should be respected.
9. Be prepared to confront your own fears before or after the visit. Confrontation with your own mortality is inevitable.
10. Focus on the person, not the disease. Make it clear that you see the person behind the disease, that his identity and individuality are intact.
11. Remember touch. A hug, massage, foot rub, may say for you what you can't speak.
12. Know your own limits. We need to honor our own limits in giving. Know how much giving you can manage. Know when to stop. Find help if necessary.
13. Touch . . . hug . . . stroke . . . if appropriate.

There are rewards to sharing yourself with a dying person. Those who do so daily say that they learn the value of today as though each one is their last. They say their lives become dearer. "Caring for the dying ensures a daily reminder that we are going to die. We may lose everything we have tomorrow."

A second reward is becoming acquainted with death. This familiarity or desensitization erodes fear

Hooper urges the hesitant visitor to "go now. Regrets are for those things we didn't say or do, for the visits we didn't make."

And what may be the truest reward in visiting the dying is having the opportunity to give to someone what we may one day desperately need ourselves.

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