

Coping with Dying



Understanding the changes which occur before death

There comes a point in most people's lives when death and dying are contemplated. Perhaps we must face our own death or that of someone close to us, but we don't know what to expect.

In order to reduce the anxiety that often comes from the unknown, this article describes some typical features of the process of dying.

It anticipates questions you may want to ask and hopefully it will encourage you to seek further help and information.

The changes that occur before death

The dying process is unique to each person but in most cases, there are common characteristics or changes that help to indicate that a person is dying.

Any one of these signs can be attributed to something other than dying, so remember that the events to be described here are happening to a person whose illness is already so severe that life is threatened.

The many changes that indicate that life is coming to an end fall into three main categories:

1. Diminished need for food and drink
2. Changes in breathing
3. Withdrawing from the world

Diminished need for food and drink

When someone stops eating and drinking, it can be hard to accept, even when we know they are dying. It is a physical sign that they are not going to get better.

Initially, as weakness develops, the effort of eating and drinking may simply have become too much, and at this time help with feeding might be appreciated.

However, eventually there will come a time when food and drink are neither wanted nor needed. This can be very distressing for carers as food and drink are closely associated with nurturing.

Nevertheless, caring can be continued in other important ways such as spending time together, or sharing memories and news of family and friends. Try not to be discouraged if there is little response – this may be due to weakness, not lack of appreciation. Simply being together can be a great comfort to both of you.

Most importantly, being cared for in this way enables people to feel that their lives have been worthwhile and that they will be remembered.

Changes in breathing

People who suffer from breathlessness are often concerned that they will die fighting for their breath. Yet towards the end of life, as the body becomes less active, the demand for oxygen is actually reduced to a minimum.

This may be comforting to those who have had breathing problems, as carers often remark that when a loved one is dying their breathing is easier than it has been for a long time.

Of course, breathing difficulties can be made worse by feelings of anxiety. But the knowledge that someone is close at hand is not only reassuring; it can be a real help in preventing breathlessness caused by anxiety.

Occasionally in the last hours of life there can be a noisy rattle to the breathing. This is due to a build up of mucus in the chest, which the person is no longer able to cough up. Medication may be used to reduce this and changes of position may also help.

These measures may have limited success, but while this noisy breathing is upsetting to carers it doesn't appear to distress the dying person.

If the person is breathing through the mouth, the lips and mouth become dry. Moistening the mouth with a damp sponge and applying lip salve will give comfort.

Withdrawing from the world

'Withdrawing from the world' is a gradual process. The person will spend more time sleeping and will often be drowsy when awake.

This apparent lack of interest in one's surroundings is part of a natural process which may even be accompanied by feelings of tranquillity. It is certainly not a snub to loved ones.

Eventually the person may lapse into unconsciousness and may remain in this state for a surprisingly long time (in extreme cases many days) although for others it is shorter.

When death is very close (within minutes or hours) the breathing pattern may change again. Sometimes there are long pauses between breaths, or the abdominal muscles (tummy) will take over the work – the abdomen rises and falls instead of the chest. If breathing appears laboured, remember that this is more distressing to you than it is to the person dying.

The skin can become pale and moist and lightly cool prior to death. Most people do not rouse from sleep, but die peacefully, comfortably and quietly.

This is a difficult and painful time for you. You are leaving those you love or losing someone you love and care for. It is often hard to know what to say to each other at a time like this.

Nurses, doctors and other staff are there to help you to work through your worries and concerns and to offer you care and support.

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