ST. FRANCIS 24/7 CALL CENTER: (321) 269-4240

St. Francis REFLECTIONS® Hospice
Established 1977 • Licensed 1990

Understanding the Dying Process

What to Expect: Physical Changes

- **Decreased Appetite and Thirst:**
  - **What Happens:** As the body begins to shut down, your loved one may lose interest in eating and drinking. This is a natural part of the dying process as the body no longer requires as much energy.
  - **How to Help:**
    - **Offer Comfort, Not Force:** Offer small sips of water, ice chips, or moist swabs if tolerated. Do not force food or liquids, this can cause discomfort.
    - **Lip and Mouth Care:** Use lip balm to keep their lips moist. Gently clean their mouth with a damp cloth or mouth swabs to prevent dryness and cracking.

- **Changes in Breathing Patterns:**
  - **What Happens:** You may notice changes in breathing, including periods of rapid breathing followed by pauses (Cheyne-Stokes respirations) or irregular, shallow breaths.
  - **How to Help:**
    - **Repositioning:** Help your loved one change positions to ease breathing. Elevating the head with pillows can also help.
    - **Medication:** The hospice team may provide medications to help ease any discomfort associated with breathing changes. Ask for guidance on how and when to administer these.
    - **Reassurance:** Breathing changes can be distressing to witness, but they are typically not uncomfortable for the patient. Reassure them with your presence and a calming voice.

- **Skin and Circulation Changes:**

- **What Happens:** As circulation decreases, the skin may become cool to the touch, particularly on the hands, feet, and legs. The skin may also develop a mottled (bluish or purplish) appearance.
- **How to Help:**
  - **Keep Them Warm:** Use blankets as needed to keep your loved one comfortable.
  - **Gentle Touch:** You can offer comfort with gentle touch, but be aware that their skin may be more sensitive at this stage.

- **Decreased Consciousness:**
  - **What Happens:** Your loved one may spend more time sleeping and become less responsive as their body conserves energy.
  - **How to Help:**
    - **Speak Softly:** Continue talking to your loved one, even if they seem unresponsive. Hearing is one of the last senses to fade, and your voice can be a source of comfort.
    - **Physical Comfort:** Use pillows to support their body and ensure they are lying comfortably. Gently reposition them as tolerated to prevent bedsores.
    - **Encourage Rest:** Allow them to rest as needed without trying to keep them awake. This is a natural part of the body's preparation for death.

What to Expect: Emotional and Spiritual Changes

- **Restlessness or Agitation:**
  - **What Happens:** people may experience restlessness, agitation, or confusion as the end of life approaches. This is often referred to as "terminal restlessness." It can be caused by a variety of factors, including physical discomfort, unresolved emotional issues, or changes in the brain's chemistry.
  - **How to Help:**
    - **Comfort Measures:** Try calming techniques such as playing soft music, dimming the lights, and reducing noise in the room. Gentle touch or holding their hand can also provide reassurance.
    - **Medications:** The hospice team may prescribe medications to help ease restlessness or agitation. Follow the instructions provided by your healthcare team, and report any changes in behavior.

    - **Reassure Them:** Speak softly and reassuringly. Remind them that they are safe and loved. Sometimes, just knowing that someone is near can help reduce anxiety.

- **Visions or Hallucinations:**
    - **What Happens:** It's not uncommon for dying individuals to report seeing deceased loved ones, spiritual beings, or other visions. These experiences can be comforting or, at times, unsettling.
    - **How to Help:**
        - **Acceptance:** Understand that these experiences are a natural part of the dying process. There's no need to correct or dismiss what they are seeing or experiencing.
        - **Offer Reassurance:** If they seem distressed, gently reassure them that they are safe. You might say something like, "I'm here with you," or "You're surrounded by love."
        - **Discuss with the Hospice Team:** If visions or hallucinations seem to be causing distress, discuss this with the hospice team. They may adjust medications or offer additional support.

- **Emotional Withdrawal:**
    - **What Happens:** As death nears, your loved one may become less communicative and more withdrawn. This can be a sign that they are beginning to let go.
    - **How to Help:**
        - **Presence:** Even if they don't respond, your presence can be comforting. Sit with them, hold their hand, or simply be near.
        - **Respect Their Process:** Understand that emotional withdrawal is a natural part of the dying process. Allow them the space they need, but continue to offer love and support.
        - **Talk to Them:** Share memories, express your love, and say the things you want them to hear. Even if they don't respond, they may still be able to hear you.

- **Spiritual Needs:**
    - **What Happens:** Spirituality can become increasingly important as the end of life approaches. Your loved one may find comfort in religious or spiritual practices, or they may seek meaning in other ways.

- **How to Help:**
  - **Honor Their Beliefs:** Support their spiritual practices, whether that involves prayer, meditation, reading from religious texts, or speaking with a spiritual advisor.
  - **Provide Resources:** If they express a desire to speak with a chaplain, priest, rabbi, or other spiritual leader, arrange this through the hospice team.
  - **Respect Their Wishes:** If they don't express a desire for spiritual support, respect their wishes. Each person's experience with spirituality at the end of life is unique.

How to Help: Physical & Emotional Comfort

- **Physical:**
  - **Repositioning:** Help your loved one change positions every few hours to prevent discomfort and bedsores. Use pillows to support their body in a comfortable position.
  - **Oral Care:** Keep their mouth and lips moist to prevent dryness and cracking. Use a damp cloth, oral swabs, or lip balm.
  - **Cool Cloths:** Apply a cool, damp cloth to their forehead or wrists if they are warm or have a fever. This can provide relief and comfort.
  - **Pain Management:** Administer pain medications as prescribed. Ensure that their pain is well-controlled and report any signs of discomfort to the hospice team.

- **Emotional**
  - **Talk to Them:** Even if they are unresponsive, continue to talk to them. Share your feelings, memories, or simply let them know that you are there.
  - **Create a Calm Environment:** Play soft music, keep the room dimly lit, and minimize noise. Creating a peaceful atmosphere can help reduce anxiety.
  - **Presence:** Your presence alone can be a great comfort. Sit with them, hold their hand, or simply stay close by. Let them know they are not alone.

Understanding and Addressing Common Fears:

Fear of Pain:

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- **What to Know:** Pain management is a central focus of hospice care. The hospice team will work to ensure your loved one is as comfortable as possible.
- **How to Help:**
  - **Administer Medications:** Follow the hospice team's instructions for administering pain medications. Regularly assess their comfort and report any pain to the hospice team.
  - **Reassure Them:** Let your loved one know that their comfort is your priority and that you are working with the hospice team to ensure they are pain-free.

Fear of Being Alone:

- **What to Know:** Some people fear passing away alone. It's important to understand that many individuals choose to pass when loved ones briefly step away. This is a natural part of the dying process and is not something you should feel guilty about.
- **How to Help:**
  - **Stay Close:** If possible, stay with your loved one as much as you can. Your presence can be a great comfort.
  - **Take Breaks:** If you need to step away for self-care or rest, it's okay. Your loved one knows they are loved and cared for, even if you're not physically present every moment.

After Death: What to Expect & Next Steps:

- **Signs of Death:** When your loved one passes, their breathing and heartbeat will stop. The skin may become cool, and there may be a release of bodily fluids. These are normal physical changes.
  - **What to Do:**
    - **Contact the Hospice:** Call hospice to report the death. They will guide you through the next steps, including the official declaration of death.
    - **Allow Yourself Time:** Take the time you need to be with your loved one. There's no rush to call anyone immediately unless you feel ready.

Bereavement Support:

- **What to Know:** Grieving is a natural and necessary process. Hospice care includes bereavement support to help you navigate this difficult time.

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- **How to Help Yourself:**
  - **Accept Your Emotions:** Grief can bring a wide range of emotions, including sadness, anger, guilt, and relief. All of these feelings are normal.
  - **Reach Out for Support:** Don't hesitate to reach out to the hospice team for support. St. Francis can offer resources to help you cope with your loss.

Remember, you are not alone. The hospice team is here to support you every step of the way, both before and after your loved one's passing.

St. Francis Reflections is always available to assist with any questions or concerns 24/7

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