



Thoughtful Ways to Prepare for the Death of a Terminally Ill Loved One

When someone you love is diagnosed with a terminal illness, your first reaction may be denial. Unfortunately, the likelihood that death will come is almost certain. It may be years, weeks, or days from now, but the outcome of a terminal condition is always the same. The time between diagnosis and death is emotional for everyone. Here are some ways to prepare yourself and your family for this incredibly difficult time.

What to Expect

Death does not always follow a specific pattern. Neptune Society explains, “The exact [sequence and occurrence](#) of symptoms of physical decline will vary based on the illness involved.” However, there are a few indicators that it is near. The first is if your loved one cannot sustain their vital functions on their own. A stroke patient, for example, may be intubated if they have lost neurological control of their airways or lungs. Likewise, someone who cannot swallow may be given intravenous fluids or be nutritionally sustained through a feeding tube.

Once life-support is removed or is no longer functional, your loved one will likely spend more time asleep than awake. They may not be interested in eating or be able to maintain their concentration for more than a moment. Their vital signs will decline, although many healthcare providers [report a rally](#) in the hours directly preceding death.

Hospice Versus Curative Care

Either your loved one or their chosen representative ([power of attorney](#)) might need to make a decision between hospice and curative care. Curative care is that which is meant to cure a disease. This may be sustainable, but at some point, you will need to make the transition from trying to get them well to easing them into a state of comfort. This is known as hospice care.

Vitas Healthcare explains that [hospice care](#) does not withhold all treatment or medications from a patient; they are still administered items of their choice that are thought to improve quality of life. However, for those at the very end, most life-support functions will be terminated, and they will be given a combination of medications such as lorazepam and [morphine](#) to relieve anxiety and pain, respectively. If this decision must be made, you must not blame yourself. Remember, you did not cause your loved one's death; instead, you simply allowed them to transition out of life without pain or prolonged suffering.

Discussing Death with Children

For many families, the most difficult part of a loved one dying is not the loss but how they [explain the death](#) to children and grandchildren. It's crucial that you are honest — to an age-appropriate degree — with everyone. Avoid using phrases such as “passing away” or “finally at peace” when talking about an impending or recent death. It's difficult to explain death to younger children, but they must not be given false hope that their loved one can return. Most experts recommend actually using the word “death.”

Recovering Together

There is no wrong way or right way to grieve the loss of someone you love. You may choose to have an open [funeral service](#), which allows your friends and extended family to support you through your loss. What is important is that you surround yourself with people who share in your love of the deceased. Stick together as a family, or, if you have none, seek support from a [grief counselor](#) or support group. Do whatever feels right to you.

When there are children involved, be patient. Even young adolescents may not fully have the ability to express their emotions. Sometimes, grief may appear in the form of a stomach ache or insomnia. Some children might lash out or seclude themselves. Whatever their reaction, chances are, it's normal. Talk to their pediatrician if you suspect otherwise.

No single source of information can fully prepare you for the moment someone you love dies. You may have prepared for this moment for months, but it almost always comes as a shock to the system. However, by understanding the process — and helping the youngest members of your family do the same — you are one step closer to moving forward.

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