Seven Common Fears of Dying (and How to Address Them)

1. The Fear: The Process of Dying
   - Will death be painful?
   - How will I get through this?

   **How to Dispel It**

   Make sure your loved one knows that he will experience little or no pain unless he chooses to. Pain management is a service that hospice facilities are especially strong in providing. Staff members are trained to interpret what patients need using verbal and nonverbal cues, and they will discuss the benefits and drawbacks of each option with patients and their families.

2. The Fear: Loss of Control
   - Must I give up independence?
   - Can I cope with being dependent on others?

   **How to Dispel It**

   Encourage your loved one to live a normal lifestyle for as long as possible-a life-threatening or terminal diagnosis does not change who the patient fundamentally is. When it becomes clear that the patient will need to accept care from others, arrange for her to meet and get to know her caregivers in advance, especially if medical professionals are involved. Becoming acquainted with them before accepting their services can alleviate discomfort and fear.

3. The Fear: Loss of Loved Ones
   - What is going to happen to them?
   - How will they manage without me?

   **How to Dispel It**

   Only the patient's loved ones can alleviate this fear. Be willing to frankly discuss with your loved one what will happen to everyone when he dies, and do everything you can to reassure him that you will be okay. If children or dependent adults are involved, help your loved one formulate a detailed plan for their future care.

4. The Fear: Others' Reactions

What if I see fear in the eyes of others?
How do I respond to differences in their nonverbal communication and body language?
How to Dispel It

It's natural to feel fear and sadness when faced with the loss of a loved one, but after the initial shock has worn off, try to behave normally. Remember, it's not about you. Make sure that all caregivers are getting enough sleep, exercise, and emotional support, since the strain of not receiving them is evident in both appearance and demeanor. Lastly, ensure that all caregivers and visitors are told in advance what to expect. This way, displays of shock or fear can be avoided.

5. The Fear: Isolation

- What if my visits with healthcare professionals and friends decrease?
- Will I die alone?

How to Dispel It

Quite simply, make sure that regular visits with close friends, family members, and other volunteers are scheduled, especially if medical appointments have decreased because a cure is no longer possible. If you don't live near your loved one or cannot commit to frequent visits for other reasons, consider taking advantage of hospice care or church ministries. End-of-life care from these establishments includes comprehensive pain management and dramatically increases quality of life.

6. The Fear: The Unknown

- What can I expect?
- Will there be life after death?

How to Dispel It

Everyone, even the greatest self-professed skeptic, wonders what will happen to them after they take their last breaths. Addressing this concern has physical, emotional, and spiritual implications. Even if your loved one is not "religious," consider asking a priest, rabbi, minister, pastor, etc. to speak with the patient. Outside resources such as these can present a gift of peace, regardless of past doubts and skepticism.

7. The Fear: That Life Will Have Been Meaningless

- What did I accomplish during my life?
- Did I have a positive impact on the world?

How to Dispel It

People who are leaving this world need to hear that they are valued and that they won't be forgotten. Don't miss the chance to tell the patient how much you love her, and remind her of all the good she brought to your life. Reassure her that her life had purpose and meaning, and encourage others to do the same, either in person or through cards and letters. Also, take time to go through photo albums, share memories, and absorb life lessons from your loved one.

* These seven fears originally appeared in Hospice: A Caring Community, a book by Theodore Koff II.

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"What Can I Do to Help?": Nine From-the-Heart Answers Your Dying Loved One Would Like to Give You

The following suggestions have come from men and women who have passed various milestones on their own sacred walks.


"Don't ask me how to help." Although asking how you can help might be your first instinct, instead try to anticipate ways in which you can be useful. Your loved one is embroiled in an immense crisis, and he may not be able to identify or articulate the areas in which he needs help. It's also possible that he might feel uncomfortable asking for aid. So if you see a way in which you can help, just do it. Make a meal. Clean your loved one's bathroom. Offer to pick up groceries, or take care of children. Your foresight and initiative will be greatly appreciated.

"Don't make me talk about my condition." Remember that your loved one has talked endlessly to doctors about her illness, prognosis, and treatment options. If you were not a part of those meetings, it's okay to ask about general news—but resist the impulse to go into detail. More likely than not, this will unnerve your loved one, make her feel less "normal," and undermine the positive attitude she's striving for. When she's ready to share, she'll initiate the topic.

"Listen to me." When your loved one is ready to talk, be ready to listen—even if the topic is one you'd rather avoid. The patient may not need advice, but what he does need is a sounding board to help him think through the pros and cons of his options—someone who won't fall apart when he talks about his fears and concerns. Make your loved one feel comfortable by asking questions and affirming his feelings.

"Help alleviate my fears." If your loved one is harboring fears about the dying process or death, it's important for her to address them. Gently encourage the patient to talk about what she is afraid of or apprehensive about, and do what you can to alleviate those worries, whether that involves physical action or affirming words.

"Help me maintain my dignity and control." Although you might want to do everything you can for your loved one from the minute he receives a terminal diagnosis, it's important not to hover over him or prematurely treat him as an invalid. Let him maintain a normal life by doing the things he can for as long as he can. Otherwise, he might feel as though he has lost control of his life. Once your loved one does need aid to get from one day to the next, always be sure to consult his opinion and make sure that his wishes are being followed.
"Reassure me that my life mattered." It is common for depression and doubt to set in when someone accepts that she is losing the battle to stay alive, particularly if she has always been an "in-charge" person and/or a caregiver herself. Take every opportunity to express appreciation and admiration for her past accomplishments, and communicate what your relationship has meant to you. Make sure that your loved one knows how much you care for her, and encourage other family members and friends to do the same.

"Share your faith with me." Whether your loved one is an atheist, an agnostic, or a person of faith, he may be uncertain and apprehensive about what the next step will entail—and he might not feel comfortable initiating conversations about what he believes. Keep your antennae up and listen for the subtle openings you might be given. Skeptics and believers alike are comforted by the assurance that a divine being exists and that an afterlife awaits.

"Create a peaceful atmosphere for me." The last thing your loved one wants is to be surrounded by reminders of death and dying. Most patients prefer to stay at home if at all possible. If your loved one has to remain in a healthcare facility, though, do everything you can to make her room feel like home. Keep the area around her free of clutter and harsh lights, try to hide or disguise medical supplies, and surround her with her favorite things: pictures, objects, flowers, artwork, music, and above all, people.

"Give me permission to go." This is one of the last and most difficult services you can perform for your dying loved one. Even after a person's fears about the dying process have been addressed, some might still worry about leaving the people who love and care for them. Assure your loved one that everything has been taken care of, that he will be remembered and cherished, and that it is okay to let go. Removing any emotional obstacle that may remain will help open the door to a peaceful passing.