



SAYING GOODBYE WHEN A LOVED ONE IS DYING

By Debra Voth

Though we are all aware that death is a natural part of life we cannot help but feel shock and great sadness when faced with the death of someone close to us. Exactly what we feel and how we choose to cope with these feelings will vary greatly depending on our particular situation and the past history we bring to our current circumstances.

This information is meant to offer some very general guideposts for this difficult journey. Many of these thoughts come directly from people who have said goodbye to loved ones and have reflected on the challenges they face. You may find yourself able to relate to some points but not to others. Use what is helpful and leave the rest.

Above all, be gentle with yourself. These are days of poignant sorrow as well as precious joy. The moments you share with your loved one now will be remembered for many years to come.

The Task At Hand

When a loved one is dying we are faced with the difficult task of preparing ourselves to separate from this special person while continuing to stay involved. Sometimes this period of time involves intense caregiving responsibilities which demand intimate, personal closeness. The challenge is to remain involved with our dying loved one while beginning to consider a life without him or her.

An early change that often occurs is a shift in the usual roles each person plays. This may mean that the "in charge" person may no longer be able to make decisions or the "chief cook and bottle washer" can no longer accomplish daily chores. When possible it may feel comforting to maintain the familiar household routines as much as possible.

The "roller coaster effect" is a phrase used by some to describe the extreme ups and downs that can be typical of this time. One day our loved one is energetic and positive and the next day our loved one is hurting and sad. We may sense that death is very near one day and the next it seems far away. We might even begin to consider "we can beat this yet." In the midst of such uncertainty it can be helpful to scale back our view of the future and take one day at a time.

If we are spending much of our time and energy caring for our loved one we may experience a deep sense of isolation. Some caregivers have used the words "the walls are closing in on me." It can be extremely helpful to seek out outside support from friends or family in order to maintain our perspective and our own health.

What We May Feel

It is not possible to describe here the wide range of feelings we may encounter during this time. There are, however, some general themes that many people have identified.

The first of these is the feeling of numbness. Our hearts can simply take in only so much bad news. It's okay to let ourselves understand both the awfulness and the enormity of our situation a little bit at a time.

Another difficult feeling may be that of anger. Maybe we feel angry at our loved one for being so sick and causing us such anguish, or at the physician for failure to cure. Perhaps we even feel angry at God for our feelings of being abandoned. These feelings can be quite disturbing. They may also lead us to feelings of guilt and helplessness. No matter what we do or how hard we try to make things better our loved one is still dying.

Laughter and pleasure can still be a part of our lives. We can permit ourselves positive feelings even in the midst of these difficult circumstances.

Dealing With Intense Feelings

To love deeply is to open ourselves to the pain of separation. Often the intensity of this emotional pain surprises even the most stoic and well-prepared individuals. Many people feel uncomfortable with these feelings since they are so seldom experienced. Expressions such as "breaking down" or "losing control" may lead us to see these feelings as threatening and dangerous. However, intense sadness is a natural part of saying goodbye, and the emotional release of these feelings is also very natural.

Sharing sad feelings and tears with our loved one can be very healing. However, this is not always possible. Perhaps our loved one can no longer respond or perhaps our loved one does not want to talk about these difficult feelings. A private time and place where we can shed our tears alone or with trusted friends can be a way of coping with intense feelings.

Some people find journaling or keeping a diary helpful. Others have used a creative project as a means of expressing the pain and sorrow of their loss. Such projects may include writing a song or poem for the memorial service, building the burial box or casket or creating a picture book of the loved one's life.

By finding an outlet for these intense emotions, we are taking care of our own emotional well being. We are also less likely to distance ourselves from our dying loved one out of fear or discomfort.

When Family Is Involved

If we are experiencing this loss as a member of a larger family we will, no doubt, experience the rewards and challenges that come with family interactions.

These times may call for increased flexibility and tolerance of personal differences among family members. It may also be helpful to keep in mind our family history of

dealing with difficulties or crisis situations. These past experiences can teach us how best to cope with the current crisis.

Our family can be a source of great strength and courage. When other agendas are put aside and energies are focused on these special last days with our loved one, these times can be our family's "finest hour."

When The End Comes

Inevitably the moment comes to bid our loved one farewell. We say our goodbyes. We reassure our loved one that we will manage without them and then we release them to God.

These profoundly moving moments can be made less anxious and frightening if we have been able to do some planning. Sometimes just thinking through what these moments might be like will help prepare us. Who would we like to have with us? Who will need to be called? There is no need to rush. We have all the time we need to say a prayer of farewell or wait for family to arrive. We know that soon the funeral director will arrive and our deceased loved one will finally leave our side.

One journey has ended. Another is just beginning. In the weeks, months and years ahead we will slowly rebuild our lives and we will discover our loved one's final gift to us. They have taught us how to say goodbye when it is our time to die.

Debra Voth is a clinical social worker formerly with Harry Hynes Memorial Hospice, which serves 25 counties throughout south central and southeast Kansas. For more information, contact Harry Hynes Memorial Hospice at www.hynesModule.org