

What to expect as the final stage of death approaches

PHYSICAL CHANGES

Eating & drinking less

As metabolism slows down, appetite and thirst decrease. Your loved one will become weaker, sleep more and weight loss is expected.

Less energy & drowsiness

Because their bodies are trying to save as much energy as possible they need extra sleep and rest. It is best to socialize with your loved one when they are most awake and alert. Speak and act as you normally would and don't shout or shake them to catch their attention.

Changes in temperature

Slowing down of the circulation causes skin to become cold and sometimes darker colored or blotchy; this can be seen in the hands or feet. There can also be times when the person is hot, clammy and restless.

Uneven breathing patterns

Breathing is irregular: it can be quick or have long pauses and breaths can be shallow or noisy. The ability to cough and swallow becomes impaired. A gurgling sound may be heard because it is difficult to clear the throat; this is known as the "death rattle" and becomes more frequent as death approaches. It is normal and not painful for the person.

Loss of bowel and/or bladder control

Urine and/or stool may be passed unintentionally due to the relaxing of muscles in this area. Special pads and bed covers are available to improve hygiene and make sure the person is comfortable.

Confusion

Changes in the person's metabolism, effects of medication or the illness itself may cause the person not to understand what is going on around them, where they are, who people are or what the time is. They may not speak clearly, or what they say will not make sense; for example, talking about finishing an important project, going on a holiday or hearing things that are not real. As well, they may have a hard time concentrating or remembering. When speaking with your loved one it is best to speak calmly and clearly but without being condescending. You may also need to identify yourself and others.

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Restlessness

The person may seem quite agitated. Softly playing music, reading them a book or a gentle massage can be quite calming.

When death is closer

- There are fewer care needs. Treatments may be stopped and the priority may be providing comfort; bathing, clothing and other hygiene needs.
- The person will become more relaxed. Some may come to terms with the fact that death is approaching; they are less resistant.
- More and more drowsy, and may even fall asleep during conversation.
- Become unresponsive and extremely difficult to communicate with.
- More restless than they were before by constantly shifting, trying to get out of bed and being difficult to comfort.
- Heartbeat and pulse may be irregular.
- Bubbling throat sounds more prevalent when breathing.

EMOTIONAL CHANGES

Anxiety

The person may develop feelings of uneasiness in knowing that they are dying, and may become overwhelmed and distressed. Help them relieve some of this stress by breaking down their anxiety into its different aspects and tackling each one individually. You can share your thoughts and provide reassurance of care or simply be attentive and actively listen to any expressed concerns.

- Breathing exercises may also be helpful in relieving symptoms of anxiety.

Anger

Anger is a common reaction. It can be caused by the symptoms of a person's illness, the effect it has on their family and friends, and how it disrupts their lifestyle such as becoming more dependent on others. Anger may be expressed through yelling, sarcasm, hostility or displays of aggression. It may be directed toward family or friends. The experience of anger may create a sense of guilt for the person because it can offend or push away their loved ones when they need them most. It is a difficult but natural response and it is important not to abandon your loved one during this time. Instead, identify what you experience as angry behavior and determine the cause. Be aware of your own boundaries, and do not be afraid to take a break from the conversation or visit if you feel uncomfortable.

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Fear of the unknown

When approaching death it can be frightening to think what will happen in the future. What experiences will I miss out on? What will happen to my family and friends? What will become of my work, house and belongings? How will I feel right before I die? What will happen to my body? Some of these questions have realistic answers while others are philosophical. Heart to heart discussions may be helpful for all involved. Some people benefit from professional counseling which may be provided by a social worker, pastoral care counselor, psychologist or family therapist.

Sadness

Sadness does not necessarily mean the person is depressed. Feelings of sadness can emerge once the reality of impending death is integrated. They are sad to leave loved ones behind, to not accomplish certain goals and to miss out on opportunities or important events. These feelings are expected and it is helpful to give the person the chance to express them openly.

Loneliness

Sometimes when faced with death, there is a fear of dying alone. Being confined to a bed and restricted in activities leaves people feeling isolated. Missing out on moments with family and friends puts a strain on these relationships. Your loved one needs comfort and reassurance that they are loved and will be missed. It is important to visit them, keep them up to date on everyday activities and involved in relationships.

Fear of losing control

As your loved one makes the transition along the dying process they will become more dependent on others. They will need help for basic activities such as eating, drinking, bathing, dressing and going to the bathroom. The person may feel that they no longer have control over their bodies or what is being done to them which can be distressing. Giving back control in planning or decision making, and providing opportunities that allow the person to take part in activities (even if it is just observing) will improve their self-esteem.

Guilt & embarrassment

With the physical transition of moving from independent to dependent, your loved one may feel that they are becoming a burden. They may fear that they are causing pain for others and might blame themselves. As well, they might be embarrassed if there are changes to their appearance or have a need for assistance in basic tasks. Be sure to normalize behavior and feeling for your loved one and encourage expression of thoughts or emotions.

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Withdrawal

Your loved one may withdraw from normal activities, become less interested in conversation and distance themselves from their surroundings. They may feel that no one understands what they are going through or that they cannot articulate what they are feeling. Remember that you are a special part of this person's life and they still need your support even if they do not interact with you as they once did. At this point, touch and physical presence can be more important than words.

IMPORTANT THINGS TO REMEMBER:

- Dying is a process.
- Your loved one is still living even though they are dying. Avoid treating them only as patients or as if they are in the last stages of life when just diagnosed.
- Individuals who are dying also grieve. They need the opportunity to go through this process in order to confront their feelings about death and mourn the losses they are experiencing.
- Because changes occur over time, your loved one may not become bedridden right away. It is important to be aware of the person's desires to carry on with their normal activities, work and/or social interactions.
- Although your loved one is dying, it is important to continue to treat them as you did before. Acting differently towards them can contribute to feelings of abandonment and anxiety.
- Behave honestly: use normal communication and stay true to the relationship you have with your loved one.

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