

Guidelines for Communicating with Patients and Families at the End of Life



Some general guidelines and helpful hints for the professional caregiver in applying interventions are as follows:

- Use an empathetic approach
- Encourage self-expression
- Listening may be more important than speaking
- Maintain the patient's dignity
- Help the patient to feel secure
- The tone and manner of interacting is important
- Maintain hope
- Focus on remaining capabilities
- Reminiscing may bring a sense of closure

There are no easy cookbook answers to working with dying patients and their families. A set of guidelines is just that -- guidelines, not hard and fast rules. We adapt our caregiving to the nature and needs of the individuals involved.

Helpful Hints

- **Listen and Watch**
 - Listen carefully in order to decipher essential information
 - Pay attention to everything the patient says
 - Watch for key signs: glassy-eyed look; the appearance of staring through you; secretiveness or distractedness; seemingly inappropriate signs or gestures
 - If you don't know what to say don't say anything
- **Accept**
 - Keep an open mind
 - Accept and validate what is told to you by the patient (Example: "I'm so pleased you are telling me this. I really want to understand what is happening to you.")
 - Respond in ways that tell the patient you accept whatever they see or hear
- **Question**
 - Follow up what is said in a gentle way by asking questions



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- Encourage patients to repeat the question(s) if necessary. (Example: "I'm not sure I follow you. Can you explain a little more?")
 - When you do not understand what is happening, respond with gentle questioning (Example: "Can you tell me what is happening? You seem different today. Can you tell me why?")
 - Be honest about having difficulty understanding. (Example: I think you are trying to tell me something important and I am trying, but I am not understanding what you are telling me. Please do not give up on me. I will keep trying.")
 - Pose open-ended questions. (Example: If the patient whose parent is long since dead says, "My mother is waiting for me," turn the comment into a question. " Mother is waiting for you? or "I'm so glad she is close to you. Can you tell me about it?")
 - **Support**
 - Support the patient
 - Do not challenge or argue. Do not push.
 - Reinforce the interest you have in what they have to say and offer to be available when needed.

