

The power of listening

When helping someone with a terminal illness, sometimes just listening is the best medicine

"I was in my early forties with a lot of life before me when a moment came that stopped me on a dime."

Country music star Tim McGraw's "Live Like You Were Dying" tries to sum up the emotions of a terminal illness.

It's not just Hollywood. Rita Manning counsels patients and their loved ones as a pastoral care professional and bereavement coordinator for OSF HealthCare. She says there are ways to make the person's final days more peaceful.

Getting the diagnosis

Before the "what's next?" phase sets in, Manning says gut reactions to a terminal illness diagnosis can vary widely. Some have been in declining health, and they may show less of an emotional response. Others learn the news unexpectedly and abruptly.

"Those that are broadsided probably have more of an impact of mental and emotional things," Manning says.

People might talk about being afraid of death or ask lots of questions. Some may want to go "full speed ahead," as Manning puts it, and do things while they can. They may travel or catch up with old friends. Others may retreat and want to contemplate the future alone. Depression and other mental health issues can follow.

Helping out

Here's a phrase to try when starting the conversation with a loved one:

"You may not want to talk about this now. Just know that whenever you are ready, I'm ready to listen and be there," Manning says, putting herself in the shoes of a caregiver.

In other words, try to meet the person where they are. Don't try to fix something that can't be fixed. Acknowledge that the news is tough. Sit and cry with your loved one if that's the emotion they show. Or if you don't wear your emotions on your sleeve, offer help in other ways. Offer to mow the yard or take care of groceries.

Manning advises to avoid cliché phrases like "How are you doing?" Instead, try "How's your day treating you?"

Another poor phrase: "You're going to a better place."

"Those types of phrases might be factual for them in their faith journey. It still may not be the time they want to hear that," Manning says.

End of life discussions

It's not uncommon for an adult with a terminal illness to put off talking about their funeral, estate and other matters once they have passed away. But there comes a time when there's little time left to get things in order. Approach it delicately, Manning suggests.

"We just want to honor your wishes," Manning says, again posing as a caregiver. "If you could help us understand what those are, that would help us to know how to move forward."

Other phrases that may work: What is your greatest concern? What is your greatest hope? How can we make your final days full and comfortable?

Children and terminal illnesses

Consoling and supporting a child who will soon pass away requires a different approach, Manning says. You should still be honest, but they may not understand death. So, explain it in a way they understand.

First, reassure the child that the situation is not their fault.

Try something like: "Sometimes people just get sick. As hard as we try, we just can't find that solution to make you well again."

If they ask a question, an adult may need to ask one back to make sure they grasp what the child is thinking. For example: does the child's stomach hurt because they are nervous or because of the illness? The response will shape what the adult says.

Relate to what children know, like a pet who died or even leaves falling off trees in the winter. But don't be afraid to use words like "death" and "dying." Using words like "lost" may cause confusion, Manning says. For example: a parent says, "We lost grandma today." A child may respond, "Let's go find her."

Manning adds that there are books from trusted sources that talk about death.

"They're still going to have questions," Manning points out. "But it starts the hard task. Reading helps them engage and understand better."

Learn more

Learn more about resources for people nearing the end of their life on the [OSF HealthCare website](#).