

WHAT DO YOU SAY TO SOMEONE WHO IS DYING?

Talking to someone who is dying can be very uncomfortable. It can be so uncomfortable people often avoid, or want to avoid, visiting or talking with a dying person. People often state they “just don’t know what to say.”

It is understandable we are at a loss for words around someone who is dying. We never wrote essays in school about talking to a dying person and dinner conversations don’t routinely cover this subject. It is especially difficult to find words when we are experiencing intense feelings of sadness and impending loss. We can also be blind sighted in the presence of a dying person. We may only see their failing body, declining health, and vanishing spirit while losing sight of the fact a dying person is more than their death. Finding words in this painful situation necessitates a broader perspective than the moment we are in.

At any point in time a human being is a composite of their past, present, and future. Relating to people successfully includes referencing all three of these dimensions. When we say “Hello” to someone who is dying we need to be thinking about the person they were, the person they are, and the person they will become. When we ask “How are you?” we need to really mean it and not accept “Fine” or “Okay” as an answer. We need to say “No, I mean how are you really.” Then we need to listen and listen well, because talking with someone who is dying is as much about listening as it is about words.

We may not know much about the particular a dying person shares such as diagnoses or tests or treatments. But we all know about pain, frustration, sadness, and loss. These feelings are not situation specific and we can say “I am so sorry you have to experience these things today.” Empathizing with someone who is dying is a powerful way to be with them. Even the dying person can only spend so much time with their decline and will need to move on.

You can say “I remember when things were different. Do you remember when we went fishing in that snowstorm?” or bring up some time in the past you were together. This can often be a comfortable time, talking about your shared past and exchanging familiar remembrances that connect you in the world of memories. Talking about past experiences reminds everyone that the dying person’s life is more than what it is today.

When reminiscing is ending you can talk about tomorrow by asking “What will your tomorrow be like?” This question may take you into current events or it may take you into the final chapter of a life. When a dying person talks about “just waiting to go” you may squirm and say “I hate to hear you say that, my world will be different without you.” Tears and hugs and hand holding are meaningful because sharing emotions and touch are another powerful way to be with someone.

Ending a conversation or visit with a dying person can be hard. You can say “I have to go now, I have enjoyed talking with you, I am thinking about you.” You may be overwhelmed with lots of other thoughts and emotions, but know you have made a positive difference by spending time with someone and their past, present, and future. And when the dying person can no longer talk, you can still communicate with them by sitting quietly at their side in silence, remembering their life is so much more than this moment.

Heart of the Mountains Hospice staff are available to assist you when you need more help with what to say to someone who is dying. You can join us at our Caring Corner meetings or call us at 887-9074. We would also like to extend a big thank you to all the organizers, sponsors, and golfers who made the 2008 Hospice Golf Tournament such a big success!



Marsha Braddy is a volunteer with Heart of the Mountains Hospice. She has past experience as an RN and shares many skills with numerous volunteer activities in Grand County. Marsha is enjoying her role as a new grandmother and Hospice is very fortunate to have Marsha and her energy on our team.