



Caring for the Terminally Ill

Many illnesses can be cured or controlled while others are considered to be “terminal”. The timeframe from diagnosis to death can be from a few days to a few years. Those who have hope and the will to live will usually outlive those who have minimal or no hope at all.

Attitude has a definite influence on a terminal person’s longevity. Things that might influence a person’s attitude towards death are experience, culture, religion and age.

This section will help the Home Care Assistant understand the complexities of the dying process and the role they play while working with the terminally ill.



The Positive Side

- Reconciliation with Self – as individuals look back on and evaluate their lives, they face the pain and mistakes which, in turn, helps them to understand the totality of life. This reconciliation helps them to realize and accept that this was life.
- Reconciliation with Others – relationships long characterized by contention may be restored. While factors may not be agreed upon by those involved, the important thing is that there is forgiveness on both sides. It does not necessarily mean that a perfect relationship will develop but there will be some peace acquired.



The Process of Dying

- **Denial** – the first stage...dying individuals refuse to believe they are dying. Even when a physician informs them that nothing can be done, they still feel a mistake has been made. This information can give them time to:
 - ✓ Prepare
 - ✓ Take care of business
 - ✓ Close doors
 - ✓ Make amends



The Process of Dying

- **Anger** – the second stage...dying individuals feel anger and rage. Suddenly they are not in control of their lives or death. There are no options – they are going to die. Feelings of helplessness develop then guilt surfaces. They also experience envy towards those who are healthy. The anger is directed at no one in particular.
- **Bargaining** – the third stage...dying individuals are now willing to compromise. They are willing to do or not do specific things in exchange for more time. Bargaining is usually done privately and on a spiritual level.



The Process of Dying

- **Depression** – the fourth stage...dying individuals realize that death is inevitable. They are aware, angry and filled with sorrow. There is mourning over things that were lost and things that will be lost without a future. This is a normal part of the process of preparing to die.
- **Acceptance** – the fifth stage...dying individuals have worked through the numerous conflicts and feelings that death brings. They succumb to the inevitable, as they grow more tired and weak. They become less emotional and more calm and at peace. They realize the battle is almost over and it's really alright to die. Reaching this stage does not mean death is near.



Areas of Needs

There are four main areas of care for those who are coping with dying:

- Physical
- Psychological
- Social
- Spiritual



Physical Needs

As the person weakens, Home Care Assistants can help to meet basic needs, which will promote physical and psychological comfort. Below are suggestions of how the Home Care Assistant can help meet those needs:

Speech	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Becomes difficult• May be hard to understand• May not be able to speak	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ask “yes” or “no” questions• Continue to talk to the person even if he/she cannot speak
Vision	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Blurs and gradually fails• Eyes may be half opened• May be afraid of the dark	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Explain what is being done• Keep room lit but avoid bright lights and glare
Hearing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• One of the last functions to go	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Speak in a normal voice• Offer comforting words• Always assume they can hear you



Psychological Needs

It's important that Home Care Assistants take the emotions of those with a terminal illness seriously. These emotions can range from anger to sadness to anxiety to fear. Below are some suggestions of how to communicate effectively:

- Be physically present
- Be honest and empathetic
- Actively listen, allowing them to express feelings, worries and concerns



Social Needs

People who are dying may want to spare their families unnecessary strife and will only express their thoughts and feelings to a “third party” such as caregivers. It is quite understandable that many caregivers find these situations to be uncomfortable. Below are some suggestions on how to meet their needs:

- Allow them to talk about their concerns
- Serve as a “sounding board”
- Allow them to suggest how their needs might be met



Spiritual Needs

Dying persons often bring up spiritual issues. (Spirituality is concerned with or affecting the non-physical part of a human being). They may ask questions out loud but are not really looking for answers. Instead they are expressing what they are thinking about and trying to determine the answers to their own questions. Below are some tips on how to meet these needs:

- Be empathetic
- Provide creative opportunities (e.g. music, literature, etc.)
- Allow privacy during spiritual moments



Summary

Caring for the terminally ill can be very challenging. The job of the Home Care Assistant is to involve them as much as possible in making decisions and developing plans, being an effective listener and ensuring their needs are addressed. It is important that Home Care Assistants realize that terminal illness is still life. While it may be short, it is the only life left.

Terminal illness also has a positive side in that dying people can seek reconciliation with themselves and with others. It is a normal phase of the life process.