

“What Can I Do to Help?”: Nine From-the-Heart Answers Your Dying Loved One Would Like to Give You

The following suggestions have come from men and women who have passed various milestones on their own sacred walks.

From Donna Authers, author of *A Sacred Walk: Dispelling the Fear of Death and Caring for the Dying* (A&A Publishing, 2008, ISBN: 978-0-615-24585, \$15.95)

“Don’t ask me how to help.” Although asking how you can help might be your first instinct, instead try to anticipate ways in which you can be useful. Your loved one is embroiled in an immense crisis, and he may not be able to identify or articulate the areas in which he needs help. It’s also possible that he might feel uncomfortable asking for aid. So if you see a way in which you can help, just do it. Make a meal. Clean your loved one’s bathroom. Offer to pick up groceries, or take care of children. Your foresight and initiative will be greatly appreciated.

“Don’t make me talk about my condition.” Remember that your loved one has talked endlessly to doctors about her illness, prognosis, and treatment options. If you were not a part of those meetings, it’s okay to ask about general news—but resist the impulse to go into detail. More likely than not, this will unnerve your loved one, make her feel less “normal,” and undermine the positive attitude she’s striving for. When she’s ready to share, she’ll initiate the topic.

“Listen to me.” When your loved one is ready to talk, be ready to listen—even if the topic is one you’d rather avoid. The patient may not need advice, but what he does need is a sounding board to help him think through the pros and cons of his options—someone who won’t fall apart when he talks about his fears and concerns. Make your loved one feel comfortable by asking questions and affirming his feelings.

“Help alleviate my fears.” If your loved one is harboring fears about the dying process or death, it’s important for her to address them. Gently encourage the patient to talk about what she is afraid of or apprehensive about, and do what you can to alleviate those worries, whether that involves physical action or affirming words.

“Help me maintain my dignity and control.” Although you might want to do everything you can for your loved one from the minute he receives a terminal diagnosis, it’s important not to hover over him or prematurely treat him as an invalid. Let him maintain a normal life by doing the things he can for as long as he can. Otherwise, he might feel as though he has lost control of his life. Once your loved one does need aid to get from one day to the next, always be sure to consult his opinion and make sure that his wishes are being followed.

“Reassure me that my life mattered.” It is common for depression and doubt to set in when someone accepts that she is losing the battle to stay alive, particularly if she has always been an “in-charge” person and/or a caregiver herself. Take every opportunity to express appreciation and admiration for her past accomplishments, and communicate

what your relationship has meant to you. Make sure that your loved one knows how much you care for her, and encourage other family members and friends to do the same.

“Share your faith with me.” Whether your loved one is an atheist, an agnostic, or a person of faith, he may be uncertain and apprehensive about what the next step will entail—and he might not feel comfortable initiating conversations about what he believes. Keep your antennae up and listen for the subtle openings you might be given. Skeptics and believers alike are comforted by the assurance that a divine being exists and that an afterlife awaits.

“Create a peaceful atmosphere for me.” The last thing your loved one wants is to be surrounded by reminders of death and dying. Most patients prefer to stay at home if at all possible. If your loved one has to remain in a health care facility, though, do everything you can to make her room feel like home. Keep the area around her free of clutter and harsh lights, try to hide or disguise medical supplies, and surround her with her favorite things: pictures, objects, flowers, artwork, music, and above all, people.

“Give me permission to go.” This is one of the last and most difficult services you can perform for your dying loved one. Even after a person’s fears about the dying process have been addressed, some might still worry about leaving the people who love and care for them. Assure your loved one that that everything has been taken care of, that he will be remembered and cherished, and that it is okay to let go. Removing any emotional obstacle that may remain will help open the door to a peaceful passing.