

Seven Common Fears of Dying (And How to Address Them)

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)

1. The Fear: The Process of Dying

- Will death be painful?
- How will I get through this?

How to Dispel It

Make sure your loved one knows that he will experience little or no pain unless he chooses to. Pain management is a service that hospice facilities are especially strong in providing. Staff members are trained to interpret what patients need using verbal and nonverbal cues, and they will discuss the benefits and drawbacks of each option with patients and their families.

2. The Fear: Loss of Control

- Must I give up independence?
- Can I cope with being dependent on others?

How to Dispel It

Encourage your loved one to live a normal lifestyle for as long as possible—a life-threatening or terminal diagnosis does not change who the patient fundamentally is. When it becomes clear that the patient will need to accept care from others, arrange for her to meet and get to know her caregivers in advance, especially if medical professionals are involved. Becoming acquainted with them before accepting their services can alleviate discomfort and fear.

3. The Fear: Loss of Loved Ones

- What is going to happen to them?
- How will they manage without me?

How to Dispel It

Only the patient's loved ones can alleviate this fear. Be willing to frankly discuss with your loved one what will happen to everyone when he dies, and do everything you can to reassure him that you will be okay. If children or dependent adults are involved, help your loved one formulate a detailed plan for their future care.

4. The Fear: Others' Reactions

- What if I see fear in the eyes of others?
- How do I respond to differences in their nonverbal communication and body language?

How to Dispel It

It's natural to feel fear and sadness when faced with the loss of a loved one, but after the initial shock has worn off, try to behave normally. Remember, it's not about you. Make sure that all caregivers are getting enough sleep, exercise, and emotional

support, since the strain of not receiving them is evident in both appearance and demeanor. Lastly, ensure that all caregivers and visitors are told in advance what to expect. This way, displays of shock or fear can be avoided.

5. The Fear: Isolation

- What if my visits with health care professionals and friends decrease?
- Will I die alone?

How to Dispel It

Quite simply, make sure that regular visits with close friends, family members, and other volunteers are scheduled, especially if medical appointments have decreased because a cure is no longer possible. If you don't live near your loved one or cannot commit to frequent visits for other reasons, consider taking advantage of hospice care or church ministries. End-of-life care from these establishments dramatically increases pain management as well as quality of life.

6. The Fear: The Unknown

- What can I expect?
- Will there be life after death?

How to Dispel It

Everyone, even the greatest self-professed skeptic, wonders what will happen to them after they take their last breaths. Addressing this concern has physical, emotional, and spiritual implications. Even if your loved one is not "religious," consider asking a priest, rabbi, minister, pastor, etc. to speak with the patient. Outside resources such as these can present a gift of peace, regardless of past doubts and skepticism.

7. The Fear: That Life Will Have Been Meaningless

- What did I accomplish during my life?
- Did I have a positive impact on the world?

How to Dispel It

People who are leaving this world need to hear that they are valued and that they won't be forgotten. Don't miss the chance to tell the patient how much you love her, and remind her of all the good she brought to your life. Reassure her that her life had purpose and meaning, and encourage other to do the same, either in person or through cards and letters. Also, take time to go through photo albums, share memories, and absorb life lessons from your loved one.