

Leaflet # 7: Thinking of you...

What to say if someone you know is dying

Someone you know is very ill

They may not have long to live. You feel desperately sad, but also at a loss what to do. Their illness seems to have changed everything. How can you talk about things the way you used to? Will they still want to see you when time is so short? Should you call? And what can you possibly say to them under the circumstances?

Why we need to stay in touch

People who are very ill or dying can become very isolated. Friends and acquaintances sometimes avoid them, not out of maliciousness, but because they don't know what to do or say. They decide not to ring them as they usually would, or think that it's probably best not to visit them given the stress the family must be under.

But that often isn't the best approach for the person who is dying – and it can leave you, as a friend, with regrets and sadness afterwards too. People who are ill often won't want a long conversation, but having contact with friends and a life beyond their immediate situation can provide the kind of lift that family members cannot. It can also provide them with a sense that, as life is ending, they have an opportunity to complete things – to say goodbye even if "goodbye" is never said.

“It was the little acts of kindness and thoughtfulness that meant most to us all when Joan was dying. Some of them, like people bringing round old pictures, made us laugh and cry at the same time.”

Where to start

- Bear in mind that it’s nearly always better to do something than nothing – to have a conversation rather than remain silent.
- Making contact is the most important thing, even if it’s simply leaving a message saying that you’re thinking of them.
- You don’t have to say much, or be profound.
- Try not to worry about saying the wrong thing – the chances of doing so are slim.
- Try not to make assumptions about what the other person wants, or what their family wants. You can always ask.
- Don’t make assumptions about their situation either. Do you really know how ill the person is, or is it just hearsay?
- If you’re worried about anything – for example, how much the person knows about their illness and life expectancy – you can ask the family.
- Rather than visiting unannounced, ring or email first to check that it’s convenient.

During the conversation

- Try and gauge from the other person how much they want to talk, and what about.
- You don’t have to make speeches, provide answers or offer counselling.
- Treat them as you normally would: it’s reassuring to know that, despite illness, people still think of you in the same way they always have.

- If there are things you want to say, and the moment seems right, say them.
- Bear in mind that whatever you say, even if you talk about dying, you're unlikely to make the other person feel worse. They may well be thinking about these things anyway.
- Don't worry, or feel you have to change the subject, if things get emotional – it's quite natural.
- Try and feel your way about how long you should stay. Don't feel you have to rush away, but don't outstay your welcome.

Help with practicalities

Families and individuals who are feeling the stresses of illness often greatly appreciate practical help. Simply offering is a good way of showing you care, but actually doing something can provide an act of kindness that means a great deal. Running errands is also a good excuse for popping in without making a big thing of saying goodbyes.

You could offer to do some shopping, bring someone round, or buy a favourite treat.

To find out how to get more help visit www.dyingmatters.org

or call freephone 08000 21 44 66

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NATIONAL
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This is number seven in a series of leaflets focusing on dying, death and bereavement produced by Dying Matters.

The National Council for Palliative Care (NCPC) is the umbrella charity for all those who are involved in providing, commissioning and using palliative care and hospice services in England, Wales & Northern Ireland.

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