

End-of-Life Planning Guide

When a person is in the final stages of life, changes happen as his or her body begins to die. These changes may be physical, emotional, or spiritual. Just as the body gets ready to be born, it prepares for death. Knowing these changes can help loved ones and caregivers be ready when death is near.

It is important to remember that everybody experiences different changes at the end of their life. You may see one or more of these changes even when the person isn't dying.

Common End-of-Life Changes

Drowsiness and increased sleep. Even though the person may appear asleep, he or she can probably still hear. Speak directly to the person and talk as if he or she can hear, even if you do not get a reply. People can often still hear after they are no longer able to speak.

Confusion, restlessness, and visions of people and places. Gently remind the person of the time, date, and others who are present. The person may become bothered or jerk without meaning to. Stay calm and comforting. Leaving soft lights on in the room can help if the person has trouble seeing.

Withdrawal and less interest in socializing. Let the person know you are present and supportive. Sometimes it helps to give permission to “let go.”

Less interest in eating and drinking. Allow the person to choose if and when to eat or drink. Offer things that keep the mouth and lips moist.

Loss of bladder or bowel control. Keep the person as clean, dry, and comfortable as possible. Place disposable pads on the person's bed and remove them when they become soiled.

Cool or bluish skin. This is caused by decreased blood flow, especially in the arms and legs. Blankets can be helpful, but avoid using electric blankets or heating pads that can cause burns.

Breathing changes and congestion. Breathing may become irregular and shallow. The person may make gurgling and rattling sounds. Although this can be very distressing to the caregiver, it is not believed to cause the person discomfort. Placing pillows underneath the person's head and back may help.

Providing Emotional Support

Everyone has different emotions as they near death, but some are common to most dying people. These include fear of being alone, being a burden, and loss of dignity and control. Here are some ways you can comfort your loved one:

- Keep the person company—talk, watch movies, read, or just be present.
- Listen when the person expresses fears and concerns about dying.
- Be open to talking about memories from the person's life.
- Try not to keep difficult information from the person. Include him or her in discussions.
- Reassure the person that you will honor advance directives such as living wills.
- Ask if there is anything you can do.
- Respect the person's need for privacy.
- Express feelings and thoughts that may offer resolution to the person such as forgiveness, gratitude, love, and goodbye (summarized from *The Four Things That Matter Most* by Ira Byock, MD).

Signs That Death Has Occurred

- The eyes do not move or blink, and may be in a fixed stare. The eyelids may be slightly open.
- The jaw is relaxed and the mouth is slightly open.
- The body may release bowel and bladder contents.
- The person will not respond to being touched or spoken to.
- There is no breathing or pulse.

After death has occurred, there is no need to hurry with arrangements. When you are ready, notify family and friends, the funeral home, and health care staff.