

# Helping Your Family When a Member is Dying

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

You have learned that someone in your family is dying. You want to help the ill person as well as your family. This article will guide you in ways to turn your cares and concerns into positive actions.

## **The Shock of the News**

Learning that someone in your family is dying is a blow to everyone the news touches. We sometimes think this only happens in other families, but now it is happening to yours. If the onset of the illness was sudden or unexpected, you and the rest of your family will likely feel shock and numbness at first. This is a natural and necessary response to painful news.

You can only cope with this new reality in doses. You will first come to understand it in your head, and only over the weeks and even months to come will you come to understand it with your heart.

## **Be Aware of Your Family's Coping Style**

How you and your family respond to this illness will have a lot to do with how you as a family have related in the past. If your family is used to openly talking about their feelings with each other, they will probably be able to communicate well about the illness and the changes it brings. Families in which people don't talk about feelings and tend to deal with problems individually will probably have difficulty acknowledging the illness and its impact.

If you are reading this brochure, you are already taking steps to acknowledge that someone in your family is dying. You may have found some family members want to discuss the illness, while others seem to want to deny the reality and refuse to discuss it. Right now your family may feel like a pressure cooker: you all have a high need to feel understood, but little capacity to be understanding.

## **Adjust to Changing Roles**

Families sometimes have a hard time adjusting to the changing roles the illness makes necessary. If the head of the household is dying, the other spouse may now have to find a job in addition to caring for the home and children, for example. If grandma acted as the family's binding force before she was ill, her family may now feel confused and disjointed where they once felt strong and cohesive.

Such changes can alter the ways in which family members interact with each other. They may act short-tempered, overly dependent, stoic or any number of other difficult ways.

## **Consider Getting Outside Help**

Perhaps the most compassionate thing you can do for your family during this stressful time is to reach out for help on their behalf. If someone in your family is caring for the dying person at home, consider hiring a homecare nurse instead. Have groceries delivered. Hire a housekeeper to come in twice a month. Your church or other community organization might be able to provide volunteers to help you with any number of tasks. And family counseling can be a healing, enriching experience that helps family members understand one another now and long after the illness. Hospices are well-staffed and trained to help both the dying person and the dying person's family. Their mission is to help the dying die with comfort, dignity and love, and to help survivors cope both before and after the death. Contact your local hospice early in the dying process. Because they don't want to acknowledge the reality of the impending death, too often families wait until the last few days of the sick person's life. But when they are contacted sooner, hospices can provide a great deal of compassionate support and care up to six months before the death.

### **Encourage Open Communication, But Do Not Force It**

As caring family members, we should encourage honest communication among the dying person, caregivers, family and friends. However, we should never force it. Dying people naturally "dose" themselves as they encounter the reality of the illness in their lives. They may not be able to talk about it right away, or they may only feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings with certain family members.

### **What the Dying Person May be Feeling**

Experiencing illness affects a person's head, heart and spirit. While you wouldn't want to prescribe what they might feel, do be aware that terminally ill people may experience a variety of emotions. Fear, anxiety, anger, guilt, sadness and loneliness are just a few of the emotions they may feel-one at a time or simultaneously.

These feelings are a natural response to terminal illness. Your role as caring family member should be to listen to the sick person's thoughts and feelings without trying to change them. If she is sad, she is sad. Don't try to take that necessary emotion away from her. If she is angry or guilty, that's OK too. You may be tempted to soothe or deny her painful feelings, but a more helpful response is to simply acknowledge them. Listen and understand.

### **Help Family Members Tend to their Own Needs**

When a family member is dying, he or she becomes the focal point for the family. Suddenly everyone is concerned about that one person and her coming death. This is normal, yet it places a great physical and emotional burden on everyone involved.

Family members should not lose sight of their own needs during this difficult time. Encourage everyone to nurture themselves as well as the sick person. Get enough rest. Eat balanced meals. Lighten schedules as much as possible.

Though the family is experiencing a serious time, they should still give themselves permission to be happy. Plan fun events. Allow time to laugh, love and enjoy life.

### **Embrace Your Spirituality**

If faith is part of your family's life, express it in ways that seem appropriate to you. Singly or together, you may find comfort and hope in reading spiritual texts, attending religious services or praying. Allow yourselves to be around people who understand and support your religious beliefs. If some among you are angry at God because of the illness, realize that this is a normal and natural response. Try not to be critical of whatever thoughts and feelings each of you needs to explore.

### **Seek Hope and Healing**

After the ill person dies, you and your other family members must mourn if you are to love and live wholly again. You cannot heal unless you openly express your grief. Denying your grief, before and after the death, will only make it more confusing and overwhelming. Embrace your grief and heal.

Reconciling your grief will not happen quickly. Remember, grief is a process, not an event. Encourage your family to be patient and tolerant with themselves. Never forget that the death of someone loved changes your life forever.