



10010 Kennerly Road
St. Louis, Missouri
(314) 525-7360



Thinking About Your Emotional Needs

Each person facing the end of their life does so in their own unique way. Each of us has a particular fingerprint. Similarly, we each approach death and the dying process with the special sensitivities, emotions, and beliefs that create and define the special human beings that we are.

Many patients have reported feeling grief and fear when they first begin to contemplate their own death. Grief is the psychological reaction to the experience of loss. When dealing with an advanced or terminal illness, there are many threats to personal and professional identity as people with a terminal illness recognize the many losses which the illness can cause. These losses include:

- ❑ Security
- ❑ Physical functions
- ❑ Body image
- ❑ Power and strength (physical, emotional, and sometimes spiritual)
- ❑ Independence and Self-esteem
- ❑ Respect of others and Future dreams

Fear is the psychological reaction to danger. It is understandable that as people approach the unknown in the future, they feel frightened about what lies ahead. Patients often envision the frightening images of death and dying which are broadcast in dramatic media portrayals and horror stories. They can become fearful of who they will become and what their new identity will be as they integrate each new loss. Even if a person does not verbalize these fears, they are often on their minds. Caregivers should not assume what their loved one is fearing; however, many people with illness report feeling the following fear of:

- ❑ Separating from loved ones, friends, workplace associates
- ❑ Becoming a burden to family members
- ❑ Losing control of bodily functions
- ❑ Being dependent on others
- ❑ Worsening symptoms and pain

- ❑ Being unable to complete life tasks or responsibilities
- ❑ Dying/Being dead
- ❑ Feeling the fears of others

Unexpressed fears and feelings can contribute to increased pain and physical side effects. In order to decrease fear and work through the grieving process, people need to be encouraged to share their complex feelings and have them validated and normalized. Palliative care programs, hospices, clergy, social workers, and health care providers are all sources of support to help find ways of coping with these overwhelming feelings and practical realities.

It can be helpful for some to speak with someone in their family about their concerns. For others, it is easier to speak with someone outside the family. Still for others, their fears and feelings are too private and they do not feel comfortable talking about them. For these individuals, it can be helpful to keep a journal, jot down a list or speak into a tape recorder with their changing emotional and physical experiences. They can then use these tools to ventilate their feelings privately and also share what they want with others when they feel they are ready.

For some individuals, talking about their experience is not sufficient to relieve fear, anxiety, and depression. It might be helpful for them to be referred to a psychiatrist for evaluation and medication. Often medication coupled with counseling can help decrease debilitating emotions and restore quality of life. A person's previous personality and their accustomed ways of viewing the world and coping with problems will color the way they cope with advanced illness and death. To quote Dylan Thomas, some patients will "rage, rage into the dying of the night" while other find themselves experiencing peace and acceptance and having the ability to quietly let go.

There is no one right way to die or feel about dying. Each person's experience will be individual and only the patient knows what would be helpful to him. Everyone has the right to decide what he or she wants to share with others and be willing to define boundaries with caregivers.

Caregivers will be looking to the dying person to tell them how to help. As the illness progresses, people with a terminal illness and family members are confronted with the task of redefining hope. Redefining hope is an individual and personal process. It can be redefined to mean accomplishing tasks never thought possible, getting closer with loved ones, finding the time to share smiles, laughter, and hugs, being able to participate in another beautiful day, and other small accomplishments which bring joy, satisfaction and peace.

Source - Cancer Care

The information provided on this website is for educational/informational purposes only and is not intended to be used in place of professional services or medical advice. It is not a substitute for professional medical care. Please be sure to consult your healthcare provider with any concerns or problems.