

Expert offers guide to end-of-life issues

By Jeanne Millsap For The Herald-News Nov 2, 2010 01:52PM



Jeri Palmer (right) shares a laugh with her friend Marilyn Feehan in 2007 when she was in the care of Joliet Area Community. A lifelong Jolietan, Palmer shared experiences in hospice with The Herald-News before she died in June 2007. | Herald-News file

The process of letting go of a terminally ill loved one or special friend can be just as difficult as the dying friend saying goodbye to his or her own life.

Grieving can begin long before the death, and the stress of it all can bring out the worst in family members, with squabbles over past differences and even household objects.

Sometimes, worry about what to say or the difficulty in accepting the situation keeps friends and family away from their dying loved one, something one hospice worker says is a shame.

“Don’t worry about what to say,” said Joan Sereno, executive director of Grundy Community Volunteer Hospice. “You go with your humanness, and the number one thing is listening. I’ve sat with patients before when I haven’t said one word. That’s what they needed. For me just to be there and to listen.”

Good for the soul

Reminiscing is another very good way to begin the letting go process for friends and family, she said.

“Remember when we did this thing or that thing,” she said a loved one can say, “or when such and such a thing happened ... Reminiscing is good for the soul. Talk about the things that made your life good because they were there, special events, funny stories ... ”

Sereno said some people might want to thank their dying family member or friend for all the things they’ve done in their life — the nice things they’ve done for people, the way you always knew they loved you, the time they were there for you during a difficult period.

“You want to go out of this world hearing good and loving things,” she said.

Remembering and celebrating the good is a wonderful way for loved ones to go through the letting-go process, she said. Grief is full of guilt, Sereno said. They go hand in hand, but leaving a dying friend without reminiscing about those wonderful, positive memories can leave feelings of even more guilt behind.

What to avoid

One thing family members should not do, she noted, is spend those last few months or days arguing and treating other family members badly. That is not the time for that behavior.

“There is no perfect family,” she said, “but this is not the time for that. Put it aside. You have to pull together. It will all work out in the wash.”

Letting go of grudges and family conflict will be easier and better if there is peace during those last days. Letting go of anger and resentment of not only other family members, but also the dying person, is not always easy, but it can be very liberating.

Some people are scared of other’s tears, too, Sereno said.

“Some people are afraid they might cry,” she said. “Or that they themselves might cry. It’s fine to cry. Let them cry. Don’t be afraid. You can cry, too. It’s OK to cry together. Don’t ever apologize for your tears.”

The human touch

Sereno said the four T’s of grief are talking, tears, touch and time.

Touch can be very important in the letting go process, she said.

“Human touches are really good,” she said.

Sereno is a hugger, but she never hugs someone without asking them if she can hug them first. It may not be something a loved one will be comfortable with, she said, but if they are, it is very cathartic for them and the other person. It’s a great way to say goodbye, with a hug, a kiss, holding hands, or caressing their head.

Sereno said husbands and wives will sometimes lie alongside their dying spouse, like they have done all of their lives together.

In the final days or hours, Sereno said, it’s good to tell a loved one that it’s OK for them to let go.

“Just give them permission to go,” she said. “When they are in the dying stage, you can say, ‘It’s OK, mom, you can go. I’ll be OK. I’m going to be fine, and you’re going to do fine.’ Sometimes the dying hang on for their loved ones, and they fight to stay.”

Finding closure

A final way to let go is to attend the funeral or the wake, she said. Some families are deciding to forgo funerals today because of the expense. Sereno said she thinks that’s a bad decision.

“I believe you must have some type of service,” she said, “because we need to say goodbye. It’s a closure.”

Sereno said hospice offers grief counseling for loved ones and help in letting go before the death. The Grundy Community Volunteer Hospice offers those services free, she said, and also has support groups for cancer, widows, and grief for men and women.

She offers a class on coping with loss each spring, as well. The hospice can be reached at 815-942-8525.

Saying goodbye

There comes a time when it's necessary to say goodbye to a terminally ill loved one, and letting go is one of the most powerful expressions of faith and parting gifts you can offer to them. It can be painful, and some may feel they don't have the right words, but the hospice community offers these tips for those final days:

Touch your loved one in a way that is comforting to your loved one (hold hands, rub his/her head, snuggle). Let your physical presence be part of what nurtures a place of trust.

Tell your loved one you love him/her. If the person is unable to respond, then answer, "And I believe you love me, too."

Tell him/her that you feel God's love in this place surrounding you and him/her. Let him/her know your trust is now in God. If you can express your experience of God's love/presence then describe it. If it feels natural to you, you could use a scriptural image (i.e. God has the hairs on your head numbered, so I believe that God knows where you are and knows your name). Tell her that God will continue to support you after he/she is gone and that you will make it in the future with your faith in God and your belief that he/she is at peace with God.

Forgive your loved one of any past estrangement/ behavior/words. If he/she is unable to respond, then answer, "And I believe you forgive me, too."

Give your loved one permission to let go. Again assure him/her that you trust the move from your loving hands into God's loving arms. Offer words such as "God is here with me and you, let's hold on to God now," "God's arms are open to you," "I am here for you, and so is God."

Remember you will likely repeat these acts in different forms many times. Hearing the words over and over creates a foundation of trust so that your loved one can feel secure in letting go. If visitors come and do not know what to say, suggest reading this page for guidance. Hearing permission from different people is reassuring to your dying loved one.

Source: www.hospicenet.org