

When a patient and family hear a diagnosis of chronic and devastating illness, it is heartbreaking for everyone. The mind may register the news, but the emotions are thrown into turmoil. It is natural to feel alarm, disbelief, bewilderment, sadness and depression.

As the ill one goes through treatment, each of you is likely to swing between feelings of hope and hopelessness. You will grieve together for every loss along the way. At this time, you can only cope as best you can. This brochure offers suggestions to help you.



complicated. It is natural to feel relief that your loved one is no longer suffering. You are also likely to feel sorrow, guilt, anger, and acceptance. Seek out people you can talk to and be with, who are willing to share your journey through grief without judgement. When you feel safe, allow yourself to confide your thoughts, feelings and memories. Nurture yourself, eat properly and get plenty of rest.

It takes courage to move forward

Those who have lost a loved one know that grief does not end. To heal is not to recover from grief, but to learn to live with your loss as you choose to move forward. Be patient with yourself as you work to let go of old roles and grow into new ones. It takes effort and courage to leave your "old self" and "normal" life behind. Know that you deserve to go on living as you remember the one you loved. You will find that hope emerges as you are able to make commitments to the future, reinvesting your emotional energy in life affirming activities.

*Death is a natural and permanent part of life,
just as grief is a natural and permanent part of
love. As life and love are to be embraced, so then
must death and grief be experienced and shared.
In sharing, we find the path to healing.*

We offer this brochure as a means to convey our support. This brochure is not meant to replace the professional guidance of a psychologist or counsellor. As you move through this difficult time, please seek professional help if necessary.



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BEING THERE FOR
*a family member
who is dying*



because *life* is important





A journey you share

A time of serious illness can be a time of love for the patient and their family. It depends how open you all are to sharing what you feel and experience. Families who are open are able to share the reality of the illness and its impact on their lives. When the family is not comfortable sharing their experience, each person may find themselves coping alone. This is a time to be understanding of each other, even as you seek to be understood.

The way your family copes is also determined by other factors, including the nature of the illness and the losses it brings. If the illness affects your loved one's mind, this brings a special kind of heartbreak. Consider, too, your financial situation, the age and health of the carer, your family's ability to adjust to change, the support you have, your past experience with loss, and your spirituality.

We encourage you to reach for emotional and practical support at this time. There are many people ready and willing to help: counsellors, your church, hospices, and organisations that assist with specific illnesses. Give consideration to hiring a cleaner, having someone cook for you, do your shopping, and have your gardens tended. If you cannot afford to pay for these services, ask your friends to pitch in. They will be glad of the opportunity to turn their care and concern into action.

Don't feel you must be your loved one's only means of support. Take time out to nurture yourself. This will energise and calm you, so that when you are with your loved one you can give her your undivided attention.

The challenges of care-giving

If you are the primary carer, you will learn intimately the nature of your loved one's illness. Encourage others in the family to learn about it, too. This will give them insight into his experience, and empower them to help him. The more each of you knows, the more prepared you will be for the progression of his illness.

Your loved one is likely to lose his autonomy and freedom along the way, and you will all grieve for his losses. Very often we define our importance by our ability to do - to act and to plan. As your loved one loses this power and becomes dependent on you, it may be difficult for him to believe that he is "worth" anything or that his life has meaning. Comfort him with the truth that his worth is not in doing, but in being - in being a loving partner, a loving parent, a loving colleague. Share with him how he enriches your life by being in it.

Be aware that your loved one may be feeling anxious, fearful, sad, regretful, angry or even guilty; these are normal responses to serious illness. You will be emotional, too, and as a carer may feel the loss of your own life and freedom at this time. It is natural for emotions to erupt on occasion, with each of you lashing out and saying words you regret. When this happens, be forgiving and understanding of each other. Diffuse the moment by focussing on love. Begin each day anew.

Coping with changing roles

Your loved one's illness makes them the chief concern for the family, and may require roles within the family to change. If the patient was the sole income earner, others may need to take on this role. Children tend to grow up quickly as they help out Mum and Dad. Everyone in the family is likely to feel the physical and emotional burden of care.

It is important that each person is encouraged to take time out and nurture their own needs: to rest, to play, to grieve, and to escape the reality of what they are facing. This will give each of you the energy and calm you need to be there for your loved one.

Listen to each other with compassion

Your loved one may not wish to talk about her illness. Don't force her. When she does feel ready to talk, the most loving thing you can do is to listen without judgement or expectation. Understand that your loved one must experience her illness in her own way. What she needs is your loving acceptance as she pours out her emotion.

Apply the same non-judgement to your own and the rest of the family's feelings, too. You are all experiencing loss and grief. Be gentle with each other. Accept each others feelings, and create opportunities to share them. Know that there is joy to be found in these days, too - the joy of loving each other through this difficult time.

Find comfort in your spirituality

Grief is a natural part of love. Your faith won't take your grief away. What it can do is give you comfort and strength as you share your loved one's final days. Your faith is a light of hope you can shine into your future. If you are upset at God, it is okay. Accept this as part of our grieving process. Find someone who will listen to your thoughts and feelings with compassion.

When it is time to say goodbye

You may have prepared for your loved one's death, or you may have been hoping for his recovery; either way you face a difficult grieving process, and will need support to move through it. Understand that your feelings will be