

COPING WITH DYING

1. Introduction

The dying process is unique to each individual but in most cases there are common characteristics or changes that help us know that a person is dying.

These fall into four main categories:

- diminished need for food and drink
- withdrawing from the world
- changes in breathing
- changes which occur before death

2. Diminished need for food and drink

When someone starts to die, their body no longer has the same need for food and drink as before. The body's metabolism slows down and the body can't digest the food so well or take up the nutrients from it. People stop drinking, and although their mouth may look dry, it's not a sign that they are dehydrated. Gently moistening the mouth with a damp cloth and applying lip balm will give comfort.

It can be hard to accept these changes, even when you know that the person is dying, as it's a physical sign that they are not going to get better. Nevertheless, you can still show that you care about your loved one by spending time with them and giving them comfort through your presence.

3. Withdrawing from the world

For most, the process of 'withdrawal from the world' is a gradual one. People spend more and more time asleep, and when they are awake they are often drowsy, and show less interest in what is going on around them. This natural process can be accompanied by feelings of calmness and tranquility.

4. Changes in breathing

Towards the end of life, as the body becomes less active, the demand for oxygen is less. People who suffer from breathlessness are often concerned that they may die fighting for breath, but in fact breathing eases as they start to die.

Of course, breathing problems can be made worse by feelings of anxiety. The knowledge that someone is close at hand is not only reassuring; it can be a real help in preventing breathlessness caused by anxiety. So, just sitting quietly and holding your loved one's hand can make a real difference. Occasionally in the last hours of life there can be a noisy rattle to the breathing. This is due to a buildup of mucus in the chest, which the person is no longer able to cough up. Medication may be used to reduce it and changes of position may also help. The noisy breathing can be upsetting to carers but it doesn't appear to distress the dying person.

5. Changes which occur before death

When death is very close (within minutes or hours) the breathing pattern may change again. Sometimes there are long pauses between breaths, or the abdominal muscles (tummy) will take over the work – the abdomen rises and falls instead of the chest.

If breathing appears labored, remember that this is more distressing to you than it is to the person dying.

Some people may become more agitated as death approaches. If this is the case, then staff in the ward (for in-patients) will talk to you about it, having ensured that pain and other symptoms are controlled with appropriate medication, will administer some sedation.

The skin can become pale and moist and slightly cool prior to death.

Most people do not rouse from sleep, but die peacefully, comfortably and quietly.

How can we help

This is likely to be a difficult and painful time for you as you lose someone you love or have cared for. It can be hard to know what to say, how to help and what to do.

Nurses, doctors and other staff are there to help you work through your worries and concerns and to offer you care and support.

We hope that you will come and talk to us if there is anything on your mind.