

Talking to a Dying Loved One

Common (Mis)Beliefs about Talking to the Dying

The expected death of a friend or loved one changes your relationship—sometimes for the better, bringing you closer together, but sometimes for the worse. It can be incredibly difficult and awkward for many people to talk to their dying loved one.

You might find yourself wondering “What do I say?” and “How will I know when I’ve said enough?” There are some common beliefs about talking to the death that has the potential to prevent us from talking at all. Here is a look at some of the misconceptions about talking to a dying loved one.

"Talking about death will cause upset."

It’s a common belief that talking about someone’s illness or impending death will only upset them. Many people are surprised to find that a dying person wants to talk about what’s happening to them. In fact, many dying people are thinking the same thing: that talking about what’s happening to them will only upset a friend or loved one.

Talking about death allows a loved one to express unspoken fears and concerns. Oftentimes, sharing these feelings with someone who listens fully and without distress can help reduce pent-up anxieties.

"Talking about death will make things worse."

Some people believe that talking about death will actually make it happen sooner. They may think that discussing death will stress the dying person and could bring about a heart attack or stroke. They may also fear that if the dying person accepts their own death that they will give up and die sooner.

This belief is entirely unfounded. It harkens back to the days when doctors used to tell family members not to reveal a terminal diagnosis to an elderly parent, spouse, or grandparent. ("Knowing will kill them!")

While talking about death can be stressful, it can also be therapeutic and healing for everyone involved. Of course, not everyone will want to talk about death or dying. That’s okay, too.

Let compassion guide the conversation, remembering this is not about you. This doesn’t mean you can’t share your feelings; just be sure those feelings don’t add to a loved one’s burdens, like whether or not you’ll be able to cope once they die.

"Talking about everyday things is hurtful."

This belief prevents many people from discussing the day to day aspects of our lives. We may think that talking about the playoff game or our favorite television show will make it seem like we don't care about what's happening to our loved one. We might think that he can't possibly be interested in the news or even in what happened to us at work today.

The truth is, most dying people are still interested in the same things they were interested in before they knew they were dying. If they are an avid sports fan, that's not necessarily going to go away. There is every chance that your loved one will want to hear about what's happening in your life, just as he did before.

Talking about everyday things helps affirm that, while life may be limited, your loved one is still alive and part of your life.

"Silence is stressful for everyone."

Chances are, if you believe this, you will simply talk and talk to avoid silence, littering the air with words that don't mean anything. Some people will even use the fear of awkwardness to avoid seeing a dying friend. ("I don't know what to say.")

What's more important in these instances is not trying to find something profound or moving to say (which will generally sound false) but just being there. In fact, the one thing better than being a talker is being a listener.

There are things you can do to encourage conversation. Sit at the same level as your loved one with no barriers between you. Lean forward and give them your full attention without folding your arms or fidgeting. In short, be there.

It's also important to know that not all silence needs to be awkward. A calming physical presence is often all a dying person needs or wants.

Adapted from: <https://www.verywell.com/talking-to-a-dying-loved-one-1132505>

