

Try:

- ...saying "I've been thinking of you"
- ...talking about normal life
- ...giving something
- ...treating the person the way you always have

Try not to:

- ...show any discomfort you have about the situation
- ...change the subject if the conversation does turn to dying – try to listen
- ...avoid subjects that you would normally talk about because you think they might be upsetting

Remember:

You can always ask for advice on what to do, or support for yourself, from people you respect and trust, or from a variety of organisations that you can find at www.goodlifedeathgrief.org.uk

Someone you know is very ill.

They may not have long to live. You feel desperately sad, but also at a loss what to do. Their illness seems to have changed everything. How can you talk about things the way you used to? Will they still want to see you when time is so short? Should you call? And what can you possibly say to them under the circumstances?

It's not an easy situation, but one that we're all likely to face. This leaflet provides some advice.

To find out how to get more help visit:
www.goodlifedeathgrief.org.uk
or call 0131 229 0538



Good Life, Good Death, Good Grief is working to make Scotland a place where there is more openness about death, dying and bereavement so that:

- People are aware of ways to live with death, dying and bereavement
- People feel better equipped to support each other through the difficult times that can come with death, dying and bereavement

We are interested to hear from any person or organisation who wants to work with us to make Scotland a place where people can be open about death, dying and bereavement.

This leaflet was originally produced by the Dying Matters Coalition which aims to change public knowledge, attitudes and behaviours towards dying, death and bereavement. Dying Matters is led by the National Council for Palliative Care, the umbrella charity for palliative, end of life and hospice care in England, Wales & Northern Ireland: www.dyingmatters.org
Registered Charity no.1005671

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What to say if someone you know is dying



Dying Matters

Let's talk about it

L7G/05.12/V1



Why we need to stay in touch

People who are very ill or dying can become very isolated. Friends and acquaintances sometimes avoid them, not out of maliciousness, but because they don't know what to do or say. They decide not to ring them as they usually would, or think that it's probably best not to visit them given the stress the family must be under.

But that often isn't necessarily the best approach for the person who is dying – and it can leave you, as a friend, with regrets and sadness afterwards too. People who are facing the prospect of death often need a lot of support, but that doesn't mean you have to sit with them for hours. Just letting them know that you're there and that you care is a form of support. If they don't hear from you, they may wonder why.

People who are ill often won't want a long conversation, but having contact with friends and a life beyond their immediate situation can provide the kind of lift that family members cannot. It can also provide them with a sense that, as life is ending, they have an opportunity to complete things – to say goodbye even if "goodbye" is never said.

So we can all try and make sure that those who are dying still feel loved, appreciated and part of the world they've always been part of in their final weeks.

Where to start

- Bear in mind that it's nearly always better to do something than nothing – to have a conversation rather than remain silent.
- Making contact is the most important thing, even if it's simply leaving a message saying that you're thinking of them.
- You don't have to say much, or be profound.
- Try not to worry about saying the wrong thing – the chances of doing so are slim.
- Try not to make assumptions about what the other person wants, or what their family wants. You can always ask.
- Don't make assumptions about their situation either. Do you really know how ill the person is, or is it just hearsay?
- If you're worried about anything – for example, how much the person knows about their illness and life expectancy – you can ask the family.
- Rather than visiting unannounced, ring or email first to check that it's convenient.

During the conversation

- Try and gauge from the other person how much they want to talk, and what about.
- Listening is often more important than talking.
- You don't have to make speeches, provide answers or offer counselling.
- Treat them as you normally would: it's reassuring to know that, despite illness, people still think of you in the same way they always have.
- If there are things you want to say, and the moment seems right, say them.
- Try not to dominate the conversation, and don't push the other person to talk if they don't want to.
- Bear in mind that whatever you say, even if you talk about dying, you're unlikely to make the other person feel worse. They may well be thinking about these things anyway.
- Don't worry, or feel you have to change the subject, if things get emotional – it's quite natural.
- Try and feel your way about how long you should stay. Does the family seem very busy? Have there been many other visitors? Don't feel you have to rush away, but don't outstay your welcome.

Help with practicalities

Families and individuals who are feeling the stresses of illness often greatly appreciate practical help. Simply offering is a good way of showing you care, but actually doing something can provide an act of kindness that means a great deal. Running errands is also a good excuse for popping in without making a big thing of saying goodbyes.

People usually find it easier to accept if you suggest specific tasks, rather than saying "If there's anything I can do, let me know". You could offer to do some shopping, bring someone round, or buy a favourite treat.

"It was the little acts of kindness and thoughtfulness that meant most to us all when Joan was dying. Some of them, like people bringing round old pictures, made us laugh and cry at the same time."