

Aurora Care

Cultivating Comfort at the End of Life



Dying takes a great deal of energy, and none of us will know the details of the process until we experience it for ourselves. We can only learn from the deaths we experience in life and communicate with our loved ones in preparation for this moment, which holds the potential to be beautiful and deeply healing for all of us.

Hopefully, your loved one has created a comprehensive Advance Directive, so you have detailed information about their wishes, and perhaps more importantly, information about the things they do not want.

If you do not have an Advance Directive, but want more info, please visit AuroraCare.ca

As we die, our five senses will be affected over time, beginning often with sight, as we close our eyes, for longer and longer periods of time, or our sight begins to fail, drawing us within. Our other senses will diminish over time; We will eat less, and become less interested in foods. Our sense of touch is often overlooked, as people can be afraid to touch a dying person, for fear of hurting them. Our sense of smell can be impaired by stale air, or overpowering scents from flowers or visitors. Research has shown that our hearing may be the last to fail, this may be the most important thing to remember, as we talk *about* the dying person instead of *to* them.

Consider Sight



Maybe your loved one is at home, surrounded by their favourite objects. Perhaps you've set up a make-shift space in the living room, allowing for more space for visitors or machines or easier access. Consider bringing favourite objects from other areas of the house to comfort your loved one.

Consider their favourite colours, remembering that colours can affect our emotions, for example, a yellow blanket has the potential to uplift, and a blue one has the potential to calm.

Perhaps it's possible to rearrange the furniture to allow a view outside, or to see a painting on the wall. Maybe there are cards and letters or kid's drawings on display, try to find a way to improve the setting even just a little.

Consider displaying a slow moving slide show of photographs on a large screen such as a T.V from time to time.

If your loved one has chosen to die at the hospital, hospice or long term care facility, remember that you can create a beautiful space there too, sometimes this may require advocacy on behalf of your loved one, or simply a little planning and creativity. Remember to respect the staff's need for access. Often stark lighting is too harsh, sometimes it is possible to bring a softer lamp, drape a sheer fabric over lights or even use battery operated candles to soften the environment. Perhaps bringing a special quilt from home, a speaker to play music, or some special objects is possible. In some situations, it may even be possible to bring a pet in to visit.

Make sure your loved one's glasses are clean and comfortable, so that they may make the most of the sight they have. Try to move slower than normal if your loved one's eyes are open, it may take longer for them to focus, or for their brain to understand what they are seeing.

Consider Smell



Unless your loved one has requested certain scents in their Advance Directive, it is safer to keep scents to a minimum. Often flowers are a beautiful addition, but they may produce an overpowering scent, choose scent free flowers unless your loved one has a favourite. You may ask visitors to adhere to a scent free policy.

Aromatherapy is a powerful addition to the atmosphere and has the potential to calm or uplift the environment. Keep it subtle, allow plenty of breaks from scents, and stop using any that appear to agitate your loved one. To avoid scents being too overpowering, try diluting aromatherapy oils and spritzing onto the sheets.

There can be unpleasant odours that arise during the dying process, this can be undignified or embarrassing for your loved one. Coffee grounds, as long as it is a scent your loved one doesn't hate, or baking soda in a dish in the room, or under the bed can assist in capturing odours.

Stagnant air can be alleviated by opening the window for spells if possible, or, the use of a fan on a gentle setting to move air around the room can be helpful, remember not to direct this air at your loved one, as it may create an unpleasant sensation.

Consider Touch



Don't be afraid to use a soft washcloth and warm water to gently wash your loved one's face and hands, this can be a deeply relaxing sensation and can provide a great deal of relief. Our skin and lips can become very dry as we begin to take in less fluids. Your loved one's favourite lotion, or a scent free option can be applied to the face hands, feet, arms and legs. A gentle massage can be very relaxing, and even if your loved one is unresponsive, it will enable them to know you are there.

The feeling of a comb moving gently through the hair may be a comfort. Be sure to talk to your loved one and let them know what you are about to do so that you do not startle them with your touch.

Don't be afraid to climb into the bed with your loved one for a cuddle. Often we are afraid we will hurt a frail body. If we are careful, we can create beautiful moments, memories and opportunities for healing when we aren't so afraid of physical touch. Use pillows or rolled up blankets as supports and protection if needed.

Your loved one may experience a broad range of temperature fluctuations. You can keep them comfortable by using layers of blankets that can be removed or added as necessary. Using a heating pad on a very low setting, with a protective layer of blanket, or a cool washcloth can help, but do be careful if your loved one is unable to communicate if these become uncomfortable.

If your loved one has pets, allow them to be close and to cuddle. Pets are incredibly calming and healing, don't underestimate the level of comfort they can bring. If a dog is rambunctious, ask someone to take them for a run first, and remember that animals are very intuitive, they seem to know what is going on, you may be surprised at how an excitable pet behaves around a dying person. Do consider taking precautions such as clipping nails, or laying pet blankets on the bed prior to allowing cuddles. Allowing pets access to their humans during the dying process will help the animals to process the loss, don't forget they experience grief too.

Consider Taste



As we die, our need for food reduces significantly, as our body can no longer process it, we do not experience hunger as we used to. It's important, as hard as it is for us to see our loved one refusing to eat, to respect their wishes, and understand that it is simply part of the process. However, this doesn't mean that your loved one can no longer enjoy food.

Continue to cook their favourite meals, and eat your meals with them. The smell may evoke good memories, and the ritual of sharing a meal can be very important to people. You can even do this if your loved one is dying in a hospital or facility, Pack a meal and enjoy it together at their bedside. The smells or tiny tastes of their favourite and familiar home cooked meals or favourite drinks may be the perfect thing to bring comfort, Swabs are an ideal way to give them a taste of beer, coffee or any favourite beverage.

Glycerin swabs, or simply applying a little water to the lips periodically with a cloth can alleviate much discomfort, remember to apply a lip balm afterwards (cotton balls can work well to apply liquid, but can often leave tiny fibres that can be irritating).

Oral care at this stage is often overlooked; consider heavily diluting mouthwash and making ice chips, or applying the solution into the mouth with a swab to help your loved one feel fresh. Remember to test the solution first, to ensure it does not create a burning sensation. Remember to ensure they are upright or on their side if you are applying any liquid into the mouth. Steer clear of strong flavours or citrus, as these can create discomfort.

Consider Hearing



Often visitors want to feel useful, consider having some of your loved ones favourite books, scriptures or poetry available for visitors to read to your loved one.

Hopefully your loved one has created their Musical Directive, if so, you will have access to their chosen music. If they have not created a Musical Directive, you may have to guess, consider their personality, try not to jump directly to sombre music; if they loved the Rolling Stones, don't be afraid to play them! Remember to give them breaks and changes in style.

If they're in a hospital setting, you could consider playing some nature sounds, birds, a crackling fire, train horns, chainsaws or any sounds that may have been significant for them. Make sure your loved one's hearing aids are clean and in good working order to make the most of the sounds in the room.

Most importantly, talk to them. Tell them about your day, about your pets or kids, memories you have with them, news of things that are important to them.

Don't be afraid to open your heart to them, express your gratitude, love, your sorrow, regrets, forgiveness, understanding. Leave nothing unsaid.

Let them know who is there with them. If there are family members or friends that cannot be there, consider using technology such as phones, Skype or Zoom to include them. Hearing a familiar voice that has been missing can relieve a dying person's feelings of incompleteness.

Even if your loved one is unconscious, current research shows that they are most likely still able to hear, so do be cognizant of speaking about them instead of to them. If there are disagreements, consider discussing them outside of the room. If your loved one has specified in their Advance Directive that it is important they are included in medical decisions, do consider having those discussions in their presence, even if they are not conscious, they may be able to hear, feel some autonomy, dignity or inclusion, and sometimes, may even be able to convey a message regarding their care- watch out for tiny movements, or changes in expressions.

If you like, or when you are ready, let them know you will be ok, and that it's ok for them to go. It seems that many people hold on until they hear this. This may be very painful for you, but often, people need permission from their loved ones to make their final transition.

Remember that dying takes a great deal of energy. Give your loved one alone time, make sure you let them know that you're giving them a break, where you'll be and for how long. Give them plenty of sensory breaks to rest. We may not want to leave their side, but they need it, and it's an opportunity for you to engage in some vital self-care; take a shower, have a meal, visit with a friend, take a nap, have a cry or do any other number of things that could bring you rest, joy or recuperation.

Sometimes people hold on to life until they are surrounded by their entire family, and sometimes they wait until they have a moment alone. As hard as this is for the living, it's vital we give them ample opportunity to rest, and to make their final transition in the way they choose.

Consider keeping a notebook in the room to record any insights, changes, special moments or messages for friends. Encourage visitors to write in the notebook too. It's also a good place to keep a list of questions for the medical team, this is a time of great stress, you may feel foggy or forgetful, so writing things down can alleviate some stressors.

Your loved one may experience visions of deceased family members, they may speak about going on vacation, or going home. They may express a need to pack their belongings for a trip. This may be distressing to family members, be aware it is a fairly common experience. You can alleviate or prevent any stress this may bring to your loved one by supporting and validating their visions.

If you are caring for a dying loved one, know that I am holding space for your family in my heart. Please reach out if you need any support.