

Talking to a Dying Loved One

Common (Mis)Beliefs about Talking to the Dying

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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 dying that have the potential to prevent us from talking at all.

If I Talk About His Illness, I Will Only Upset Him More

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 their friend or loved one.

Talking About Her Illness or Impending Death Will Make It 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. 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. While talking about death can be stressful for the dying person and their loved ones, it can also be therapeutic and healing for the dying person as well as their family and friends.

Of course, not everyone will want to talk about dying. If your or your dying loved one truly don’t want to discuss their death, that’s okay too. There are other things you can talk about.

If I Talk to Him About Trivial Things at Such a Serious Time, I’ll Only Offend Him

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 favourite 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 he's an avid sports fan, that's not necessarily going to go away. If he cares about you, chances are he'll want to hear about what's happening in your life, just as he did before. Talking about daily life affirms the fact that, while his life is limited, he's still living.

Looking at the first three beliefs, we see that many people feel like they can't talk about illness, can't talk about dying, and can't talk about life. What's left to talk about?

If I Don't Know What to Say, I'm Afraid the Silence Will Be Awful

Chances are, if you believe these, you don't know what to say and silence will ensue. Moving beyond those beliefs and finding a way to relate to your friend or loved one can help prevent awkward silences.

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

“Love is stronger than death even though it can't stop death from happening, but no matter how hard death tries it can't separate people from love. It can't take away our memories either. In the end, life is stronger than death.” *Anonymous*

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