

When You Are Unable to be With Your Loved One During Their Final Days

There may be times when you are unable to be with your loved one during the final days or hours before their death. It is hard to deal with the loss of someone special, especially if you did not have a chance to say goodbye. The grief we have when we lose a loved one can be very hard. Your feelings of loss may be even stronger, if you did not have a chance to personally share an “I love you” or to simply hold their hand.

If you are not able to be with your loved one when they are getting close to their end of life, here are some ways you can reach out to them from a distance.

- If your loved one is still able to eat, set up a video chat so you can eat together. Share stories and updates with them as you would if you were together at the same table.
- If your loved one is able to watch TV, call them on the phone and watch a movie or TV show together. Talk with them as if you were sitting in a chair by their bed. It is okay if they mostly just listen to you.
- If you can share music with them, play a favorite song or create a playlist for them to listen to when they are able. Ask others to help you choose comforting songs. You may want to record your own voice singing a song or playing an instrument to make the music even more personal. Check with the health care team to see what options are available for playback in your loved one’s room.
- Read to your loved one over the phone. This may be a favorite book, poem or religious reading. Read letters from others who wish to connect with your loved one during this special time. If it is hard for others to write a letter, suggest they share a favorite memory or a lesson your loved one taught them.

This handout is for informational purposes only. Talk with your doctor or health care team if you have any questions about your care.

- Check with a member of their health care team to see if you can bring mail or drop off items to your loved one. Examples could include; a favorite pair of socks, a photo that brings fond memories, a religious item, a special item from home or a something you think may bring them comfort. Keep in mind these items can include things your loved one can see, hear, taste, feel or smell.
- Arrange a time with the staff when you can call your loved one on the phone or through a video call. Even if your loved one is too ill to talk to you, they may still be able to hear your voice and your message.
- Ask your loved one if there is something important that they feel is undone and needs to be completed. There may be a letter they want to write or they may need help in making a call to someone special. Your loved one may have cultural and/or religious rituals that are important or meaningful to them. Ask them about the rituals they want to be followed at their time of death.
- When talking to your loved one, take time to write down a family history and/or favorite memories.
- Offer to deliver “future” gifts, cards or letters that your loved one may want to give to family members or friends. This might include a gift or letter to a spouse or their children on their birthdays, weddings or graduations.
- Do not delay in sharing your loving and meaningful thoughts with your loved one before their condition gets worse and they are not able to communicate with you.
- Reassure your loved one that the people and things that are important to them are being taken care of. This might include caring for another family member or pet or completing a project after their death.
- Thank your loved one for the things that you cherish about your shared relationship and how those memories will always be special to you.
- Respect your loved one’s health care wishes.
- Based on your beliefs, you may find comfort in being near your loved one through prayer at this time.

Community Resources

You may find it helpful to talk to your doctor, nurse, chaplain, counselor, social worker or psychologist about your feelings.

For information on support groups and other resources in your community, you may want to check on the programs offered through one of the following:

- Churches, synagogues, temples, mosques or shrines
- Health departments or community mental health centers
- Hospitals and hospice programs
- Funeral homes