

## SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF APPROACHING DEATH FROM A PSYCHOLOGICAL/SPIRITUAL PERSPECTIVE

Information taken from *Final Gifts*, by Maggie Callanan and Patricia Kelley

Hospice recognizes this as one of the most difficult times you and your family will experience and we will be as open and honest with you as possible during this time. When people are close to death, they often report a remarkable experience and develop an expanded awareness which is called **Near Death Awareness**. *Near Death Awareness* is a special knowledge about, and sometimes a control over, the process of dying. We have created this sheet to inform you of the possible psychological and spiritual characteristics people may experience as they approach death. **Not all of these characteristics will appear at the same times, and some may never appear.**

- **Patient's belief that he/she is in the presence of someone not alive.** This can occur hours, days or weeks before the actual death. The patient may report recognizing significant people from his/her life and/or religious figures. He/She may try to interact by talking, nodding or smiling at someone who is invisible to us. The most important thing to remember when the patient sees someone invisible to us is that death is not lonely.
- **Patient's belief that he/she is preparing for travel or change.** The patient may try to communicate with loved ones that he/she is preparing for death. The patient may try to share information with symbolic language to indicate preparation for a journey or change soon to happen. Some examples may include looking for tickets or passport, getting ready to set sail, or talk about some large challenge such as taking the house with him/her. Some messages are long and detailed while others may be brief and fleeting. These messages indicate that the patient "is getting ready to leave." The patient may be asking for information about the dying process or showing concern for those he/she loves. The family's reassurance that they will be all right often brings peace to the patient.
- **Patient's belief that he/she is seeing a different place.** The patient may see a place not visible to any one else. The description may be brief and not very specific. Accept what the patient tells you. If the patient tells you he sees a beautiful place, you may respond by saying, "I'm so pleased. I can see that it makes you happy. Can you tell me more?"
- **Knowing when death will occur.** The patient may know specifically the day or hour when he/she will die. The patient may convey this in a message. Examples of these messages may include, "I'll be out of the game by noon." or "Christmas can be a sad time." To help prepare the family for death, the caregiver may want to jot down the message and discuss it with other family members.

## **Additional Reminders to Help You Recognize, Understand, and Respond to *Near Death Awareness***

### **Key signs to watch for include:**

- Glassy-eyed look;
- The appearance of staring through you;
- Distractedness or secretiveness;
- Inappropriate smiles;
- Gestures such as pointing, reaching toward someone, or waving when no one is there;
- Efforts to pick at the covers or get out of bed for no apparent reason;
- Agitation or distress at your inability to comprehend something the patient is trying to say.

**Respond to anything you don't understand with gentle inquires.** A helpful way to initiate this kind of conversation may be to ask the patient, "Can you tell me what's happening?" or "You seem different today. Can you tell me why?"

**Pose questions in encouraging terms.** The patient, whose mother has been dead for several years, may say, "My mother is waiting for me." Turn that comment into a questions. "Mother is waiting for you? I'm so glad she's close to you." Or "Can you tell me about it?"

**Don't argue or challenge what the patient is saying.** You could increase the patient's frustration by saying, "You couldn't possibly have seen Mother. She's been dead for 10 years." The patient may end further attempts to communicate what he/she sees.

**The patient may use images from life experiences such as work or hobbies.** A pilot may talk about getting ready to go for a flight. You may ask, "Do you know when your flight leaves?" or "Is there anyone on the plane you know?" or "Is there anything I can do to help you get ready for takeoff?"

**Be honest about having trouble understanding.** You may say, "I think you're trying to tell me something important, but I'm just not getting it. I'll keep trying. Don't give up on me."

**Don't push.** Let the patient control the conversation. He/she may not be able to put his/her experience into words. Insisting on more talk may frustrate or overwhelm him/her.

**If you don't know what to say, don't say anything.** Sometimes the best response is simply to touch the patient's hand, or smile and stroke his/her forehead. Touching gives the very important message, "I'm with you."

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