

What should family and friends do when death is close?

You and your loved ones will need to answer this question for yourselves. Many patients are frightened of being alone or just want a loved one nearby to help ease the passage. A few simply want to be alone. Some family and friends find comfort in reading, reminiscing, saying prayers, or singing. Some just want to be there, sharing the precious time. What any one patient or family member wants may change over time, or as other visitors come and go.

Unless it is absolutely unavoidable, family and friends should not spend much time on medical treatment decisions at this point. It is best to have had any such discussions earlier in the course of a disease or at least limit the time spent on them now. Sometimes families or patients have to remind the professional staff in a hospital that this is precious time and should not be taken up with issues like blood tests, x-rays or other scans, or detailed advance directives (other than resuscitation orders). Remember, too, that this can be a good time to call on spiritual support, including the hospital chaplain. Music is very helpful for some patients and families. One elderly lady was comforted by a Gregorian chant tape, another by special harp music. Some prefer gospels or modern music, but most families and patients seem to benefit from some kind of music

This is a very good time to say farewells and to ask forgiveness, if these things have not already been done. People who visit can say to the dying person that he or she lived well and is loved. Often it seems that dying people can still hear, even when they no longer seem to be awake. So saying things to a person who seems to be asleep is not unreasonable, and it can be important for those left behind.

Some patients and families have a sequence of people who, one-by-one, come through to say goodbye. Others have more unplanned visits. Some have religious rituals to follow; others make up their own style as they go.

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