

Module 22 – End of Life Care

Handout #1

Nurse Aide: Communicating with Seriously Ill Patients

Communicating with seriously ill patients can be one of the most challenging and difficult aspects of nursing care. Patients, their families, and caregivers often do not want to bring up the possibility of death and dying, even when the patient seems to be suffering. Here is what you can do to help your patient, keeping in mind that conversations with the patient may be planned or spontaneous.

BE PREPARED:

- Know your patient's history and current situation; this is a way to help build their trust
- Listen and watch for signs that the patient wants to talk about the end of life; your patient may say things like, "Well, I suppose things are coming to an end now," or "Things seem very final at the moment;" listen for hints that the may be scared of dying
- Create an environment for conversation where the setting is private, comfortable, and quiet
- Allow enough time so the patient feels there is time to talk; include people important to the patient, if the patient so choses, in the conversation
- Plan your schedule so there is enough time for conversation; however, you may find that the best time for conversation is during patient care
- Be culturally sensitive when caring for your patient; know the patient's social and religious practices and be aware that these factors may affect your patient's needs and desires; this is especially helpful for older patients

WHAT TO DO:

- Provide privacy
- Speak loud enough for the patient to hear you; it is unnecessary to shout
- Listen with full attention; limit disruptions or distractions; keep your cell phone in the car to avoid the temptation of answering calls and texting
- Acknowledge your patient's emotion with care and empathy; this does not mean that you agree with the emotion but that you are aware that the patient feels emotion
- Give your patient time to ask questions and express thoughts
- Use proper body language, tone of voice, and manners to communicate respect and understanding; positive body language can include relaxed posture, facing the patient, an open stance, being at the same level to prevent standing over the patient, keeping arms loose and at your sides; crossed arms may be perceived as being bored or closed to communication

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- Sit or stand, as appropriate, facing your patient, making eye contact and speaking directly with the patient and family members; make sure you are aware of the patient's cultural practices; ask the patient or family the most comfortable and appropriate way to communicate with them and the patient; for example, some cultures may find it offensive to talk directly to the patient, or to make eye contact

HELPFUL STATEMENTS TO START THE CONVERSATION:

- “Tell me more about...” or, “How do you feel about this?” may tell you about patient's emotional state
- Stating: “I hear your concern, your worry, or your frustration,” or “You must be feeling a lot of emotions at the moment,” are helpful ways to let the patient know that you hear what the patient is saying
- “What have the doctors and nurses told you about your illness?”
- “How is this illness affecting your life?”
- “What are you most concerned about right now?”
- “Are you finding this difficult?”
- “What one thing worries you the most?”
- “When do you feel most frightened?”
- “What do you want to talk about today?”
- “When do you find yourself worrying the most?”
- “What do you find that helps you feel calm?”
- Offer supportive comments to your patient for controlling pain and other symptoms; let the patient and family know that you will share any concerns with the nurse; offer continuing emotional support to the patient and their loved ones as you share this journey together