

Catholic Caregivers

'Caregiving is pro-life!'

Preparing for Your Loved One's Death

Death has been surrounded by folklore and traditions throughout human history. Every culture has rituals for and beliefs about preparing for death, death itself, and life after death. What's it *really* like to die? We don't know. How do you prepare for that moment? How do you help your loved one prepare? Here are some suggestions:

--*Examine your own beliefs and let your care-receiver talk about his or hers if your loved one wants to.* Maybe the two of you believe different things about heaven and God. If your loved one is afraid, offer comfort. If you're the one who's uncertain, trust your care-receiver. This isn't the time to have a theological argument. Help him or her be at peace with what's happening.

--*Read about death and the dying process.* Learn about what typically happens, step by step, as a person dies. The more you know, the better prepared you will be.

--*Make preparations if you don't live where your parent does.* If Dad is seriously ill, or his health is steadily declining, think about what needs to be done in order for you to get to him on short notice. Who can cover for you at work? What arrangements need to be made for your spouse and kids?

--*Ask Mom where she would like to die.* At home? At the hospital? With family at her bedside? With friends nearby? Maybe she doesn't like hospital room mob scenes and wants the opportunity to see each of her children privately when she's near death. You may need to ask her more than once where she wants to die, because as time goes by and she gets closer to death, her answer may change.

--*Figure out your role.* Try to get a mental picture, based on your loved one's preferences, of what his or her death will be like and what your role will be. If it is at home, are you leading prayers? If it is at the hospital, are you at the bedside? In the chapel?

--*Take care of necessary funeral details ahead of time.* As the time of death approaches, you will want to focus on the immediate needs of your family.

--*Don't wait until the last minute to say good-bye to each other.* Say the words, or the equivalent. It can be tremendously difficult for family members and a dying loved one to get those words out. But after your care-receiver has died, it will mean a great deal to you and other family members if you were able to do this.

--*Help your loved one prepare spiritually.* Pray together. Would he or she like to receive the sacraments of the Eucharist, reconciliation, and the anointing of the sick, if possible?

--*Don't open old wounds.* A care-receiver's final days aren't a good time to rehash old family arguments. If you need to resolve something between yourself and a parent, spouse, or sibling, do it before this time comes, when emotions won't be running as high. Perhaps you need to resolve a family issue by yourself, on your own or with the help of a counselor or therapist.

Remember that when a loved one is dying, family members will show their grief in different ways.

--*Let people be themselves.* Remember that when a loved one is dying, family members will show their grief in different ways. Each may need to cope with it in a different way. One may want to be quiet and alone, spending time in the hospital chapel. Another may keep busy handling details that need attending. One may chatter nonstop. Another may always be demanding the latest update on the loved one's condition from the medical staff. Let each person do what works best for him or her, and you do what works best for you.

--*Talk about how precious life is.* Just because someone is bedridden doesn't mean that person's life has no value. Maybe this is a special time for your loved one to pray. Maybe it is a time to reminisce with family and friends and say good-bye. Maybe it is all of those and, above all, a time to prepare for the life that comes after this life.

Your loved one's death is an extremely difficult time for you, but it can also be a very rich time. Up until now you've been given the chance to show your dear one how much you love him or her. Now you're being given the gift of being with that person as he or she dies. You're being given the opportunity to exchange good-byes. You're being given the blessing of being there as your responsibility for his or her care ends and our heavenly Father calls him or her home. You'll be there with your loved one as our heavenly parent reaches out to gently lead him or her to eternal peace, to eternal joy, to eternal life.