

Module 22 – End of Life Care

Handout #5

Nurse Aide: Providing Emotional Support to the Family

Providing emotional support is one of the most important things that you can do for family members who have a loved one with a life-limiting illness. Due to the feeling of isolation, your visits as a professional caregiver will be all the more impactful, giving family caregivers a chance to connect with someone other than their terminally ill loved one. You may even become someone whom the family caregiver can confide in, someone who understands what they are going through. The power of your caring presence may make a difference for the family members and they may always remember how much you helped them at one of life's most difficult times.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO PROVIDE EMOTIONAL SUPPORT:

- Know your patient's history and current situation; this helps to build the family's trust and lets them know that you really care about their situation
- Getting to know the family and encouraging them to open up about their emotions can be helpful; acknowledge that the care they're giving their loved one is very important and encourage them to look after their own wellbeing, too; if respite care for the family is available, be sure that you constantly reiterate to family caregivers the availability and benefits of respite care
- Early in each home visit, ask the family member, "What can I do for you and your loved one today?" then honor their request
- Some family members often find comfort in reminiscing about their life with their loved one; ask to see family pictures that include the patient and talk about the pictures; ask them to tell you stories about time spent with the patient; younger children can participate in this as well
- Be both positive and realistic; support hopeful but realistic goals, such as participating in a special event or receiving a visit from a special friend; it is appropriate to sit in silence.
- Be present. Sometimes just being there can make a world of difference. Hold the patient's hand, share stories with the patient and family members, and model how to face pain and grief head-on.
- Acknowledge the family's emotions with caring responses such as, "It must be difficult for you;" avoid saying things like, "I know how you feel;" no one ever really knows what it is like for someone else; it is important to be genuine, to listen, and be aware of your body language.
- Provide family members time to cry and comfort them; it is all right to share your emotions and cry with the family if the family does not have to comfort you

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- Remember that each family member responds to having a loved one with a life limiting illness in his/her own way; there is not a right way to express emotion; some family members may express their frustration with anger, or with angry accusations, or other expressions; do not take it personally; acknowledge their emotions with caring responses such as, “It must be frustrating for you.”
- Sometimes when you are busy caring for the patient, you may miss an opportunity to offer support to the family; make time to ask family members how they are feeling, then sit with them as they tell you how they are feeling and pay attention to what they say
- Some individuals find comfort using touch; observe how the family uses touch and provide comfort using touch if it is acceptable to the family member.
- Touch may be culturally inappropriate for some families; always ask for permission to touch the person by saying, “May I give you a hug?” or “May I hold your hand for a while?”
- Give family members time to ask questions and if needed, let them know you will get help from the team to get their questions answered.
- Respect that people have their own way to cope; some may choose to be silent, or they may prefer to keep their feelings private and may not want outside support.
- Encourage family members to keep a notebook of questions they want to ask; be sure to ask about the notebook and any questions they have each time you visit; let the nurse know if there are questions that you can’t answer.