

Visiting Those Dying and in Pain

What To Do When You Visit Someone Who is Dying and in Pain

Before meeting a friend who is experiencing physical or emotional pain, and/or facing the end of their life, sit quietly for a few minutes. Become aware of any thoughts or fears that might impede your receptivity, and connect again with your inherent openness and love by reflecting on your friend's suffering.

As you settle quietly in meditation and watch your thoughts, you might find that you have fear about the other person's anguish or concern about your ability to make him feel better. Perhaps you're already trying to plan what you will say, to feel some control in the uncertain situation ahead. Acknowledge these thoughts and fears, and then allow them to dissolve. You might imagine setting your fears, plans and thoughts in a box next to you and leaving them behind, before going into your friend's room.

Simply Be Yourself

Reflect on your friend's situation, and let his suffering touch your heart, awakening your compassion and love. No matter how painful the circumstances or how disturbing the physical appearance that you will encounter, remember that your friend has, at the core of his being, the innermost essence of wisdom and compassion. Your role, then, is not to rescue him or give him your solutions, but to help him recall and turn toward his own inner resources.

After becoming aware of yourself and compassionately opening your heart to your friend, you'll feel more at ease authentically communicating with him or her. You don't have to have all the answers or be perfect; you can simply be yourself.

What to Say

You might begin: "I'm at a loss here because I don't know what to do. And I can't even imagine how difficult this is for you. Still, I've come because I want you to know that I care about you, and that you are not alone. No matter what happens, or what you're feeling, I love you. Please tell me what is happening for you now."

Then listen as your friend expresses who he is and how he is feeling. And you must listen with your whole being, not just your ears. Listen with your body, your heart, your eyes, your energy, your total presence. Listen in silence, without interrupting. Fill any spaces of silence between you with love, with silent permission for the other person to go on and go deeper. Once in a while, perhaps, ask a question to draw your friend out even further:

"What else are you going through; what else is happening in your life right now? What are you thinking about as you go through this difficulty? What's the hardest part of this for you? What is your biggest fear?"

If he can't talk directly about the immediate suffering he is going through (for example, if he is dying and doesn't want to speak about it yet) then you might say: "Tell me about your life. What happened to you? What did you do that you feel good about? What was the happiest part of your life? What have you accomplished? What challenges or difficulties have you had to face?"

Or: “How have you coped with your illness up till now? Has being ill brought any new insights about your life?”

Give space for his answers and acknowledge his pain. Don't immediately jump in with your stories or brilliant ideas. Silently acknowledge your rising thoughts and feelings, and continue to be there for him. Focus on what he is communicating on every level – through his body, his expression, his tone of voice, his energy and his words. Listen to what is said, and also to what is not said, but implied. Validate the feelings he has expressed, and through your intuition and questions, slowly draw out more of his thoughts or needs.

You might reflect back to your friend: “This must be very hard. You are going through a great difficulty right now, do you realize that? As I listen to you, I feel your distress, your sorrow, your frustration or fear. This must be really, really hard. Whatever you are feeling is perfectly understandable, given the circumstances you are facing.”

After encouraging your friend to describe his deepest fears, angers, regrets, or sadness, you can acknowledge his pain and let him know that it may take a while for it to diminish. By fully listening to and accepting your friend's pain, you can help him accept himself and his present condition, thus alleviating a great deal of the emotional suffering that can result from guilt or harsh self-judgement.

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