

How to minister to the dying by Dave Gallagher

Our culture doesn't "do death well." Most people don't like to think or talk about dying. If you visit a mortuary, you'll hear happy names given to sad things. Phrases like "slumber rooms" and "remains" will be used. Ashes will be called "creamains." Family members no longer ride in a "hearse," they enjoy a limo. Someone once said that it won't be long before we call death a "terminal incident." Funeral directors will seldom even use the word death. Many think that if we don't talk about death, it won't happen. Death will happen and pastors particularly need to be ready to minister to the dying. Remember that the leading cause of death is life!

Robert Frost's poem "Wild Grapes" speaks of wisdom. According to Frost, the first part of wisdom is learning to let go with our hands. The second part of wisdom is to learn to hold on to the memories and legacy with our heart.

One of the most powerful gifts we can give someone dying is a listening ear, a caring heart, and a sense that they are valued and cherished. Show the dying person what a difference he or she has made in the lives of others. You'll be giving the person a gift if you do.

If you've been faced with ministering to a dying person and have found the experience uncomfortable, here are four practical suggestions:

1. Be aware of compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue is very subtle. Quite simply, it is just being "worn out" from caring for others. Pastors are high-risk candidates. If you are emotionally exhausted, you may do more harm than good when trying to minister to a dying person. You cannot give emotional energy and spiritual insight if you do not have it yourself. To overcome compassion fatigue, try these six suggestions:

- Use your time wisely.
- Exercise regularly.
- Enjoy fun activities with your spouse, family, and friends.
- Eat healthy meals.
- Laugh a lot and hang out with happy, positive people.
- Don't take life or your ministry too seriously.
- Never procrastinate.

After 40 years in full time ministry it is staggering to notice the number of pastors who have dropped out of ministry – many because they did not understand how to deal with compassion fatigue.

2. Reacquaint yourself with the stages of the dying process. Obviously everyone faces death in their own way. Be familiar with the basics.

- One to three months prior to death we would normally expect withdrawal and the start of the separation process. Be aware that a lot is going on inside the person. They are sorting things out and evaluating their life. Remember that during this time there is really only room for one! Don't be pushy. You may hear phrases like, "I just don't feel like eating."
- One to two weeks prior to death, he or she will probably spend much more time sleeping. The person may be more confused in speech and manners and could become quite agitated. Their blood pressure may go up and down, their pulse rate may change and their temperature probably will fluctuate.
- One to two days prior to death there may be a surge of energy, and the person may request a favorite meal. Family members often get very encouraged; however, this only means the dying person is close to slipping away. Eventually the person will become non-responsive and breathing will stop. Remember, everyone lets go at their own time and in their own way.
- Hours or minutes before death there is usually decreased blood pressure, eyes become glossy and perhaps tearing. Breathing starts and stops until that final moment when the dying person has slipped into eternity.

Reacquainting yourself with the basic signs of the dying process helps you be more aware of ways you may help loved ones.

3. Making the visit with the person who is dying: I offer six cautions:

- Dress appropriately.
- Respond immediately.
- Listen a lot.
- Speak quietly with dignity and sensitivity.
- Don't tell stories, jokes, or give advice.
- Offer words of comfort, ask if you may pray. If the person says no, don't be surprised or hurt. This is not the time for preaching; it's the time for loving, listening, and caring. Help the dying person experience forgiveness. Help them reflect on treasured relationships. Let the tears (and sometimes anger) flow freely without judgment. If the dying person is not a believer and the Holy Spirit leads you, share the plan of God's love in providing salvation in a sensitive manner. I have found Billy Graham's [*Steps to Peace with God*](#) an excellent help in sharing the Gospel message.

4. Help the person walk their way through the dying process. This is done in many different ways. For example to one person it may simply mean being with family, singing hymns and Gospel songs, and hearing Scripture read. To another person it may involve keeping a journal of their feelings, a sort of life review. The process may involve forgiving someone or showing anger or deep fear. During these times you have a wonderful opportunity to point them to our loving God of compassion. Remember that

people need time to grieve – lots of time. They need permission to grieve, and they need loving people around them as they grieve.

A huge error some pastors make is thinking people may not need or want to talk about their feelings. We think if we don't talk about feelings, the feelings will go away. Just the opposite is true. We must talk. It has been said that it hurts too much to talk, but remember that it hurts more to remember and not talk. There are two schedules in the grief process: the first is when the pain starts, and the second is when the person decides to do something about it. Grief comes in only one size – extra large! Remember the words in Ecclesiastes 3:1-2, "There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot. ..." (NIV)