

Talking to People about Dying during the Pandemic

During the COVID-19 pandemic we are faced with a potentially life threatening situation to some of the population, with many others being unwell.

This guidance is in response to this situation and may help you to think about and talk about death and dying with your families and loved ones.

Conversations about death and dying, particularly with people close to you, are potentially very painful and difficult. We recognise that some people during the COVID-19 crisis may need to have a conversation about death and dying. You yourself may become unwell, you might know someone who may be dying, or know people who are bereaved.

Families who have been through bereavement commonly report that it comes as a relief when the subject is brought out into the open and talked about. This guidance offers some suggestions about how to navigate such difficult conversations because we recognise it can be really hard to know what to say.

Why talk?

Beginning to talk about dying can take courage and effort. But sharing your feelings can help everyone to cope better.

Talking can support people to express their wishes; perhaps about how they would like to die or what they might want to happen afterwards.

Talking can help people and their loved ones both emotionally and practically when trying to understand what death might mean. It can bring people closer together when they talk honestly about death and share their fears.

How to start the conversation about death/dying

It can be really difficult to start the conversation. Perhaps consider some of the following conversation starters;

- You know that you have COVID-19 and that you are very unwell, is that something that's on your mind. Do you know what is happening?
- I know that talking about these things is never easy but....
- I know this is very difficult but maybe it would help if we talked about our feelings, and what the future may bring.
- If you were to become more unwell, what would be important to you?

Subjects you might need to talk about

- The type of care you would like towards the end of your life
- Where you would like to die
- How long you want doctors to be treating you
- Funeral arrangements
- Your will
- Care of dependents
- How you would like to be remembered
- Worries you would like to discuss about being ill and dying
- What you'd like people to know before you die
- How you feel about people

How to talk generally about someone's death

These are some helpful tips to support people to have conversations about death and dying;

- Avoid clichés that sound impersonal and not relevant to the person. Being genuine, concerned and empathic will convey a sense of comfort and support

- It is okay to say “I don’t know what to say but I am here for you to listen and help”. Follow the lead of the person so that they feel in control of the conversation.
- Use your non-verbal communication skills (open body language, gentle smile and nod)
- Find a quiet, private place to talk
- Give the person your full attention – try to avoid distractions
- Explore cues – don’t assume you know what the person is trying to say
- Don’t force them to talk but look for prompts that the person is happy to talk
- Show them you have listened by checking out you have understood what they have said
- Try not to worry about “saying the wrong thing”. It is better to address the situation than ignore it. An apology is always possible!
- You cannot and should not stop a person feeling sad or crying– but you can support them by listening and talking
- Don’t feel guilty if you’re struggling – ask for support from others
- Consider your own wellbeing – you may be struggling with your own worries too
- Stay grounded. Try to remain calm, gentle and present despite the chaos around us and them
- Some people need an end to the conversation and doing something practical and physical can help. Cooking, exercise, tv.
- Allow the individual to talk to you about other people who have died if they want to. Such news will bring up memories of other deaths.
- A series of short conversations is often easier than a long conversation.
- We all worry about hurting people by talking openly. But it’s generally true that in the long run you hurt people more by the conversations you don’t have rather than the ones you do.

These are some helpful tips to support conversations with someone who has lost someone close;

- It's better to do something than nothing – to acknowledge loss rather than ignore it.
- Look for invitations to talk from the other person. If they start talking about the person who has died, encourage them, even if it seems to make them upset.
- Words aren't always necessary, or easy. Sometimes it helps just to be with somebody, especially if they don't seem to want to talk.
- Be prepared that the person may want to go over what has happened, or what's worrying them, over and over again. It can be a way of coming to terms with something.
- Don't feel upset if your offers of support are rejected at first. Try later. Keep reminding them you are there so they know they can come back to you when and if they need to.
- People who have been bereaved need support, but they may also need space. Be careful not to smother them with your sympathy, or to make them feel powerless.
- Offer to help with practical things. A direct offer of help for something specific like "I can watch the children while you..." is more likely to be accepted than "I am here for anything you need."

COVID-19

Some of the current circumstances around the COVID-19 might make grief harder to deal with.

- People may not get to see their loved ones before their death because of isolation.
- People might not be able to come together with their loved ones to grieve.
- Infection control may mean that funerals are small or cannot take place in person.

- Other people in the family or support network may also be sick or worried.
- There is little certainty and the threat is going to continue for some time.
- The media is full of scary stories and it is hard to escape from reminders.

It is very understandable that these things may make what is already a very painful time even tougher.

Looking after yourself

Talking about dying and being with people who are dying can be hard and painful. You may also be worried about death at this time. You may have already lost people close to you in your personal and professional life.

It is perfectly normal to experience feelings of shock, denial and frustration at the prospect of someone dying.

Stay connected with others. Rest. Smile when you can.

AND BREATHE....

B – Be kind to yourself.

R – Respect your body by not overindulging alcohol, drugs, and bad food; by getting enough sleep, and by moving around at least a little every day.

E – Engage with others in big and/or small ways. We're not asking you to bloom into a social butterfly or anything. Just try not to isolate. Connect with colleagues, phone a friend, wave to your neighbors.

A – Allow your emotions to ebb and flow. Don't run from them. Expect that grief emotions will bubble up, their intensity will rise, and they will wash over you and recede.

T – Take life one minute, hour, and day at a time. The enormity of what it means to live life without your loved one is overwhelming, but remember that coping with grief is something that happens bit-by-bit and day-by-day

H – Allow yourself space and time to remember, honor, and to connect with your loved one’s memory and their continued impact on the world.

E – Your critical voice has a lot of expectations about what grief *should* be like and how you *should* cope. Remember, there are very few “*shoulds*” when it comes to coping with grief. Everyone copes in their own way and at their own pace. So give yourself a break.

Based on <https://whatsyourgrief.com/self-compassion-in-grief/>

Links and references to source material

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/Coronavirus/death-talk>

<https://www.mariecurie.org.uk/professionals/palliative-care-knowledge-zone/individual-needs/talking-approaching-end-life#why>

<https://www.dyingmatters.org/page/updated-resources>