

Listening, acts of kindness support family when loved one is dying

By Emmanuel Hospice

As a social worker for Emmanuel Hospice, Jenny Kellogg knows how uncomfortable most people are when it comes to death and dying.

As a society, she says, we tend to veer away from talking about death, which means we often don't know what to do or say when a friend or family member faces the end of life.

"We talk about coming into the world and birth and celebrating life, but we avoid talking about death," Kellogg says. "We live in such a curative society when it comes to health care, we feel like we are giving up if we talk about dying.

"What if we were to reframe that experience so that death is just as special and heroic as your whole life? At Emmanuel Hospice, we put emphasis on how you want to live. If you have lived well, you can definitely die well."

The process of dying, Kellogg knows, can paralyze even the closest friends and families. She regularly sees people getting tongue-tied when a loved one faces the end of life. Friends may avoid bringing up a topic they feel will only further upset or offend someone who is already in a state of anxiety, grief or shock.

Or they may stop calling or visiting altogether because they don't know what to do or say. Wanting to run away or avoid the situation is normal, Kellogg explains – but giving in to that emotion can leave a family feeling abandoned.

"Listen to the family and follow their lead," Kellogg recommends. "There may be some conversations that will be uncomfortable, but let them lead. They may want to share memories. They may just need a shoulder to cry on. Everyone grieves differently.

"Instead of focusing on yourself and what you may be feeling, focus on your loved one. It's important for caregivers to know they can rely on family and friends for support."

Something, not everything

That support can come in many different shapes and forms, Kellogg explains. She encourages friends and family members to reach out with a specific offer rather than sitting back and waiting to be asked for help.

"It's often better to offer something rather than everything," she notes. "We may want to say, 'Let me know if I can do anything for you.'

"But if they are in the midst of caregiving and their own grief, they are often living moment to moment just to get through the day. They often don't know what they need. Don't be afraid to take the initiative."

What are the most helpful things to offer? Kellogg suggests:

- **Reassurance.** Tell the caregiver that they are doing a great job, she recommends. "It's a stressful job to be a caregiver when a loved one is passing. Often it might be the first time you've been in that situation, and you may need support. Words of encouragement go a long way."
- **Support.** Offer to make and deliver healthy meals and snacks, Kellogg says. Step in to take out the trash or handle yard work. Organize a group of people to divvy up the work so that those things that need to get done can be done.
- **Respite.** Hiring extra help can add unnecessary financial stress, Kellogg explains. "Offering your time is a huge asset to any caregiver. They may need a couple of hours to go to the grocery store or take a nap or take a walk."
- **Dogs and babies.** It's easy to get wrapped up in the sadness of losing someone, Kellogg notes. "Do things that bring joy to people, even if it's a small gesture. So if your friend was a dog lover and you have a calm dog, arrange for a visit. Bring a young child to visit. These

little things can make a big difference for the patient – and continue to make memories for the family, too.”

Kellogg recommends being mindful when it comes to visiting. People may want to come over and say their goodbyes, but that can place an extra burden on caregivers. Call before going over to make sure it's a good time.

“Sometimes boundaries are broken or misread,” she says. “Read the cues and make sure you are not overstaying your welcome.

“Support from family and friends is so important to both patients and caregivers. Don't let your fear of doing or saying the wrong thing prevent you from offering to assist.”

Emmanuel Hospice provides compassionate care for patients and families facing the end of life – and for their extended circle of family and friends. To find out more, visit www.EmmanuelHospice.org.