

Frequently asked questions

Supporting a loved one during terminal illness – emotional well-being and communication

When facing a terminal diagnosis, families often have many questions about what to expect, how to provide the best support, and how to navigate the complex medical and emotional landscape. Here are answers to some of the most common questions families ask.

How do we tell children about their loved one's terminal diagnosis?

Use age-appropriate, honest language and provide opportunities for questions. For young children, explain that the person is very sick and the doctors cannot make them better. Be honest if they ask whether the person is going to pass away. You can say that it is possible, but nobody can say for sure. For older children, you can provide more detailed information while focusing on the love and support the family will continue to provide. Consider involving a counsellor who specialises in paediatric grief.

What if our loved one doesn't want to talk about their diagnosis or dying?

Respect their wishes while remaining available to talk. Some people process difficult news by focusing on normal activities and relationships. Continue to provide loving support and let them know you're available to talk whenever they're ready. Follow their lead and don't force conversations they're not ready to have. You can still support them in practical ways, such as driving them to appointments, helping them with grocery shopping, or dropping off meals.

How do we maintain hope while also being realistic about the prognosis?

Hope can evolve throughout the illness journey. Initially, hope might focus on a cure or remission. As the illness progresses, hope might shift to having meaningful time together, being comfortable, or achieving specific goals. It's possible to hope for good days while also acknowledging the reality of the diagnosis. Hope and acceptance can coexist.

Is it normal to feel angry about the diagnosis?

Anger is a normal response to terminal illness. You might feel angry at the disease, the healthcare system, other people who are healthy, or even at your loved one for being sick. These feelings are natural parts of the grief process. Find healthy ways to express anger, such as physical exercise, journaling, or talking with a counsellor.