



Providing Companionship for a Person at the End of Life: Talking about Death

Accompanying an elderly person at the end of life means taking measure of their accomplishments, who they are, their life experiences, and accepting the imminence of death.

Your companion may wish to discuss the topic of death and may broach the subject by mentioning discreetly that they feel ready, that all their affairs are in order. Sometimes they may evoke death in their own words, referring to a departure, or a great journey.

While these shared moments can certainly be troubling, they can also provide the opportunity to think about death together.

“Let’s talk about it while it’s sunny”, said the wise man... Talking about death allows you to prepare emotionally, and to share your thoughts, while respecting your limits and your respective beliefs.

*“It is the perspective of death that highlights the beauty of things. I don’t want to avoid thinking of death, I would be afraid of missing the most important thing.”
Claude Raymond (2020)*



"Providing companionship for a loved one is a great adventure: you must expect to be moved, troubled, and awed. There are moments of joy when just a look is sufficient to share mutual understanding, and moments of sadness when even words are powerless. There are hopes and disappointments. Accompanying a loved one is first and foremost about being there, being present, loving, patient and honest. It's about coping with our own emotions and those of another, being suffocated with love and fear all at once. To accompany someone on the path towards death is to take nourishment from the past to face an uncertain present. It means accepting not to project yourself into the future: it means laughing, crying, holding one another, and living in the moment."

Accompanying someone to the end of life is to be momentarily suspended in time, to stand together on the threshold of death, to ensure a peaceful presence to the last breath. Finally, it means opening your arms, letting go, weeping for your loss and filling your emptiness with love."

Danielle B., Team coordinator at Little Brothers



Good practices

- Be sensitive and receptive, be available and show empathy;
- Allow the person to share their feelings and emotions in their own words;
- Show affection;
- Show interest in their beliefs, what comforts them and makes sense to them;
- Ask open-ended questions if they are broaching the topic. For example, by asking them if they need to talk about it or if you can do something to reassure them;
- Recall cherished moments from the past;
- Talk about the positive aspects of their life journey;
- Approach end-of-life teachings with an open heart;
- Be yourself, be reassuring;
- Welcome silence;
- Consult, get information.

Attitudes to adopt

- Keep in mind that your presence makes a big difference.
- "Too often a person at the end of life is considered 'at the end', rather than being considered alive until the end", Little Brothers.
- As a volunteer or caregiver, you are not alone: share your observations with people of trust and professionals from the person's caregiving network.
- Respect the guidelines and limits of your role, take care of yourself in order to enjoy your companionship experience and its teachings.



Things to avoid

- Denying the person's feelings or emotions;
- Refusing to talk about death, changing the subject;
- Judging the person.
- Withdrawing from the relationship, decreasing the number of visits;
- Transposing your own fears and perceptions.

Additional resources

Readings

Les Petits Frères des Pauvres, *100 mots contre l'isolement de nos aînés*, Fauves Editions, 2021.
 SINGER Christiane, *Derniers fragments d'un long voyage*, Éditions Albin Michel, 2007.
 PROULX Jean, *Grandir en humanité (préface de Frédéric Lenoir)*, FIDES, 2018.
 CYR Claude et De MONTIGNY Johanne, *Ce vif de la vie qui jamais ne meurt*, Éditions Novalis, 2017.

Online

Maison Monbourquette, *Ressources - Aide et Soutien - Deuil*, <https://bit.ly/monbourquette-ressources> (In French only)
 LUGAN Fanchette, *Témoignage : Écoute et impuissance, un duo inséparable*, dans *Jusqu'à la mort accompagner la vie*, 2018/2 (N° 133), p. 27 à 30, <https://bit.ly/ecoute-impuissance> (In French only)
 De MONTIGNY Johanne, *On ne mourra pas d'en parler*, [Film] <https://bit.ly/film-de-montigny> (In French only)

