



Loss and Grieving

“... if peace and dignity
are what we delude
ourselves to expect,
most of us will die
wondering what we,
or our doctors,
have done wrong.”

SHERWIN NULAND, M.D.

Author of
How We Die



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Loss and Grieving



Advice for
Healthcare
Providers Caring
for Dying Patients





Helping Healthcare Providers Through Difficult Times

Following are some tips to help physicians discuss end-of-life issues with their patients. These tips have been endorsed by consumer organizations with respect for the physician-patient relationship and understanding that there may be variations of “tips” based on individual circumstances.

- * Begin initiating discussions before a medical crisis occurs. Have information about advance directives available to your patient. If she/he completes an advance directive, discuss your patient’s wishes and make sure it is in the chart and that other members of the health care team are aware of it. Encourage the patient to discuss their end-of-life decisions with their family.
- * Provide your patients, their families, caregivers, or others involved in the decision-making process with the information they need to make decisions. Provide a clear overview of the diagnosis, prognosis, treatment options, risks, benefits and outcomes. Be aware your patient and their families may ask the same questions more than once as they try to absorb the reality of the patient’s circumstances.
- * Improve communication by involving nurses, social workers and spiritual caregiver as members of the health care team.
Remember you are part of a team. Utilize team members and be aware of other resources such as hospital chaplains.
- * Respect the role of the family and especially the primary caregiver as part of the health care team. *(Information from the Sacramento Healthcare Decisions, Extreme Care, Humane Options (ECHO) project.)*
- * Patients and families do not have medical degrees to help them understand what you are saying.

Do not use euphemisms. Be gentle and straightforward with language such as,

“I believe we are approaching your final weeks, let’s discuss where and how you would like to spend this time.”

- * Be familiar with the existing legal and ethical policies at your hospital and the state laws around end-of-life care. Certain issues such as withdrawal of treatment can be misunderstood. Be familiar with your hospital’s designated procedure to access your ethics committee.
- * Understand the local resources available to help the patient and family, such as hospice, home care services and patient/family support groups. Work in cooperation with your health care team to initiate the appropriate referrals.
- * Try not to see terminal illness or death as a failure on your part.
- * Be aware of the signs of depression in the patient, as well as the family and caregivers.
- * Work on coming to terms with your own feelings or fears about death by reading a provider-oriented book about death, talking to colleagues or attending a seminar.

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