

# The Dying Process

What to expect, what you can do, and what happens after



Bethell Hospice

A person who is dying undergoes many changes. Each person is different, but there are common signs. This guide may help you understand the dying process – what to expect, what you can do, and what happens after a death at Bethell Hospice.



## Signs a person is nearing end-of-life:

- They may become withdrawn and lose interest in the activities and people around them.
- The dying person may experience or express a variety of emotions including guilt, sadness, anger, frustration, etc.
- Some people may ask for a spiritual counsellor, pastor, priest, etc.

## Physical changes in the last days to weeks:

- They may sleep a lot. They may become less aware and less responsive.
- Confusion about time, people, and place is common.
- Loss of appetite and a decrease in thirst may occur when the body no longer requires nourishment.  
**Forcing a dying person to eat or drink may increase their discomfort and put them at risk of choking.**
- The dying person may become restless. This may happen suddenly. They may reach out, pull at the bed sheets or their clothing, attempt to get out of bed, or they may see or speak to people not visible to you.
- Skin may become cool, clammy, or they may develop a fever.
- Hands, feet, knees, or lips may become bluish as circulation of blood slows down.
- Noisy breathing or gurgling may develop. This occurs when the dying person's muscles weaken to a point where they are no longer able to swallow their saliva. *Suctioning is not recommended.*
- Breathing may become irregular; it may be shallow, fast, and stop for brief periods. Periods of not breathing may become more frequent and last longer as the person nears death. The person may moan or sigh as they exhale.

## What you can do:

- Be present. If it feels right, you can sit with them, lay in bed with them, hold their hand, talk to them, reassure them.
- Do not force them to eat or drink.
- Provide frequent mouth care to keep the mouth and lips moist and comfortable.
- Difficulty breathing may be managed with repositioning, elevating the head of the bed, and fan or open window to allow for a gentle breeze across the face.
- Call the nurse if the dying person appears to be in pain, is anxious or restless, feeling short of breath, or has an increased temperature.
- Take care of yourself first. Being at the bedside of a dying person can be difficult; be sure to take time to eat, rest, bathe, etc.

*Here when you need us*



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## At the time of death:

- There will be no response, no breathing, no pulse.
- The eyes may be open or closed. If the eyes are open, they will be fixed in one direction.
- The mouth may be open. Fluid may ooze from the mouth.
- The bladder and bowels may release.
- You are encouraged to spend as much time as you need with the person after they die. You may talk to, touch, hug, kiss, or lay down beside them – whatever feels right for you.

## What happens after death at Bethell Hospice Residence:

- You may take all the time you need with the deceased person. There is no rush.
- When you are ready, a member of the clinical staff can contact the funeral home you have selected.
- As the deceased person leaves Bethell Hospice, staff and volunteers will stop what they are doing to honour the person as they depart the building. We refer to this as the "Leaving Ceremony." You are welcome to select a meaningful song or reading to include as part of the Leaving Ceremony, but it is not required.
- If the deceased person has personal belongings left in their room, you may take your time to collect these after the Leaving Ceremony.

## Grief & Bereavement Support

At Bethell Hospice, we provide a full continuum of care, including grief and bereavement support after a person dies. Support is available to children, youth and adults. If you are interested in accessing one-on-one grief counselling with one of our trained spiritual care and grief counsellors, please inform staff so a referral may be made on your behalf. Referral forms can also be found on the Bethell Hospice website at [www.bethellhospice.org](http://www.bethellhospice.org). Bereavement groups are also available and designed to support individuals dealing with bereavement or anticipatory grief. Please call, **905-838-3534** to inquire about our current Bereavement Group schedule.



Some of this information has been adapted from Acclaim Health's "When Your Loved One is Dying at Home" pamphlet and has been prepared by the Clinical Excellence Committee of Bethell Hospice.

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