

Understanding the Dying Process: Transitions during Final Days to Hours

KATHLEEN A. MONEYSMAKER, R.N., C.H.P.N.

Death, like birth is a rite of passage that each one of us experiences. For some, death is a sudden catastrophic event, for most it is a "process," allowing time for preparation. As the dying and their loved ones attempt to "deal" with death it is not unusual to experience a variety of emotions that both help and hinder one's ability to cope. Often family relationships become tense and strained. Although each death is unique to the person, there are commonalities that occur when dying extends over time, these include:

- Social changes, redefining "self" within the context of relationship;
- Emotional changes, addressing the inevitability of death and engages in attempts at "closure";
- Spiritual changes, "life review," reflections on "meaning," addressing forgiveness and reconciliation, making one's peace;
- Physical changes, physiologic processes change as the body prepares to "shut down" and "let go" . . . to die.

Spiritual support is always available to you and your loved one as desired.

Focus on the present . . . the "here and now" so you do not miss what is before you in the moment.

A quiet presence with your loved one is an invaluable gift.

Be gentle with yourself during this time of "letting go," allow your healthcare team to serve and support you as desire

APPROACHING DEATH

This guide will assist you to formulate questions as well as to anticipate and recognize changes that may occur as death nears.

1 to 2 Weeks prior to death (the body is no longer able to balance and maintain itself effectively)

- ✓ Blood pressure becomes lower
- ✓ Breathing may become irregular with pauses
- ✓ Cough, often weak and ineffective
- ✓ Temperature may fluctuate (hot or cold)
- ✓ Mobility decreases as weakness increases
- ✓ Skin color becomes flushed or bluish-to-whitish
- ✓ Pain may develop or increase
- ✓ Sleeping increases, person awakens to voice or touch
- ✓ Activity may be aimless, picking at bedding or in the air
- ✓ Weakness and fatigue are profound
- ✓ Pulse may become faster or slower
- ✓ Secretions may pool in the throat, "rattle"
- ✓ Eyes and mouth may become dry
- ✓ Sweating (perspiration) may occur and be excessive
- ✓ Muscles may tighten, joints may become stiff
- ✓ Skin temperature may be hot, warm, cool, or cold
- ✓ Pain may be "with movement" or described as "all over"
- ✓ Confused conversation and visions of deceased may occur
- ✓ Agitation/restlessness, may become delirious
- ✓ Spiritual issues may become important/meaningful

Days to hours prior to death (Changes occurring during the preceding week may intensify)

- ✓ Surge of energy, "rally" or "last hurrah" is possible
- ✓ Restlessness possible from decreased oxygen in the blood
- ✓ Breathing irregularities, long pauses, rapid breaths
- ✓ Rattling in throat increases, not aware or suffering
- ✓ Hands/feet cool, bluish-whitish color (mottling)
- ✓ Unresponsive to voice/touch, less conscious
- ✓ Transitional spiritual energy, preparing to "let go"
- ✓ Muscle twitching/jerking (multiple causes)
- ✓ Lower jaw relaxes, open-mouth "mandibular" breathing
- ✓ Eyes partially open, not focused or "seeing"
- ✓ Knees, ankles, elbows may become "blotchy"
- ✓ Pain may intensify

Assume your loved-one can hear you . . . even when he/she is no longer able to respond to your voice or touch.

ACTIVE DYING and DEATH

Often a person dies soon after loved ones leave the room, conversely death may seem suspended pending a loved one's arrival. Trust the process! Death comes in its own time. While attempting to provide comfort your healthcare team will not intentionally hasten or impede the dying process. Other changes that may occur while your loved one is *ACTIVELY* dying include:

- ✓ Moaning associated with breathing
- ✓ Pain, with or without movement
- ✓ Secretions may ooze from the nose and mouth
- ✓ Loss of color around eyes, nose, mouth
- ✓ Muscle jerking or twitching
- ✓ Eyes may weep tears
- ✓ Breathing that seems labored, more difficult
- ✓ Vomiting, usually without warning
- ✓ Loss of bowel or bladder control
- ✓ Sense of "vacancy," lack of presence
- ✓ Eyes open wide and seem to stare
- ✓ Body may become rigid at time of death

Note: To determine the official time of death requires a physical examination to confirm the heart has stopped beating, breathing has ceased, and pupils dilated and fixed. The nurse will arrange for pronouncement of death.

Kathleen A. Money maker, RN, CHPN
Legacy Palliative and Hospice Care Program

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1. Maureen Lynch, Constance M. Dahlin. 2007. The National Consensus Project and National Quality Forum Preferred Practices in Care of the Imminently Dying. *Journal of Hospice & Palliative Nursing* 9:6, 316. [[CrossRef](#)]