



Helpers

A Practical Guide to Coping
With A Loved One's
Terminal Illness

By
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My love and gratitude to...

**Mom & Dad
Ann & Bob
Petra & Rose**

**who inspired me to write this
from their home
on the other side.**

I love you all.

A Legacy In The “Dash”

1955 – 2046

When we think of the life we have left
Having started with birth and ending in death
What we have that remains in between
Is a little ol’ dash
That looks simple and clean...

But, that ‘dash’ represents our accomplishments
Our frailties and conditions of life
It illustrates who we are
Those we’ve touched, near and far
Its our legacy of love, strength and strife.

Take the time to review
Anything you might change
As you find you’re mid-way through your ‘dash’
Perhaps an adjustment of priorities
Since life passes by in a flash.

Don’t put so much stock in material things
Like cars, jewels, homes and cash
When the day is done
What’s remembered most
Is how you lived your ‘dash’.

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Preface

Anytime we are faced with a terminal illness, either with a family member or friend, the first question we ask is “Why?” We wonder what we or they have done to deserve such pain. Why were we selected? How did this happen? What are we being punished for? The answer is simple. Nobody has done anything wrong. Dealing with a terminal illness is not a punishment although, it initially feels like it is. You are being given the opportunity to affect someone’s life in the most loving and powerful way possible and that can be quite a gift. You can help them leave this earth with dignity, knowing they were loved and well cared for.

There are many philosophies about how we come into this material world. Many books, including the Bible, suggest that we select our parents and the circumstances of the life we will lead before we are born so that we may learn those lessons that remain unlearned. We are spiritual beings temporarily experiencing a mortal existence. When that mortal existence comes with challenges and obstacles, we still need to rise to the occasion and respond appropriately. Children born without limbs learn to be creatively self-sufficient in other ways. Some have been able to support themselves financially with their artistic ability or speaking skills. We can see when we look closely at people with handicaps that they have other amazing gifts which go far beyond the average human being. Look at the number of incredible entertainers that are blind or lame yet they are able to touch the very souls of more people in the world than any “perfect” man. And, that is what people with terminal illnesses do too. They touch us profoundly. At times we feel helpless, scared, angry, tired, or simply wish that it is “us instead of them”. But, facing the challenges at hand with an open and loving heart will answer many of your unanswered questions if you only give God a chance to explain.

At a time when medicine and medical expertise only serve to comfort and prolong, God seems to be the one to whom we turn for some sort of understanding and answer. Sometimes we face him with wrath and in anger, sometimes with prayers and pleadings. But, no matter what emotion is controlling us or what our religious belief system may be,

most people still acknowledge that our fate is in God's hands. He has a plan that we may never completely understand unless we make the effort to try and see what is unfolding before us. What lessons do we still have to learn? Is this an opportunity for us to learn them?

Having lost so many important people in my life in a very short period of time, I have come to realize that all things happen for a reason and that there are no accidents in life. Sometimes it takes quite a while to discover what the reason could possibly be when forced to watch children, friends or family members succumb to an illness while still in the prime of their lives. Even losing my beloved friend at 91 years of age was difficult to accept because she was such a vital person as well as a source of inspiration, strength and guidance to so many. Her health had been excellent up until her stroke six months prior to her death and it appeared that she still had work remaining on earth, imparting her lifetime of wisdom to family and friends as only she could. But, upon reflection, her work was done and all of us that she left behind, found ourselves with new challenges to undertake without her earthly direction.

Sometimes, that is the lesson... to learn self-reliance; to identify inner strengths and become a more complete person ourselves. Maybe it's to receive the passing torch; to carry on where our loved one left off. Or, maybe its just time to say 'goodbye' and move on in life with the gratitude of having known an individual who touched us so deeply.

We will always see personal growth and an ultimate feeling of peace come from the experience of making a loved one's last days on earth be the best they can possibly be. God never asks more of us than He knows we are able to deliver. No challenge is ever too great for our capabilities although they may oftentimes stretch us to a point of nearly breaking. It is important to take the time to appreciate yourself and recognize that with each new 'stretch' of your elastic countenance, you develop whole new strengths. Events such as these teach us that every second of our lifetime is about choice and we can choose to make a difference in our own lives as well as those who's lives we touch.

I want to take a moment and express my supreme gratitude to the people associated with Hospice organizations around the country who work only with terminally ill patients. Most of these facilities provide their services free of charge through insurance coverage and will work with you and your family in Hospice centers or in your own home. Their mission statement reads this way, "To neither hasten nor postpone death, to provide pain relief and integrate the psychological and spiritual aspects of patient care and offer a support system to both help patients live as actively as possible and help the family cope during the illness and in their own bereavement."

I have never known a group of more dedicated and compassionate individuals as those who are associated with this noble organization. I have had an opportunity to work with Hospice programs in different cities like Palm Springs and Monterey California as well as Boynton Beach, Pompano and Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. In every instance, from receptionist, nurse, doctor, chaplain, or volunteer, the love and support these people provide is priceless. Their vocation is not a job, it is a calling and they all do it with amazing grace and devotion.

Thank you.

You restore the lives of the living as well.

Debi

Is There a Heaven?

I think most people accept the concept of heaven but perhaps have a more difficult time doing so when they know their loved one may be going there soon. That is when they begin to wonder if heaven is real after all. I have found the idea of an afterlife to be very reassuring for me when I have lost someone I loved. I always feel their presence at times when I need them and still call on their wisdom from time-to-time. Without exception, my questions are answered and my request for guidance is always met when I ask for it. It's funny how the response I receive even comes in the form I'd expect to hear from whomever I'm directing my question. For example, when I am feeling challenged with my children, I can hear my mom's disapproving voice tell me I need to be stricter and then she reminds me that she didn't give me the flexibility that I have given my own children. Or, I can hear my dad's prideful congratulations when a business deal comes through even though, in my heart and soul, I am certain that he had some part in making the 'deal' happen. I feel divine guidance with me every day of my life and know that those I have lost never truly leave me. They will not leave you either. You simply need to be willing to hear them speak to you.

I was very fearful of death for most of the time that I was growing up and didn't get over my fear until I was well into my thirties. I knew very little about death and had never lost a family member until my grandma died at age 94 when I was 37. It is so easy to fear the unknown when you have absolutely no point of reference from which you can draw understanding, nor do you have any way of confirming any part of it...you can only proceed with sheer faith.

Although I grew up in a home where my family believed in God and heaven, heaven was not a place I ever considered as a potential residence. It was simply the place where angels lived and it had little or nothing to do with me. But, after caring for terminally ill family members, I am absolutely certain that heaven exists. Even those I have cared for that were "tired of being sick but afraid of where they would go..." became very peaceful and accepting in the last few weeks of their life. I could not only see their acceptance of heaven as their final destination, but their eagerness to actually go there increased as the

days passed. It is amazing to me how people, in their final weeks of life, feel a comfort about what lies ahead for them. It is as if God let's them in on His secret and reassures them about their future accommodations so they have one less thing to worry about before saying 'goodbye' to their earthly family and friends. You may have misgivings or uncertainties about death and it's appearance of finality, but your loved one does not.

There are so many books about near death experiences and people who have channeled communication to their loved ones through mediums and spiritualists that we are able to have a better understanding of heaven and the love that emanates at the transition of life if we simply open our minds to it. Most of these people report seeing a beautiful, welcoming light and angels or family members all standing by to anxiously greet them.

I think all of us have experienced some type of divine communication in our lifetime, we just may not have been open to the realization of it at the time that it occurred. But, thinking back, if you have ever lost someone before, I bet you can think of a time when you were going to do something you knew you shouldn't do, even if it was something as simple as running a red light, and just at the moment you were going to make your move you hear a recognizable voice tell you not to do it. I am never surprised anymore when I hear these voices of warning, assistance or loving direction. I have met too many people with personal testimonials and have experienced too many connections first hand myself to deny their existence. Besides, why would I want to even try denying that my loved ones want to stay in contact with me when it is so comforting? We will never really know the true answer until we too are reunited with them.

When we are facing the death of a loved one and medicine no longer provides the solution, all we have left to keep us going is our faith and belief that God has a plan for us as well as a plan for the loved one He is taking to join Him. There is no earthly comfort I have found during this time. Eating more, dulling pain with pills and alcohol or giving in to bouts of depression certainly does not make things easier or less painful. They only provide more problems to solve later. My quiet meditations and communications with God are the only things that have pulled me through my difficulties and sadness every time. They gave me the peace I have needed when I felt frustrated or overwhelmed. They

made me more even-tempered when my emotions got out of control. They let me feel sorry for myself for a little while, then reminded me that this illness is not happening to me, I am merely a participant in the finality of someone else's life and I still have my own life to lead.

You can find your spirituality without considering yourself to be a religious person. God has no favorites. He answers your cries for help no matter where you are calling from. It doesn't have to come from a pew in a church or a temple nor does it require special positions or recitations. Some people have a very difficult time reaching out to God because they have not had a very positive experience with religion in their upbringing. You may not trust Him or see Him as very loving, especially right now. Even if you are angry with Him, tell Him so. Even though He already knows, He will help you through this and eventually will show you why your life will be forever benefited from the experience.

Faith in God offers no insurance against tragedy. It does, however, provide strength and comfort when it's most needed. Conditions on earth cause illness and suffering, not divine intervention. We are not being punished when a loved one has become sick or terminally disabled. God did not seek out your loved one to teach them a lesson or hurt you in any way. Even the Bible speaks of God's constant warnings to his disobedient children before consequences arose. He and his followers were able to heal the sick and created miracles for even the most unworthy of individuals. God is about love, not revenge. We, however, take our mortal existences for granted. Good physical health, proper nutrition and exercise very often give way to overindulgent lifestyles and demanding work schedules. We punish ourselves daily with stress and abuse but are overwhelmed and confused when "God strikes one of us down". God has not passed you by nor has he forsaken you or your family. Please do not use this time to make your loved one question their earthly behavior or feel guilty about how or why they became sick. They are not being punished and they need to be reassured of that fact. This is a time when terminally ill people need all of the faith and hope available to them in order for them to battle their illness with strength.

We are all victims of the world we live in to some extent. So much of our environment and living conditions are out of our control. We are exposed to chemicals, pollutants, toxins, food preservatives, additives and other insults to our health almost daily. Knowing that, you need to be forgiving, loving and patient. Look for the good and bright side to everything you encounter at this difficult time. Share your positive attitude with those around you. Pain and suffering are only temporary. An eternal life of peace without ills awaits everyone.

Spiritual Comfort

For me, the concept of God, angels, and an afterlife was one that got me through the death of my parents, in-laws and very dear friends. There are many concepts that have been presented in the Bible, then reinforced by many contemporary books, that not only make a great case for eternal life, they confirm it. Near-death-experiences have been reported and recorded by medical professionals that were probably more skeptical than the average person. The thread of continuity that runs throughout hundreds of thousands of accounts of personal near-death experiences is one of rising above their body during crisis, entering into a dark tunnel and moving toward a beautiful light. Most report a feeling of profound love and say they were met by spiritual entities or loved ones and friends who have passed before them. Some speak of entering into a beautiful garden where they felt complete peace. These incredible examples confirm a loving and comforting experience where most report their reluctance to leave the heavenly realm when it was still not time for their death and return to their mortal existence.

The whole concept of eternal life may be one that is difficult for you to accept but, it is one in which you should be open-minded enough to consider...especially at this time. It can explain so much while eliminating many of your fears. Although it is difficult to understand why we must experience such pain as is inflicted upon us when we are losing a loved one, you must have faith and trust that there is a divine plan for each of us. In fact, many books express the idea that we not only choose to be born, we choose when we will leave this world and even the circumstances of our death. Once we have accomplished our life's mission, it is time to move on. Even though you feel your loved one's mission could not possibly be completed, you must accept that some people are gifts that are given to us for a very short time in order for us to learn and grow ourselves.

Trevor, the child that was featured in the true-story based movie, "Pay It Forward", was a wonderful example of a life cut short that impacted millions. That little boy had a concept that, if someone did you a good deed and you repaid them by doing good deeds

for three other people, soon the world would be a better place. He showed us that by helping three other people as a means to say 'thank you' to someone who helps us, and each of those people help three more to do the same, we could quickly touch the world with good works. In fact, Trevor's 'pay it forward' concept could help almost five million people (4,782,969) in just two weeks if good deeds are exponentially conducted. Trevor accidentally died while helping another child, and although his death was untimely, he left a legacy of love and kindness behind him. Thousands in his hometown mourned him. Millions have appreciated his gifted message by seeing his life portrayed through his movie story. Foundations now exist to promote his concept. Trevor's purpose in life was realized before he was a teen even though his death made no sense for those who loved him and were robbed of his life.

Who has your loved one touched? Their friends? You? Your children? The most famous people in the world who have provided us with the best example of life or who have guided our very development are usually known only to their immediate circle of family and friends. They aren't featured in the pages of national magazines or appear on TV. They are the teachers we saw every day at school or the grandparent who listened to our frustrations every Saturday afternoon. Don't minimize anyone's lifetime contribution. Although it may appear small from one person's perspective, it can be life-changing for those who have benefited from it.

During our lifetime, we are given the opportunity to understand about love from all sides. Only in giving service and care to those around us can we fully comprehend what giving and receiving love is all about. Likewise, many of those we care for have spent a lifetime looking after others with little thought given to their own needs. Now, when they can no longer be self-sufficient, it is their turn to learn about receiving love from those who now have the opportunity to care for them.

Challenges promote your soul's growth and love is the fuel that keeps us going. Wisdom comes from the experiences of despair. Facing trying times is when we reconnect with what is most important in life. For many, it is a time to recognize that people are more valuable than our need to over-work or strive for possessions. It is in the prompt and

often unexpected requirement of our attention to others that we reestablish priorities because love and all that it represents is the only energy that will ultimately heal all pains and illnesses. Even though it may do so with finality, you will be left to feel a love in your heart, not only for the one that you have lost, but for yourself and your contribution to their life that will stay with you forever.

Use this time to seek answers, reasons and a better understanding of the challenges you are asked to face and why you may be asked to experience them. Don't simply accept your new obligations at face value with emotions that do not allow you to think clearly. Look at them with love. Evaluate what you have learned from the person you are losing, what you have left to learn or what you have given them that may have made a difference in both your lives. What changes or adjustments will you need to make, at least temporarily, that will make you reevaluate your priorities? Will you be a better person or think differently for having made these changes?

It is alright to feel the pain associated with any traumatic experience. Personal pain is expected now but, that does not give you permission to wallow in it. Losing yourself when you are needed most is not an option. Turn to God. Connect with him, perhaps for the first time. Faith, at this difficult time, means believing in advance that which will only make sense in retrospect. Have faith in the life experience process. Do not simply ask God for a reprieve in taking away a life that means so much to you. Ask Him to comfort you. Ask Him to help you understand why everyone is going through this experience and ask Him to help ease all the pain associated with it. Not just the physical pain, but the emotional pain which can be far greater. Allow yourself to be the channel in which all higher powers can heal. If you can be a blessing to someone and provide them with comfort and love when they need them most, what other better purpose could you possibly have in this lifetime?

Deny Denial

When we learn that a loved one is terminally ill, for some it is almost impossible to accept. This is especially true if the person does not appear to be ‘sick’ when they are diagnosed. Many people, when faced with their own mortality, often become far stronger than they have been historically and their new-found nobility and strength can be a fooler for those around them. Just because your family member doesn’t act ill, do not assume they do not need you.

Accepting a doctor’s prognosis does not mean that you cannot get additional opinions from other medical professionals. You should feel absolutely certain of the diagnosis given and be comfortable that it is accurate. But, once the final analysis has been confirmed, it is time for that prognosis to be accepted. It only makes things more difficult for everyone when it is not. Terminally ill people may already have a feeling that they have let their loved ones down by becoming sick or more needy. It can be tiring, frustrating and upsetting to them if they are taken from doctor to doctor only to have their diagnoses reconfirmed again and again, but still cannot provide you with the miracle answer you’re looking for. Please don’t make them feel they have let you down.

As a potential care-giver or instrumental and active member of your loved one’s life, it is good to meet with all of the doctors associated with their case and learn everything you can about what to expect, possible declining traits, appetite and dietary requirements, as well as the physical capacity restrictions that will begin to manifest. If you are not the primary care-giver, you still want to be aware of what the future holds for all of you. The more you know and understand, the better able you will be to prepare yourself while meeting their growing needs appropriately. Even become knowledgeable about the medications they are taking and what those prescriptions are designed to do so you can notify the doctor if they cease to remain effective. You will find that the doctors involved with your loved one’s illness may become less ‘hands on’ as the patient becomes more incapacitated and unable to travel to the office. The care-giver’s awareness of subtle

changes and their ability to communicate those changes to the appropriate medical professionals will make everyone more comfortable.

Many people who have not ever been around 'sick' people before may have a very difficult time adjusting to the changes or potential changes in a once healthy loved one. It is easy to get frustrated at their diminishing capabilities and not accept the fact that they are becoming limited in what they can do. Pretending that they are not sick will not make them better. It will only make them feel sad, misunderstood and even isolated. Nobody wants to feel like a burden to the ones they love. This feeling of being an encumbrance is even more prominent when the increased need for outside assistance is both recognized and anticipated.

When my mother-in-law became sick with cancer, my father-in-law was in complete denial of her condition. Even though he went to every doctor's appointment, held her hand throughout her therapies and had a complete understanding of what the doctor told him, he did not want to accept the fact that her time on earth was going to be limited.

Because Ann looked fine, even after she needed to purchase wigs to cover her rapidly diminishing hair caused by regular chemotherapy treatments, Bob went about their day-to-day lifestyle as though everything was and would continue to be the same. Ann would get very tired and Bob would try to cajole her into their usual daily activities. Ann felt guilty for not being able to keep up with him. Bob tried to keep his head in the sand.

It is not unusual for people in this situation to avoid any conversation about limitations or their growing illness. Nobody wants to think that a bleak tomorrow will eventually come, so why even talk about it? Soon Ann would become angry because Bob appeared to be very insensitive. When Ann's concerns were discussed with Bob, he broke down and admitted that he couldn't accept that he may soon lose the wife he had loved for more than 50 years. He could not remember when Ann was not a part of his life and could not fathom (nor accept) what life could be without her. Bob was not being

insensitive to Ann's illness, he was denying his fear and acceptance of eventually living alone.

As difficult as this conversation and realization was for everyone involved, it allowed Bob to really begin to understand what he needed to do in order to enjoy Ann for as long as he could and show her how much she was loved and cherished. Long walks became short strolls and, eventually, peaceful drives. Bob now shared in the dinner preparation until Ann needed to simply watch and direct the making of their meals from a kitchen chair. Although they had always been very close, they now enjoyed each and every day they had together and thanked God each morning that they would have another opportunity to share their love for one another.

Denial of the difficult situation you face can stem from numerous causes. The most obvious is the fact that you are unwilling subconsciously, even though you may accept things intellectually, of acknowledging the inevitability and finality that you may soon need to face. Part of that is because you do not want to even consider life without your loved one, and part of that is because your own mortality is now looming before you. Recognizing that you will not live forever appears greatest with the loss of a parent or spouse. For some reason, no matter how old we get, we are still our parent's children. As children, it is assumed that our parents will always be there. But, obviously, they cannot be. Likewise, although we probably never allowed ourselves to think about it much, we most likely assumed that we would be the spouse to go first, and not be the one left to grieve.

Losing a child is probably the most painful loss of all. But, you must allow yourself the reassurance that you were able to share the love and joy you felt for each other for the time you had together, no matter how limited. Even in your greatest times of sorrow, you know that you would not have given up the opportunity to experience life without this person if you would have been given the option. Do not deny them the gifts they brought into your life now.

It is easy to deny what is happening around you. But, it will eventually need to be faced and the sooner you face the challenges that will need to be met, the better you will feel about yourself and the contribution you are making to the peace and happiness of your loved one. This is a time in your life that is not about you. It is about the one you love.

Keep The Right Perspective

The outcome of every situation you will face in your life is dependant upon your perspective. If you elect to see the positive aspects of any given situation or condition, you will ultimately experience a much more positive result. Let's face facts. Dealing with an ill person is difficult at best. Dealing with a terminal illness takes profound patience and understanding. But, looking at the situation with a negative perspective will accomplish nothing other than to make every day much harder to bear.

I have read many books about the concept of universal energy. Every person and every living thing on the planet is connected in some way and we are each living organisms alive with energy. Positive energy flows at a very high frequency where negative energy flows at a very low one. It is a scientific fact that higher energy creates more higher energy. Likewise, the same fact holds true for lower energy conclusions. If you set positive forces into motion with your thinking and energy output, you cannot help but receive positive results. If you look at the bright side of every situation and demand that there be something good contained within it, you cannot help but lead a much more positive and energetic life. That same energy will rub off on those around you.

You are now facing a time when thinking positively is quite a challenge. But, it does not have to be. Every day that you provide comfort and support is a good day. Every day when you have an opportunity to bond further with your loved one and show them how much they mean to you is a positive experience. Hearing "I love you" and "thank you" make each day worthwhile too. You can always see something good in everything if you only look for it.

Increase your awareness of your potential for energy loss during this challenging time. You may think you are tired due to increased stress or responsibilities but, that is only a small part of your energy depletion. Have you noticed how drained you are after having spent even a short period of time in a hospital environment? You are not simply emotionally tired, you are physically tired and can most likely use a nap. Sometimes it

may even be difficult staying awake on the drive home. That is because, in a hospital or nursing facility, you are surrounded by ill people who are unknowingly reaching out and robbing you of your healthy energy. The same factor that you experience in a hospital environment can still hold true as you spend time with your loved one at home.

It is natural to assume that any energy loss you are experiencing is due to over-taxed feelings associated with the care and concern you have for your loved one. Perhaps you even see it as a mild form of depression when you are in their presence. Even when you hide the feeling well, you are still physically aware of the change in your energy level and increased lethargy. If this condition sounds familiar to you, there is an exercise you can do to help channel additional energy through you and into your loved one so they may not drain you of yours. It is a simple meditation.

Take several deep cleansing breaths. Breathe in deeply through your nose and exhale through your mouth. Sit or lie comfortably. You may want to play soothing music to help you relax and keep your mind clear of distractions. Close your eyes and envision a white healing light streaming out of the heavens and flowing down over your entire body. In the center of that light, you will see a single white beam that flows from high above directly into the top of your head. As this positive white healing light beam flows into you, you will begin to feel it move down through your body. It will warm you as it descends from your head, down your neck, through your shoulders and out into your arms. At the same time, you will feel the beam continue from your neck down through your body, filling your chest and moving down into your legs. You may feel your body tingle as the white light full of energy flows throughout your body, energizing you with its every fluid movement. You will even feel the excess light escape out of your hands and down through your feet, grounding you further into the earth's energy. Feel the light energize you and, while it is doing so, send all the excess energy out of your body and into your loved one so they can share the energy with you. Direct the light to heal their hurts and improve their overall feeling of well-being.

You will see a distinct difference in your energy level if you do this exercise on a regular basis. It will not only help you maintain your own personal power during this difficult

period, it will also provide you with a feeling of connection with the universe and with those that need you. Circumstances can deplete you but two things cannot be stolen...your free will and your ability to choose your attitude toward every given situation. No matter what the obstacle, you will always retain your right to choose to navigate your own way through it. Keep an open mind and an open heart. Act rather than react to each challenge. Don't let your emotions fog your ability to think clearly. You are already aware that you are capable of overcoming anything when you set your mind to it. You'll get through this too.

Confronting Pain

Most of us are inexperienced when it comes to understanding or tolerating pain. We have a very inadequate view of suffering because our exposure to it is usually minimized or avoided. Pain induces fear. Something hurts and nobody is certain what it is. But, when you focus on the pain positively and with the intention of repair, it can actually draw attention to necessary healing. The presence of pain forces us to concentrate on the problem area because the problem becomes so demanding. As unpleasant as pain is, it actually saves us from destruction. It is the body's warning system that something is wrong and we need to learn to be alert to those warnings. Subtle changes will take place as illnesses progress and pain is a way to both identify the changes as well as address those things that may simply be a symptom or alert signal for something else that may be wrong. Never attempt to shut off the warning system until you listen to the warning. Masking pain with medications before you identify its source may provide temporary emotional relief, but it is not necessarily physically beneficial.

Any time we face death, we see life from its most essential perspective. Watching loved ones slowly slip away forces us to ponder all of the questions we have pushed into the deepest resources of our mind that pertain to life, death and their meanings. We spend a lifetime trying to forget we're eventually going to die and when we are faced with the pain associated with a loved one's mortality, we share their suffering while wanting it to end as soon as possible. Medications can be a welcome solution, but they must be administered appropriately so you are not hiding medical complications by dulling the senses. This is a time to make your loved one as comfortable as possible without further damaging their quality of life.

We tie so many emotions to pain. It is the one thing we experience over a variety of conditions ranging from physical to emotional issues. You may consider that overcoming pain has some moral value since it exposes our needy state as mortals. We recognize that we cannot control everything ourselves and that factor alone is a condition we rarely accept easily. Pain can produce a value in our lives that can change us dramatically if we

recognize its attributes. We can learn to prepare for pain in such a way as to lessen its impact. Realistically assessing each day and accepting declines in our loved one's health will keep us present to the situation and less vulnerable to painful surprises. We can use this opportunity to become more compassionate, more sensitive and more alert toward others and what they are experiencing.

Tune in to your loved one's needs. Know their physical patterns and behaviors. Be aware of the changes they are going through and watch for signs of those changes. Eating patterns, waste elimination, ease of movement, strength and stamina can all be monitored. If your family member is not one to complain, be aware of their facial expressions as they move. Most people have a difficult time masking pain completely. Even the most stoic of individuals will usually give themselves away by their facial reactions as they move and function throughout the day.

In these trying times, fear accomplishes nothing. The doctors caring for your loved one should be able to provide you with pain-relieving suggestions that can make your loved one more comfortable. Warm baths can ease sore muscles and decrease stress. Massage can stimulate the skin and, for those who are bedridden, can minimize the risk of bed sores. Although many options are effective, all are not for everyone. People whose skin has become overly sensitive to touch due to their condition or medications may not welcome massage. Therefore, ask question of the medical professionals you are working with. You need to be strong and alert to your loved ones needs.

Make Peace With Your Role

Everyone has a different contribution to make toward their loved one's care. For most people who have not lost someone close to them before, this situation is outside their realm of familiarity and personal comfort zone. It is hard to know where to begin when so many decisions appear to be looming up before you. Take a deep breath and face each day, one day at a time. You will meet the challenges, just don't expect too much from yourself all at once. Love doesn't require technical training, so use 'love' as your starting place.

Some people are better at the day-to-day care-giving and others are more inspirational and supportive. You need to fulfill the job that is best for you and not feel guilty if there are aspects of their care that are not within your realm of expertise, time availability or even physical proximity. It is not your job to be super-human. Your job is to simply be as loving and supportive as you can. You need to be in attendance at those times that your heart says you are needed and accept the fact that you cannot be there all the time when or if that is not possible. It is neither expected nor is it good for your own sanity to forego all of your regular responsibilities in order to be a full-time care-giver unless that is what you sincerely want and are able to do.

When you learn of a loved one's terminal illness and decide to participate in their care, you should first assess what role you intend to play and why you elect to play it. Are you moving forward out of a sense of family or obligation? Do you feel you owe this person your attentions? Are you seeking fulfillment, a sense of accomplishment, a prolonging of your relationship, or a reconciliation in some manner? There are no 'good' or 'bad' / 'right' or 'wrong' motivations. From them you can make a realistic assessment and evaluation that will enable you to determine the extent and viability of your participation. Terminally ill people need lots of friends and family around them throughout their demise and that can be very demanding over a long and extended period of time. There are many fulfilling and necessary roles in which to do your part. It is important that you do not take on more than you are able because loved ones learn to count on those who

commit themselves. Taking on too much then not being able to meet your commitments is far more damaging to the consistency of their care than to accept your limited role and do that job well.

When your loved one is a family member and you have children in the household that may not completely understand what is happening, share information with them slowly as the need arises. They should not be left in the dark because it is important for them to prepare themselves for the future too. But, they may not need to know everything that is transpiring around them either. It is hard for a parent to play “cheerleader” and allay the fears of their children when they are fearful themselves. Remember, you are only human. It is alright for your family to see the emotional highs and lows that you may be feeling. Your strengths are evident, your weaknesses can be refreshing and welcomed by those that feel guilty about not feeling strong during this trying and emotional time.

Don't forget your family needs attention too. In many instances, the loved one who is ill is more connected to one family member than any of the others. In this instance it is easy for resentments to form when the caregiver's attention strays away from their family's needs.

A friend of mine, Janine, found herself constantly conflicted with the need to go visit her mother every weekend even though she had a sister that lived in the same town. Travel time to mom's house was more than an hour each way. But, because Janine was always considered 'the responsible child', she knew her mother depended upon the care she provided. Janine worked during the week and visited her mom on Sundays. This became a problem when Sunday was the only day that Janine and her husband, Dan, had off together. Dan was very supportive and understanding initially. But, after months went by and he had no recreational time with his wife, he became resentful. Janine was afraid to upset her mother, but didn't want to make her husband unhappy either. The internal conflict was keeping Janine up at night with worry and she was running the risk of making herself sick in the process.

Finally, Janine recognized that a lot of the conflict was self-imposed and guilt related. She found herself feeling guilty if she was not at her mother's side every week and there was not real foundation for her guilt. Her care for her mother was evident. At that realization, Janine decided to ask her sister to visit her mother every-other-week on Sunday while Janine spent time with Dan. Once she thought the situation through clearly, Janine realized that she could still take care of any necessary details for her mother's care over the phone throughout the week.

The first week or two, Janine's mother was difficult and did not like the change in schedule. Janine felt bad about her mother's upset, but continued to follow through with her original plan. Soon mom came to accept the new schedule and actually built a better relationship with her other daughter in the process.

Guilt during this difficult period can be overwhelming and is very common. When you are watching someone's demise, it is very easy to feel guilty that you are not helping more, cannot ease their discomfort as much as you would like, or, that you cannot make them well again. Accept the fact that you have nothing to feel guilty about. If you are doing all that you can, that is enough. Focus on your contributions and not your limitations. We can beat ourselves up with the feeling that we need to do more when, in reality, we simply cannot.

When a loved one is sick and many family members are trying to pitch-in and help, it can be very frustrating for the primary care-giver. Unless you are all working together throughout the entire span of time associated with the illness and have very defined roles with regard to your individual contributions, dissention can form amongst you all. This is particularly true if one family member does most of the work and other members come in from time-to-time, complete with opinions and suggestions. Remember, tempers and emotions are on the edge for all of you. Even though every member of the family only wants what is best for their ill loved one, they can appear judgmental to those who are dealing with the situation, first hand, day in and day out.

Complaints, frustrations, or lack of flexibility by the primary care-giver may all be needed cries for appreciation. Although this is a difficult time for everyone, it is possible that the primary care-giver is working much harder than those around them and they want everyone to understand what they may be going through. It is even possible that they decline assistance because they feel that, by accepting help, it may diminish the magnitude of all the work they have done so far.

My friend, Don, lived in New York and his mother lived with his sister in Texas. Don sent money regularly to help his sister with his mother's care, but his work schedule did not allow him to make the trip back and forth as often as he would have liked. When he did visit, Don's mother was so appreciative and constantly told him how wonderful it was that he was there. Don's sister became very resentful of all the attention bestowed on Don when she was there providing care, filling prescriptions and making doctor's appointments every day.

The tension between Don and his sister became so unpleasant that Don became reluctant to visit his mother. His sister, in an effort to make her vast contributions known, was constantly telling Don how tired, overworked, and overwhelmed she was with their mother's care. When Don offered to send additional money to provide additional assistance for his sister, she became even more malevolent. Finally, Don flew into Texas just to talk with his sister and resolve their conflict. Once open dialog began between them, it didn't take long for Don to realize that his sister was not overwhelmed in her tasks, she only wanted to be acknowledged for what she was doing for their mother and did not want her efforts to be taken for granted. Don also spoke with his mother and communicated his sister's continuous dedication to her directly so she would become more appreciative too.

Please be sensitive to those family members who unselfishly take on most of the care-giving responsibilities. Even if they appear difficult or unreasonable at times, remember, they are under a lot of stress every day. It is a lot easier to remain clear-headed and objective about problems associated with your ill loved one when you are not so physically close to it, making decisions and watching their steady decline daily.

Patience and understanding is needed now, not analysis or disapproval. Don't ask, "What can I do?" Find a job that you know will be of help and volunteer to do that task. The primary care-giver is thinking every day about the needs of their ill loved one, and sometimes need a break from 'thinking' too. They certainly don't need to think about what you can do to help. Be respectful and tell them what you would like to do. I think you will find that they will greatly appreciate your consideration of them.

Everyone needs a break once-in-awhile. If you are the primary care-giver, don't be afraid to ask for help when it is needed. Other family members may want an opportunity to make a contribution and you should not deny them that show of affection. When people are only available to help on occasion, they usually do not know where to begin to offer their services and may need some direction from you. Knowing that you have done a remarkable job so far, they may also be reluctant to make suggestions as to their own participation for fear of offending you in some way or giving the appearance that they are taking over while they are there. Take advantage of their availability, even if it is only to enable you to catch a movie for the afternoon.

There are many care options available in the form of nursing attendants, Hospice care or care facilities that can take some of the pressure off of you. Even services like 'Meals on Wheels' can provide a respite when they eliminate your need for daily meal planning. Take advantage of these services. They are there as much to help you as you are to help your loved one. Diversions that remove you either physically or mentally from the stark reality of your loved one's bedside can do wonders for your emotions and temperament. Take a weekend to go away, read a book, go shopping or just take a walk. Someone is always available to give you a break if you just look for them.

Living under the influence of a terminal illness will take its toll on you at times. There will be days, even weeks, that you will wish it would end and then find yourself horrified that you actually contemplate your loved one's death as a relief. Please don't be hard on yourself at this recognition. It is not only perfectly normal, it is healthy. It is part of the acceptance process and simply illustrates that you are ready for the finality of the illness.

It is neither hard to accept nor difficult to understand that terminal illness offers no quality of life for those who are incapacitated or without ability to communicate. This is not a standard of living that you would want to prolong for your loved one no matter how much you love them. It does not make you a bad or heartless person to want to see an end to their suffering. Unfortunately, when we contemplate their eventual peace, death is the only solution. That is simply a reality and not cause for guilt.

Be aware that you will always have the sentiment that you can do more... even when you probably can't. You need to define your role and potential time commitment from time to time as conditions dictate. If you have a spouse or other family members to consider, it is very important that you include them in your planning. Even though they will have empathy for the job at hand, they need to understand the additional time restriction and burden this job places on you.

When my very dear friend had a stroke, my family and I made trips, almost daily, back and forth to her house which was about 35 miles each way. When we could see that Rose's conditioning was declining, the family and I got together to discuss our options. Rose was like a grandmother to the family and her own family lived out of state. Because we truly loved this woman, and it would have been very difficult to relocate her from Florida to New York, we decided to have Rose come stay with us in our home where we could be with her every day without the additional demands of travel time. I was incredibly proud of my children for making this decision. Even though I was the parent, having someone move into your house and upset its daily routine affects everyone. It would have been unfair of me to ask them to make this sacrifice without first getting their opinions and thoughts on the matter. Not surprisingly to me, both my children, ages 11 and 16, were happy to have 'grandma' with us and were the only two people that could get Rose to actually smile right up until the day she passed.

It is important that you recognize that the role you assume in the care of your loved one be a role that works for other members of your family too. It is stressful enough to deal with a terminal illness without the added stress and demands of unhappy people who feel their needs are now being neglected. Communication in this instance is critical. You

need to make everyone around you aware of what you are preparing to do and how that may affect them. If they are uncomfortable or unhappy with your plans, be open to their objections and see if you can all reach a workable compromise. The less stress, confusion or misunderstandings you have in your environment while you are trying to make everyone happy, the better it will be for all concerned.

Keep Life Normal

Life is anything but normal right now, but, “normal” is the most comforting for you, your family and your ill loved one. The more you can maintain some semblance of your regular routine, the easier this time will be for one and all concerned. Everyone responds differently to tragedy. Life threatening crisis creates a tension that can pull a family apart. Flaws in relationships can be greatly magnified at this time if you are not careful of your disposition and outlook. It is important to create a strong, supportive life when everyone is at their healthiest so you will be better able to handle the declining times ahead.

Do not feel bad if you find yourself to be on edge and short tempered. Illness brings out the worst in us and can greatly affect our own health and disposition. When afflictions come upon us unexpectedly, we have the additional challenge of maintaining some semblance of order and peace in our daily schedule while trying to comprehend all that lies ahead. Even though you attempt to keep everything orderly and together, recognize that your temper is most likely shorter, your patience more strained and a general overwhelming feeling of responsibility can overtake you with great regularity. Being aware of these conditions and the emotional highs and lows you may experience will go a long way in helping you to cope with them. This situation you are in is NOT normal although you and your family need to act as though it is. You will all get through the time required of you if you face it with love, one day at a time. Inner peace replaces tension when you allow it to. It will also help you fight the isolation of the pain you undoubtedly feel by moving your focus away from your own emotions and needs and redirecting it to the needs and emotions of your loved one.

You are aware that your loved one needs you. Although their need may be gradual, all parties have a fear and perhaps slightly over-dramatized comprehension of what dependencies may lie ahead. The person you are today is the same person you need to maintain throughout the illness period. It is important that your personality and

attitude toward your loved one remain 'normal' to them and to yourself. Many people have a difficult time facing their loved one when they think about the inevitability of a terminal illness. Words never seem enough at times like this. 'What can we say?' 'How do we make them feel better?' 'Will I know what to do when they need me?' All of these questions and many more will come upon you regularly. If you are not careful, they will begin to invade your relationship with your family member.

Inadequacies, even imagined ones, can lead to unnecessary nervousness. You may be reluctant to maintain eye contact for fear your loved one will see the pain or grief in yours. You may also feel the need to make empty promises to help the situation. Please don't...it will only make it worse. Never ask, "How can I help?" or "What can I do?" if your questions are not sincere. If you will not be able to follow through, don't offer your assistance. You are not expected to be Herculean. But, it is not alright if you cannot be counted on. If you really want to help, you know your own capabilities best. Look around and make yourself aware of any gaps you might fill in your loved one's care. Remember, the definition of "care" is long and very diverse. Being available to "care" for emotional voids is just as important and as needed as the obvious medical, bed and meal duties.

Don't rationalize reasons to stay away just because you feel uncomfortable or hate the fact that you are being forced into facing something you do not want to face. Death is inevitable. It is a part of life. You have shared your life with someone that was and still is important to you. Now you are being asked to share their death too.

This is a time when everyone is facing life from a totally different perspective. Fear, helplessness, dependability and hope are four facets of existence you and your loved one will now be sensitive to every day. The terminally ill person has their own set of questions that can further complicate the questions you're grappling with. They are asking themselves, "Am I a burden?" "Will I ever feel good again?" "What kind of future do I have?" "What am I doing to my family?" "How will we all get along?" "Am I going to be too much to handle?" "Where will I ultimately live?"

Fear is the strongest enemy of illness. It is more than an emotion because it triggers all kinds of chain reactions that cause physical and psychological pain. The more everyone communicates their fears and resolves those issues to everyone's satisfaction, the easier it will be to maintain a feeling of normalcy in your life.

Be available to your loved one on their terms. Give more than cheerful words, give your presence whenever possible. The care-giver who is considered most helpful is one who quietly listens, comes when they are needed and doesn't keep looking at the time throughout their visit. Remember, you don't necessarily even need to speak during your visits. Just a smile that lets your family member know you love them is usually enough.

Do not be misled if barriers are constructed against you and it appears at times that you are not wanted at all. This is an ill person's way of testing your endurance to see if you will be capable of seeing them through their ordeal and still be around until the end. Pushing you away may or may not confirm their fear of being abandoned. If you don't allow them to ease you out of their life, you are helping them feel more secure in their own future. Remember, just about everything has changed in the life of a terminally ill person. Their world may feel as though it is crashing around them almost on a daily basis. Stability is essential for their peace of mind. When all else is changing, your friendship and your relationship with them should not falter nor should it transform in any way. Try to keep at least this one area of their life clear, stable and remain a happy reminder of the times they once had.

Brian was not good about death. He was very uncomfortable around sick people and avoided the responsibility whenever he could. When his mother was ill and hospitalized, Brian was there out of obligation, but was very uncomfortable. Brian's mother was aware of her son's feelings and tried to ease his discomfort by constantly telling him she was alright and he didn't need to stay with her. Several times she asked him to run silly errands so he would have an excuse to leave the hospital. Or, she told him how she preferred being alone to rest and asked that he would leave. After a few days of these activities, Brian realized what his mother was doing. Her health was rapidly declining and he found himself conflicted. He didn't want to watch her die... but he couldn't bring himself to leave her either.

To lighten up the environment and not be so focused on death, Brian decided to read his mom some uplifting poetry from one of her favorite books. This exercise eliminated the uncomfortable, “how are you feeling” type dialog that permeated most of their days and let them spend some happy, quality time together. As Brian read he thought it ironic how he was reading to his mom in bed, just like his mom used to read to him for many years while he was growing up. Books were something that both of them had shared over the years and both he and his mother found the commonality very comforting at a very difficult time.

Brian’s mom passed during one of the many hours of his reading to her and, although grief-stricken, Brian was so happy that he had decided not to leave his mother’s side. His ability to be there for her and her ability to let him stay close was a breakthrough for them both.

You're Not The Only One Who Hurts

It is easy for frustration to set in when you are required to face the additional responsibilities associated with care-giving and all that it encompasses while still maintaining your day-to-day activities. A short temper at this time may be natural, but it needs to be kept under control. There are many people around you that are grieving and feeling pressured at this time too. Although those people may not be showing the same dedication as you are, they are still feeling the same kind of pain.

People always say they regret losing someone who they never had the opportunity to see before they died. They mourn the fact that they stayed away or that they didn't make the time available for a visit before it was too late. Some family members discourage visitors because their loved one may have changed dramatically in appearance or they don't want their friends and family to remember them in their unwell or final state. But, I must urge you not to be of this opinion. Allow anyone who would like to participate in the final stages of your loved one's life to be allowed to do so. Everyone has closing business of some sort with those they love and it is important to let them say their personal 'goodbyes' too. In addition, it is just as important to the dying that they be reassured as to how much they were loved in this lifetime by the calls and visits of friends and family. Even if your loved one is in a coma or unable to communicate, do not assume that they are unaware of what is going on around them. Medical experts tell us that these patients are aware and benefit, no matter what their condition, from the tenderness of a touch and the reassurance of a loving voice. Even you.

Violet was a very proud woman who prided herself in her appearance right up until the day she died. But, a stroke had left her incapacitated. She lost a lot of weight and was bedridden for some time. Violet's son was protective of his mother and, remembering how important her appearance was to her, he asked that no one come to visit. Several friends and even family members were upset about not being able to say their 'goodbyes', but the son stood firm. Violet said little. She was excited when letters came, but didn't quite understand why local friends were not visiting. After Violet's passing, so many of

her friends said how they missed her and wished they had been granted to opportunity to say 'farewell' in person. The grieving was much harder for those who never had a chance to say 'goodbye'.

Please don't give a second thought to your loved one's appearance. With only one exception, all of the people I have lost had experienced a serious decline in their outer shell due to their illness and were only a mere shadow of their former self at their end. But, I can honestly say that my memories of them, even now, are never when they were at their physical lows. When I think of each and every one of the people I have lost, I think of a time when they were their most vital selves. In fact, I have my strongest vision of my mother when she was in her 40's even though she died at 78. Now, that does not mean that I have no recollection of the many wonderful times my mother and I shared for her latter thirty-plus years. We spoke almost daily, visited often and greatly enjoyed her status as grandma. She was always (and still is) one of my greatest sources of wisdom and strength. But, when I picture her in my mind's eye, she is always healthy, young and vital. So, please do not fear anyone seeing your loved one in their weakened state. I can personally assure you that their final appearance is not how they will be remembered by you or anyone who loved them.

People who are suffering need love even more than medical science, and pain medications. They simply want hearts full of hope and love to surround them. Loneliness increases fear which, in turn, increases pain. Most terminally ill people feel very alone when they are diagnosed. Many feel abandoned by God and anticipate abandonment by their family and friends. They recognize their forthcoming potential for dependency and are fearful that no one will be available or able to help them.

When terminal illnesses linger for long periods of time, it is not unusual for loved ones to get caught up in their daily obligations and have increasingly limited time for visits and attention. This can be particularly traumatic to an ill person when they receive so much attention after their illness is first diagnosed and then that attention dramatically declines as family members are unable to maintain that same concentration or visitation schedule for the duration of their illness. It is not necessarily the amount of time you

spend that is important, it is the consistency of time. Regular short visits that you make more often are much more rewarding and important to your loved one than fewer, longer visits. Regular visitation gives people who are incapacitated, something to look forward to and to live for. Phone calls are another way of communication that can provide comfort and support more frequently. Simply knowing they are not alone goes a long way to improve your loved one's day. Little things you may take for granted can be a lifeline for those you love. Never underestimate the power of touch. When you touch a heart, you save a life.

How It Feels To Be Sick

When the doctor confirms a terminal illness, life as it has been previously known, ends for everyone involved. Everything that has given a healthy individual a sense of purpose or a role in life is now taken away. In a split second, the terminally ill person has lost control of their world as they know it. They may be able to exist in their regular routine for a while, but the inevitability of their future is always in the forefront of their mind. Soon they will be living in accordance to other people's schedules, and not their own. They will watch friends and family see them differently even when, in actuality, they most likely do not. If care-givers are not careful during this tumultuous time, they may lovingly but unwittingly, strip their loved one of their dignity, independence and a reason to live. When facing death, all of the people associated with the terminal illness goes through various stages. Anger, denial, praying, depression and finally, acceptance which places everyone on an emotional roller-coaster.

I want to tell you some of the feelings, conditions and functional difficulties terminally ill people are subjected to as they deal with their situation. I have not added this section to upset you, but rather to help you better understand what your loved one may be experiencing. Knowledge is key to maximizing your effectiveness with them. Your ability to influence their frame of mind and distract them from focusing on their illness will go a long way toward enhancing their quality of life.

When a person is diagnosed as terminally ill, they go into mourning over many things. First, they know their life on earth is limited. But, as overwhelming as that single factor is, the magnitude of all their other collective losses can almost be a far greater source of sorrow. They know they will eventually lose their job, their freedom, their physical appearance and capacities. They anticipate there will be a decline in "good times", they'll lose their spontaneity, their dreams, independence and the concept of a future. We take good health and the freedom that affords us for granted until we lose it. To them it can feel like the greatest loss of all.

Understand that, as a person's body declines, medications can fog their consciousness and distort any real sense of reality. Memory may be affected, both short and long-term. Pain is always a haunting factor – whether physical or emotional. There is a prevailing fear of never being able to function normally and many wait painfully for the next body function to be affected. Some speak of feeling like a time-bomb that may explode any minute. They don't want to be viewed as complainers nor do they want to be a burden to friends and family. However, most maintain a serious need and desire to maximize all available time with the people they love dearly. Consider being continually challenged with two opposing emotional influences: the fear of loneliness and the desire to be left alone. It can appear to them that decisions are being made behind their back and everyone knows the real 'truth' about their condition but themselves. As the body declines, self-esteem and personal dignity are further challenged. Hospitals become a cold and sterile environment where the mere smells associated with them become an affront to the senses causing many to relive every unpleasant memory associated with being inside them.

If your loved one appears difficult, disagreeable, stubborn or irritable, consider that it is their way of maintaining some amount control in their life, even if it is an unreasonable attempt. It is not that they do not appreciate what you are doing, they may actually resent the fact that anything needs to be done at all. Their disagreeable nature probably has very little to do with you. They resent being ill and are merely taking that resentment out on anyone whose actions affirm their illness. They may even be unaware that they are being disagreeable. If you are doing things or making decisions for your loved one that they have historically made or done for themselves, it is not unusual for them to act as though your intervention is both unnecessary and unwelcome. When you understand the subconscious conflict they are experiencing, it will be much easier for you to be patient with them.

Maintaining some sense of normal activity or daily schedule is critical to an ill person's peace of mind. If they were accustomed to taking a daily walk before they were diagnosed, and they are capable of walking, even minimally now, maintain their previous routine. Optimistic ill people will be constantly looking for any good thing that may lie

ahead for them and they will find creative ways to make each day better and more meaningful in the process. You can help them maintain this vision by sharing in their optimism and not treating them as though they are 'sick'. Help them overcome the fatigue factor that will eventually slip in with happy diversions. It is more challenging for your loved one to keep smiling when their health continues to diminish but, it can be accomplished with the right mindset and fortitude coupled with lots of love and positive support from those around them.

When my father was ill, I needed to keep him from learning the seriousness of his health decline. He was the type of person that would simply die if he didn't think he was getting better. The less he knew about his condition, the better it was for his wellbeing and energy level. The doctor was aware of my dad's mindset and worked with me to isolate dad from any and all bad diagnosis. I was always provided with the truth, but dad was given regular glowing reports of stabilization to his blood cancer. Dad had advanced leukemia, but thought the ever-increasing blood transfusions were actually improving his prognosis. This illusion enabled him to lead a relatively normal life. In fact, the doctors felt that dad lived almost three years longer than he should have because he had such a positive frame of mind.

I'm not suggesting that limited medical information is the solution for all people. My mother was the exact opposite of my dad. The more she knew, the stronger she fought to get well. But, everyone is different. It is important you know the frame of mind of the person you are caring for so you can better understand the conflicts and emotional highs and lows they will experience. Being sick is difficult when you know you are going to get well. It is much harder when you are fighting a battle you know you cannot win.

Let Your Heart Learn

It may take a long time before you understand why you have been put through the challenge of dealing with and accepting a terminal illness. There are so many lessons during this time that may actually be directed at you and have nothing to do with the person you are caring for. Your loved one is merely an opportunity to increase some aspect of your soul's education. You need to open your heart to them and not be defensive. Perhaps this is an opportunity for you to learn:

- gratitude
- patience
- compassion
- unselfishness
- personal strengths
- to 'feel' your heart

I have found that so many people bottle up their emotions so that they don't give themselves a chance to "feel" what is going on inside themselves. They work, almost robotically, and try to keep their emotions uninvolved in the process. In preparation for the inevitable, they guard their heart and try not to let themselves 'feel' anything. If this sounds like you, avoiding your feelings will not make things any easier. In fact, I believe it ultimately makes everything much harder. It is your heart that guides your actions. It is your heart that allows you the compassion and understanding that your loved one needs right now. If you have guarded your heart and do not allow all these emotions to touch it, you cannot possibly be giving the kind of loving care that you intend to give.

It is a wonderful feeling to do things for others and know you are making a difference in their life at that moment. It is in the giving, not the receiving, that we are most fulfilled. Allow yourself this gift. How much emotional energy are you putting into protecting yourself rather than allowing yourself to experience the moment and learn from that experience? Sometimes, just having the courage to enter deeply into another human's suffering while being present to your own fears and pain will show you how truly remarkable a human being you are.

Leave Nothing Unsaid

Terminally ill people, regardless of their physical and mental state, are still aware of their loved ones around them. When you speak to them, your words are communicated deep into their soul. Telling them how much they are loved and that they have been appreciated throughout their lifetime is as much for their recognition as it is for yours. Sometimes situations such as these are the perfect opportunity to help us truly appreciate others.

When you spend time with your loved one, talk to them. Tell them what you have been doing and give them an opportunity to tell you things that are important to them too. You need not avoid discussions about the future, it will feel awkward. Instead, speak in the same manner as you would if they were not ill. Share. Make them a part of your life now so you will feel their presence later. Take the time to answer any unanswered questions you may be harboring or ask them things that you have always wanted to know. If communication is difficult and your loved one is unable to speak, hold their hand. Read to them. Play music. Touch is very healing. Tell them what you are thinking and about the things you would like them to know. It is not always easy to speak to someone who cannot respond or acknowledge what you are saying, but, with a little practice, you will get accustomed to it. Remember, some of the time you spend with your loved one is entirely for them and not for yourself. It will not always be easy, but, this is a time when they need you and you need to be there for them whenever you can.

It may be difficult to schedule all of the visits you would like to make during this demanding time. But, it is important that you make the effort whenever possible. After they are gone, you will want to be able to say that you did all that you could and not wish it were more. Remember, it is the frequency of your visits that is important, not the duration of time you spend at each one.

When someone is leaving young children behind, sometimes they can find more peace by creating messages, sharing philosophies, writing letters, taking pictures or even making videos that provide tools that enable those children an opportunity to know them better after they are gone. This is especially true for children who are too young to remember loved ones at the time of their loss. We all have a lifetime of wisdom that we intend to impart on our children and when that lifetime is cut short, the need to teach and express all the important things that have been learned to date does not diminish in urgency.

Sheila had cancer and knew she only had about a year to live. With two young children at home, she vowed to make the next year last a lifetime. Sheila created volumes of video tapes and letters so her children would personally know her as they grew up. Each child would receive a letter on every birthday until they reached eighteen that would impart their mother's words of wisdom to them from her heart to theirs. She video taped the reading of books and told fun stories. Each tape was for another year's development. The project of making these videos kept Sheila focused on the growth of her children rather than the growth of her disease. As her strength diminished, her writing became more intense until volumes of books were filled with her wisdoms, hopes and dreams for her children's futures. In many ways, her project allowed Sheila to share those futures before her own death.

It is hard enough for terminally ill people to leave the ones they love behind. It is much harder when they know that those same loved ones will need guidance, support and direction that they will not be available to provide. But, with a little planning, a lot of personal insights and messages can be provided through words and pictures. This activity is not only very fulfilling, it will give them a sense of "purpose" and will keep their mind occupied and directed toward a very positive and needed objective. It provides a means in which they can keep their legacy in tact with their children.

I have known of people who have imparted libraries of information on their families by creating audio and video tapes that pertained to specific years of their future growth. This practice has the ability to keep the memory and reality of a lost loved one alive for decades.

There is no age restriction for obtaining loving knowledge or insights about a loved one after they are gone. As close as I was to my mother, there was so much about her that I never realized until I read her journal after she passed. Finding that book was such a special gift to me since I had no idea she had been writing her inner-most thoughts and ideas about life and its complexities throughout my father's illness as well as her own. As strong a face as mom put forward for the family, this tough woman was actually more soft, vulnerable and even a little more insecure than I had ever imagined. Knowing that about her enabled me to learn things about myself that I tried to deny and keep hidden by pushing them down deep inside for many years. I was very grateful that I was able to understand her better so that I may understand myself better and not make some of the same mistakes that she had lamented. It is amazing that the essence of who we are can actually transcend time if we plan and share a little bit. It will let those left behind know us in our own words and thoughts and not simply through the memories or misinterpretations of others.

You can imagine the urgency many terminally ill people must feel to communicate and complete all of their final and unfinished business before they go. As they get closer to the end, they may become restless, agitated or relentless about resolving unresolved issues. This is further aggravated when their ability to communicate is minimized causing even more frustration. It is important to be sensitive to this possibility and try to help your loved one to complete and resolve all of their personal 'business' so they may obtain peace. For some, the urgency to make amends, reconcile with someone or express themselves completely can be so great as to prolong their dying process.

The need to leave nothing left unsaid between you and those you love is just as important for the living as it is for the dying. We all have things to say, apologies to make, gratitudes to express and unfinished business to attend to. I think everyone can tell stories of friends who have had family members that were fighting with someone for a long period of time and regretted that they never had an opportunity to resolve their conflict before the loved one passed away. These kinds of feuds are usually over something trivial only to become a monumental source of sorrow later. If someone did something to hurt you, you don't need to condone their behavior, you only need to

forgive it. What is done, is done. The goal, in this instance, is not to change the outcome of the situation, but to put it behind you and move on. It is important to make peace for your own sake. Express yourself and be sure you have said all that you need to say before it's too late. Understanding the need for your loved one's resolutions and feeling of closure at this time can help us better understand ourselves, our needs and minimize everyone's possibility of distress.

Cry

This is an emotional time for everyone. Holding your feelings in will do nothing but ultimately make you hurt more. Giving of yourself is a very special offering and you need to feel all of the feelings that go with that gift. Tears are a part of emotion that can allow you to feel your sadness and then release the grief that you are experiencing. Expressing then letting go of grief will also make it much easier to bear. If you are uncomfortable shedding tears in front of friends or family, do it privately. But, do not hold your emotions inside.

Tears are your body's cleanser. Any amount of tears are cleansing. You do not need to open floodgates of them in order to release tensions and emotions that need to be released and it does not make you weak or less of a person because you are saddened enough to bring you to tears. Men are oftentimes reluctant to cry because they feel a need to "be strong for the family" even though they may be losing a very important person in their own life. Showing that you are hurting is a great lesson for those around you. It gives them the message that you have feelings and value life to the extent that it touches you deeply.

Tears express and relieve so many emotions. Recognize that some of the tears you are shedding are tears of joy in memory of the great times you and your loved one's have shared together. Some are tears of frustration because you are unable to help your loved one as you would like to in their time of need. Some are tears of fear as you contemplate what it will be like for you in the future without the support you have come to love and expect. And, some are tears of sadness over the fact that your time together on this earth is now limited and you will eventually lose a person you hold very dear.

Every expression of emotion needs to be felt in order to move through the grieving process and begin to heal yourself. Tears are God's way of cleansing you from the inside out.

Let Them Go

It is important for your loved one to feel at peace when it's time for them to leave this earth. They should not be made to feel that they still have work to do or that you cannot get along without them here. Telling them how much they are loved and how well you are expecting to be able to move forward due to all the years of wisdom and guidance they have imparted upon you, will provide both of you with a supreme feeling of peace. Assuring them that you will be all right and communicating some of the plans you anticipate for the future will give them a much needed peace of mind. This simple reassurance is not "telling them to die". Instead, it is a way for you to show them the gratitude you feel for the life you have shared without asking them to continue to endure and prolong their illness for your sake.

I have known many people that have a very difficult time letting go. It is the one that remains living that has the hardest time. For them, the fact that life without their loved one will never be the same, is more painful and harder to face than accepting the unknown place where their family member is going. Loosing someone we love marks so many finalities in our life. It is also a time when we recognize that our own mortality is a reality too. But, it is not fair to make someone stay in an unpleasant existence just because you cannot tell them that you will be alright after they leave you.

Look for signs. When the end is near, your loved one will sense it and may be preparing you in their own way. Off the cuff comments may be made about their eminent demise or special momentos and gifts given for no apparent reason. They often use the metaphor of travel to indicate it's time for them to "take a trip", indicating their desire to move forward into their next realm. Their stories or plans may seem disjointed and nonsensical, but it is still a means in which they can get their message to you. They may want to sell possessions or distribute personal belongings amongst loved ones. They may even speak frequently of being tired of life and fighting what eventually seems like a never-ending battle for them. Please don't ignore these signs or make light of them when they are heard. It is a message for you that you should not overlook. Do not force them

to eat or drink when they don't want to. That is another sign of their resistance to prolong their existence. Your loved one is trying to tell you it is time for them to go. Let them. Hospice nurses often say that, in their experience with terminally ill patients, dying people are in need of permission from their loved ones to die. Don't encourage them to 'fight' for your sake. When you withhold your permission, you are prolonging their struggle.

Dealing with terminal illness from a distance can be most difficult of all. If you do not live nearby or are only able to see your loved one on occasion, it is not right to make them wait endlessly for your next visit. You know that you would most likely not want to live under the conditions your loved one is living, so please don't encourage them to do so just because you are unable to say 'goodbye'. In this instance, letting them know you'll be 'OK' without them is the most loving and unselfish thing you can do. Communicate to them how much they have been appreciated and how much you love them. Tell them of any future plans you may have that would not be a potential source of worry for them. Remember, this is a time to create comfort, not concern.

Jack's mother lived in Florida and he lived in Chicago. Jack would come to visit his mother regularly and remind her of his next visit every time he left to go back home. Jack's visits became the reason his mother stayed alive. She had declined badly and the doctors could not understand why she had not passed already. Jack was aware of how bad her condition was, but he could not bring himself to tell her to go. When the doctor told Jack his mother only had a few days left, he came straight to her bedside. Although she could no longer speak, her brightened eyes and crinkled smile let everyone around her know how much she enjoyed her son's company. Jack needed to return to Chicago and his mom was still fighting for life. After a week into Jack's visit, the Hospice nurse was very concerned about Jack's mother's condition and told Jack he needed to say 'goodbye' one last time. The nurse suggested Jack tell his mother how much he loved her and how she need not worry about him. It was time for her to join his dad who had died ten years earlier. Jack was reluctant, but did as the nurse suggested. His mother smiled as Jack told her he love her... and, for the first time in weeks, squeezed Jack's hand. Within an hour she was gone.

Many experts feel that terminally ill people will select “the right time” to pass when all of their loose ends are tied up. They may decide to wait for an expected family member to arrive before they go, wait for some visitors to leave, remain through the birth of a new baby or select a time when they feel certain that those they love most will be able to carry on without them. They are much more aware of their condition than we may think and, to some extent, they even control it.

Dealing With Grief

During the writing of the book I have asked many friends and family members what was the one thing they felt they wanted most to know when they were dealing with the decline of their loved one. Not surprisingly, the answer was almost always the same... “How am I going to get along without them?”

Unfortunately, I do not have the answer to that question for you here other than to assure you that you will. You may retain an ache in your heart for many years to come and will certainly experience a void that your beloved person once filled. But, you will survive and eventually thrive.

Everyone has a very different method of coping and I can only pass on some of the things I recommend that ultimately helped me. Your personality and the triggers that can either make you happy or sad will determine a lot about what it will take for you to move on. In some instances, you may need to make decisions for surviving family members that may find it difficult or even impossible to continue to live in a home filled with the reminders of the one they have lost. Some may have trouble clearing out closets and drawers filled with loved one's belongings. Whatever challenges you may have, it is usually recommended to make dramatic changes gradually and not while under the emotional influence of grief. This may not be a time when you are thinking as clearly as you should when it comes to lifestyle-changing decisions.

When my mom passed away, my father wanted to immediately leave California where he and my mother had lived for over 40 years so he could join my family and his grandchildren in Florida. I moved him, as he wished, but did not put his California home on the market for about six months, waiting until I was certain he was happy with the decision he made. My father-in-law, on the other hand, insisted on staying in the house he had shared with Ann because he was more comfortable with her possessions all around him.

There is no right and wrong answer to what you need to encourage or perhaps even demand of the surviving family member. Your requests will depend upon their ability to live in the “now” rather than the “past”. Sometimes, allowing survivors to stay amidst all of their loved one’s belongings only serves to make everyone sadder and more depressed. Although you never want to lose the memories of those you have loved and lost, you cannot stop your life in order to dwell on them either. It is not healthy for you or any family member who needs to move forward themselves. Even though a loved one is gone, there are still needs to meet for the others who may have depended on them

When my mother was very ill, I turned to a friend that was very similar in personality as mom. She was an older women who shared a lot of my mother’s wisdom and common sense. Recognizing that my mother’s eminent demise would leave an incredible void, I turned to Petra throughout my mother’s illness to guide me and provide the maternal strength I so longed for. This made things much easier once my mom passed because I was not looking for someone like my mother to console me, she was already there for me and prepared for the task.

Some people handle grief better if they spend their spare time assisting other people in need. Being a care-giver through a long terminal illness can leave a serious void in your life when your work is done. Many feel guilty over the relief they experience. Some want to continue to do care-giving work in nursing homes, shelters or children’s facilities. It gives them a sense of purpose and accomplishment. You should never feel guilty when your loved one dies and you feel an overwhelming reprieve from your duties. Being terminally ill rarely offers much quality of life for the dying and is a very demanding condition for those living around them. When that pressure is over, you need not feel guilty. Rather, you should be glad that your loved one is now at peace and your job for them is completed.

Depression is very common during the grieving period. It can also be an unhealthy escape if you allow it to be. Long periods of solitude can be healing but, they can also be very damaging. Your living family members will need you to. This will not be an easy time for anyone. If a feeling of depression overwhelms you and continues to render you

almost incapacitated for more than a reasonable period of time, you will need to seek help. Keep reminding yourself that you did not die and you were not abandoned. You will now need to live and overcome the self-pity that envelopes you.

When you lose someone, you are grieving as much for yourself as you are for them. Recognize that and understand it. It is human nature to be sad because you are left behind. When the person who is passing is one on which you are very dependant, such as a parent, spouse or child, you may feel you are incapable of moving forward, either emotionally or for other reasons, after they are gone. You need to analyze what it is in YOU that is making you feel this way. Even though we live in a world full of people that enrich our lives, we are still single individuals that need to be complete within ourselves. Every trait that we need in order to be a whole being is within us. Although we miss those that we lose, we are still here, complete with responsibilities and the capabilities to accomplish them. Perhaps a part of your heart dies with your loved one, but you and your soul are in tact and now need to meet the new challenge of becoming the person God meant for you to be. Dwelling on things you wish you had done... or given... or said... only serves to make you feel worse and are not designed to make you heal.

Do you want to heal? Because, if you do, you can. You know the thoughts and activities it takes to make yourself feel good and the ones that prolong your pain. Many begin their grieving process with the anticipation of their loss and become almost worthless to themselves as well as to those who need them. Even though God has a plan for us, we are given free will and the ability to make choices in our lives. He provides the map, we select the path. We can choose to be happy and act accordingly or we can choose to feel victimized and dwell on all of the reasons that should make the future look bleak. I know I am sounding harsh here but I think it is important that you recognize how much you control your emotional state and how much that state affects your physical body.

Depression is a state of mind. Anger is a state of mind. Just like peace and happiness are states of mind too. You are alive right now and there are many people, including your loved one, that would gladly take your place. Don't negate your gift of life by refusing to heal and live. Live your life fully, as you were born to do, and be grateful that you have

had the opportunity to be blessed with the contribution and education your loved one has given you to help you properly navigate your future.

Hospice provides a guide to grieving families that help them better understand the physical and emotional symptoms of “normal grief”. They also list symptoms of grief that can be dangerous and may need professional assistance. Be aware of the differences both for yourself and other family members. You may be needed to help others through the living process after a loved one has passed.

Physical symptoms associated with normal grief:

1. Heavy and repeated sighing
2. An empty feeling in the stomach
3. Loss of appetite
4. Lack of muscle power
5. Extreme tension and irritability
6. Fatigue & insomnia
7. Tearfulness

Emotional symptoms associated with normal grief:

1. A feeling of restlessness, inability to concentrate, indecision about what to do
2. Sensing the loved one’s presence; for example, expecting the person to appear, hearing his or her voice, seeing his or her face
3. Frequent dreaming of the loved one
4. Experiencing an intense preoccupation with the life of the deceased; telling, retelling, and remembering things about the loved one.
5. Feeling guilty or angry over things that happened in your relationship.
6. Feeling angry with the loved one for dying.
7. Experiencing mood changes over small things; crying at unexpected times.
8. Feeling that the future has no purpose for you.

When grief needs professional help:

1. Frequent thoughts of suicide.

2. Continued withdrawal, intense feeling of isolation, or prolonged periods of depression.
3. Seeking relief through alcohol or drug abuse.
4. Inability to function or feeling out of control for a prolonged period of time.

Don't overlook these symptoms or take them lightly. Death can be devastating and even life-threatening for those left behind who did not emotionally prepare for the loss.

They Are Not Alone and You Won't Be Either

I have been told, many times, that the final stages of a terminal illness is when our family member is between two worlds. They are being drawn into their next existence by those who have left them behind already and are still on this plane to complete any unfinished business they feel they have here. I was constantly amazed at how many times my father referred to my mother as 'hovering around his bed' the last few weeks before he died. He would be having a perfectly normal conversation with me and abruptly turn to look off to the side. Then, with no further explanation, he would begin speaking with me again. Soon his speech would be interrupted once more. When I asked him what was wrong and what he was looking at, he'd respond, "Your mother keeps walking around the head of my bed. She just won't sit down!" My mother had passed away several years before.

You may feel reluctant or uncomfortable participating in conversations your loved one may generate as they slip closer to the end. Much of what they say may sound like they are confused, hallucinating or demented. Please don't discourage these conversations. For them, it is comforting and even reassuring to talk about what they "see". It makes them, and you, know that they do not anticipate entering into their new life alone. These experiences are part of their education. They are learning how to pass on peacefully.

You should not question or be confrontational about what you hear. Try to understand what is being communicated. Be honest about any confusion you may have and ask questions that may clarify what your loved one is trying to say. But, in all instances, stay positive and supportive. Even when comments are made that make no sense to you or are complete fantasy, accept them and respond as though there was nothing unusual about their statement at all. There is no need for your loved one to feel more frustrated than they already may. They obviously need to talk, so let them. It is amazing what you may learn if you listen carefully.

I found it unbelievably comforting knowing that my mother was waiting for my dad. Although he lived a pretty full life after her passing, I know he missed her terribly. We

are never sure about what awaits us on the other side. Knowing that we won't be there alone but rather be reunited with friends and family makes it all the more reassuring.

I have asked other terminally ill people that I have cared for if they have had spiritual visits from friends and family members and they always tell me that they have. My friend Petra was regularly visited during her final weeks by her 6 year old son, Jaime, who had died almost thirty years before her death and my 91 year old friend, Rose, acknowledged that her deceased husband, David, was with her from time to time in her final days.

It is not surprising to imagine that the bond we create with the many special and important people that touch our lives transcends our physical existence. After all, we are, first and foremost, a spiritual soul that has been given the use of a physical body while we are living out our time here on earth. Our spirit is eternal. It will live on forever.

Although this time is difficult and painful, you will make it through feeling stronger, smarter and amazingly capable. What you are doing for your ill loved one, no matter at what level, is a personal contribution of love in it's purist form. Recognize it...embrace it...celebrate it. You will feel their presence long after they are gone and know that the heaven's are looking down upon you with gratitude and in peace.

Eternity

There's a song that is sung
Between heaven on earth
In a magical place
Without illness or curse.

With God's guidance
You'll find it
You'll need no map, my dear
And when you arrive
All your friends will be there.

You'll be welcomed and loved
Like no place known before
And become one of God's angels
As you step through the door.

So don't fear the transition
As your soul starts to grow
Filling hearts, touching family
Still on earth, far below.