

When A Loved One Is Dying

Death, Loss & Life

How Prayer Helps

Understanding That Helps Guide
Our Actions
In Times of Loss

When A Loved One Is Dying

As a professional chaplain, I am often asked to pray. Over the years, I've noticed a few things about prayer that help, and one or two things about prayer that do not. This section offers a simple framework for prayer. Chaplains are just as prone to feeling strong emotions as are family members. Sometimes, we feel nearly as overwhelmed as the family and friends at bedside. Not having to search for the way I'm going to pray helps me focus then on what I'm going to pray. The framework I offer is simply a suggestion. I hope it is helpful to you.

Place and Persons Involved:

I begin my prayer with a simple statement, *“Gracious God, we are here in a hospital room with (name of patient) and (name or one or two key players). We are aware that others are standing close by, and that many more who are not here are keeping (name of patient) in their thoughts and prayers.*

I focus on the key players while remaining mindful of everyone else in the room. Key players are usually right at the bedside for a reason, and this is because the dying loved one and everyone else in the room is counting upon their resources, their strength, their calm, their relationship to the one who is dying, and so forth.

In just a few words, I acknowledge the dying patient and the key players, and then include everyone else as a group. In this way, I have included everyone without having to remember a list of names. It is easy to forget an uncle's or cousin's name. They may have traveled quite some distance, and they have had a close relationship with the dying loved one, but not to the person

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offering prayer. When our emotions are running high, every small delight and disappointment is augmented.

When people gather in a room and a prayer is offered, deep emotions can come rushing to the surface. Prayer often expresses in the open air what people are feeling down in the core of their being. It is very common when I pray to see family members cry, and they often express their relief afterward.

I also begin with a very brief mention of where we are, the actual place itself, at home or in a hospice room or a hospital room. We are not in a church or a synagogue, mosque or temple, places usually thought of as “holy.” Instead, I am making the space where we are as the place where we invite the presence of the Holy to come. I usually invoke, “God” because this is the most common term for the Holy, but if I know the specific religious tradition uses another term, or no term at all, I will simply say, “In this holy place, a hospital room, we are here with... “

Reason for the prayer:

I then state simply why we are praying: *“We are here because (name of patient) is dying. We love (name of patient) so much and naturally our hearts are filled with many emotions. We do feel so very sad, and also so very grateful to be sharing these last hours together with (name of patient). We simply ask for your presence to give all of us in this room strength and courage, serenity and calm as we hear and say to one another what is deep within our hearts.*

I don't state or ask for anything further. Prayer does help, but when someone is dying, their reserves are limited, as are the emotional capacities of those at

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bedside. A prayer that states things clearly and briefly seems to help more than a lengthy prayer that tries to cover a multitude of thoughts and feelings. I say the above phrases slowly, so the prayer does take a bit of time. I speak in a measured tone, not too heavy, but not light and I let my voice modulate naturally. One thing I want to mention for those who are praying in a hospital room. I move close to the bedside so that I do not have to shout. As I move toward the bedside, others in the room come closer as well. However, let me say that when you pray in a hospital room, if there is medical equipment there, do not underestimate the collective noise of those machines. They click and whir. I pray loud enough to be heard, but again, I never raise my voice close enough to be a shout.

There is at least one cultural exception to this advice. In some Christian denominations, joyous and loud prayer, even at the time of a loved one dying, is appreciated. While I grew up in a rather subdued Christian environment, I do raise my voice and allow my emotions a bit of transparency when I know this is the hope and expectation of those who have asked me to pray. Even so, I still keep the prayer short and to the point, as described above.

Closing the prayer:

In a few sentences, I've mentioned the dying loved one, and included those at bedside as well as those who are not. I've also invoked and invited the presence of the Holy into the place where our loved one is dying. Further, I've mentioned what we are feeling, and what we hope to accomplish in the time allowed to us. Finally, I close the prayer with hope.

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Death feels so final because it is. There is no denying the powerful moment when a person stops breathing. Everything that we experienced of that person stops with that breath. Even the most devout person can be shaken by this moment. In the presence of a dying person, we are inching closer and closer to that moment. It is common for feelings to become heavy.

Prayer can give these feelings a gentle lift. I usually close with, *“We have opened our hearts in this moment and we feel your love surrounding (name of patient) and everyone here. We take the next steps in this journey knowing that we will not be alone. We thank you for that. And we thank you for allowing us to be safely here together. We pray for others who might yet be traveling. May Your peace and love continue to be with all of us in the hours and days to come. Amen.”*

In this way, the closing of the prayer does two things. It reminds everyone of their faith, or at least of their hope, that these final moments with their loved one can be filled with love. It also anticipates the death of the loved one and then the funeral or memorial services to come which may mean that other relatives and friends will be coming to provide further support for the family.

In this way, the room opens up, and the result is that everyone in the room breathes a little more easily and they are able to interact with their loved one and each other more openly. My purpose isn't to place the focus of those at bedside into the future, but rather to gently remind them that they are not alone in their grief, and that indeed “life goes on” in both practical and mysterious ways.