Pre-Death Vigil – ‘Loving Care Suggestions

from Deanna Cochran

The following is taken from the course, Accompanying the Dying: A Practical Guide and Awareness Training. These are some loving care suggestions:

1. Create a sacred space around the dying person. That includes what is spoken in front of the dying and decluttering and de-medicalizing the space around the bed and room.
2. When you go to the bedside, identify yourself. Let the person know what you are going to do before you do it, or just let him or her know that you are there.
3. Keep the person fresh with daily bed baths with his or her favorite soap or fragrant oils or with spot washings of the face, head, underarms, and private area. Make sure his/her fingernails and toenails are cleaned and filed.
4. Dress the person in his/her favorite bedclothes of comfortable clothing. If the family agrees, you can cut the clothing up the back with scissors to facilitate easy changing.
5. If the person’s skin is cool and clammy, use warm rags with a favored fragrance to cleanse throughout the day. If he or she is warm for a fever, use a bool rag.
6. Make sure the family knows good mouth care. Use a Toothette (stick with a sponge tip), moisten with a water and baking soda solution (1 tsp salt, 1 tsp baking soda to 1 qt water) and cleanse mouth by wiping the gum line, inner cheeks and gums. Apply some artificial saliva if the person’s mouth is dry, and lip balm to keep the lips moist. Use very gentle products to freshen his or her mouth. Maintain this throughout the day.
7. Make sure the family know good eye care. At least once a day, use a warm rag to moisten the eye area and to thoroughly clean the skin around the eyes. Apply lubricating eye cream and artificial tears if the person’s eyes appear dry. Maintain this throughout the day.
8. Most people love their head to be rubbed, their hair to be brushed, and their scalp to be massaged. Gently rub across the person’s eyebrows and forehead. If the dying person likes this, do it regularly.
9. Keep encouraging family members to touch their dying loved one, but if it causes discomfort, keep them from doing so. (Some people don’t believe in touching a dying person because they feel that it keeps the person on earth instead of letting him or her go).
10. Use aromatic creams, oils and lotions for generous foot/leg and hand/arm massages.
11. Take dirty briefs/pads to the outside trash immediately. Launder dirty sheets immediately so that smells do not become trapped in the room and/or the house.
12. Changing a person’s position frequently will protect skin from breakdown. However, as a person nears imminent death, many people decide not to change positions so frequently. But there is another good reason to keep changing position regularly – to help with the noisy congestion that can accumulate in the back of the throat. Changing positions will help with drainage. Put the head of the bed up and change the position side to side. Also, sometimes it helps if you are able to lower the head of the bed and raise the person’s legs (if the person can tolerate it); that way, sometimes the drainage will go into his/her mouth, and you can get it out with a Toothette and the reposition the person into his/her favorite position.
13. Have a cool-mist humidifier to increase the humidity in the room. It will help with the dryness of the person’s skin, mouth, eyes and nose.
14. Don’t ask questions of the dying. (He/she can’t respond and can get agitated trying to answer). Instead, tell stories. Encourage family members to tell the person how their day was, relate memories, and so on.
15. Check the person’s skin. Make sure that the oxygen tubing isn’t irritating the skin: check the nose, cheeks, ears, and jawline; you can pad the tubing to prevent skin irritation. Also make sure his/her ears are lying flat against the pillow. Make sure that the person’s skin is not bunched up or stretched on the side he or she is lying on, as well as on the rest of their body.
16. Have soft lighting in the room with the dying person. Use candles if you can. If you are in the hospital or somewhere where candles aren’t allowed or wanted, use the artificial ones.
17. What are his or her favorite sounds? Music? Have these familiar sounds present. Harp music has been shown to be therapeutic with the dying. See if there is an organization in your city that will come play music as a part of palliative care (called Music Thanatology).
18. Put some of the person’s favorite things (pictures, memorabilia, etc.) in view so they can be seen if the person should open his/her eyes.
19. Most people’s feet are cold, so put warm socks on them. Cover the person with a favorite blanket.
20. Get a book of visualizations and/or meditations and read to the person. Or create them yourself for the dying person. Consider having some beautiful music playing in the background while you do.
21. Sit at the bedside with the dying, and if its soothing to the person, hold his/her hand with thoughtful intention of a peaceful passing, prayers for his/her soul, and reassurance. Explain to family members that they can sit quietly and think loving thoughts toward their loved one. Encourage them to do it.
22. What are his or her favorite smells? Have a potpourri burner or essential oil diffuser in the room to maintain beautiful aromas.