

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Coping with a Terminal Diagnosis

Your reaction to being faced with a terminal illness will be complicated. Your decisions about how you live out your life or support your loved one will depend on how well you are equipped to understand the process of a life-threatening illness, and on the support available to you from family and friends.

The experience of being diagnosed with a life-threatening illness may be described as having five phases:

1. **Before Diagnosis.** This is the period just before the diagnosis when a person realizes that they have developed an illness. This phase is not usually a single moment, but includes a period of physical examinations and tests. This period ends when the person is told of the diagnosis.
2. **The Acute Phase.** This phase occurs at the time of the diagnosis. A person is then forced to understand the diagnosis and make decisions about his or her medical care.
3. **The Chronic Phase.** This is the period of time between the diagnosis and the results of treatment. It is the time when a person tries to cope with the demands of life while also undergoing treatment and coping with any side effects. With cancer patients, for instance, it used to be that the period between a cancer diagnosis and death usually lasted only a few months. This time was usually spent in the hospital. Today, people can live for years after being diagnosed with cancer.
4. **The Recovery Phase.** In this phase people cope with the mental, social, physical, religious, and financial effects of their life-threatening illness.
5. **The Final or Terminal Phase.** This is the period when the disease has progressed and death is likely. The focus changes from curing the illness or prolonging life, to providing comfort and relief from pain. Religious or spiritual concerns are often the focus during this time.

Completing a Life

During the "chronic" or "terminal" phases of a life-threatening illness, the focus should be on preparing for death. An important element in this preparation is a process that helps the dying person "complete" their life.

Completing Important Relationships

One of the most powerful ways of easing the suffering of someone facing death is to support them in completing significant relationships. This process will likely involve family members and, will be part of the healing process for both the person dying, and those who will be left behind.

Saying Five Things

Completing significant relationships can be viewed as a process of saying: “Forgive me", "I forgive you", "Thank you", "I love you" and "Goodbye".

With almost all significant relationships, there will almost always be some history of hurt. By coming to a place where you can say these five things to those who matter most, you can leave behind the history of hurt. These transformative phrases can allow you and your loved ones to be with each other in the present. This readies you both for the completion of your relationship, and allows you to say goodbye without old grievances and guilt standing in the way.

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Although the process of "saying the five things" involves others, the focus is on the healing of the terminally ill person. The intention is to allow you to be more present in yourself and more open to loved ones. This can go a long way in providing comfort and peace in the final days or weeks.