

The Active Dying Process: What to Expect and How You Can Comfort Your Loved One

Your loved one may experience a few or several of these signs. These are normal experiences of the dying process. If any of these symptoms cause you concern, or if you have any questions about the comfort of your loved one, always reach out to your hospice professionals.

Emotional & Spiritual Signs & Symptoms

Signs	What To Expect	How To Comfort Your Loved One
Giving Away Their Belongings and Discussing Final Plans/ Arrangements	Your loved one may need to make funeral arrangements or financial arrangements, ensure that a pet is cared for, or arrange for sentimental items to be given to particular people.	Allow your loved one to do what feels right for them. Honor their choices and engage in their process if they give you the opportunity. Help with practical matters as they allow, and take their lead.
Withdrawal/ Social Isolation	Your loved one may seem unresponsive or uninterested in socializing. This is a normal part of storing energy for their transition.	Hold their hand, speak in a normal tone of voice and reassure them of your presence. Even though they may not appear to be lucid, their hearing remains.
Visions/Talking to Those Who Have Gone Before Them	It is common for the dying to speak to or see those who have died before them. This is not a hallucination or a drug reaction.	Do not contradict or disagree with your loved one. Provide affirmation and comfort them if they seem afraid. Give them permission to talk about their experience if they want to share. Give them permission to go.
Restlessness	Your loved one may experience repetitive behaviors, and this can be a sign of unresolved or unfinished business.	Encourage your loved one to talk about their needs if they are able. The hospice social worker or chaplain can be a great resource to assist in encouraging communication of unresolved issues. Provide encouragement and verbalize your acceptance of them. Have family members give them permission to go.
Saying Goodbye /Permission To Go	Saying goodbye can come in many forms. It can be verbalized, but it can also be eye contact or a knowing gaze, a touch, an embrace or indirect language inferring the departure.	Participate and take the lead of your loved one. Reciprocate and express what you need to say to feel resolution. Share favorite memories and pictures, listen to them, answer questions, express your tears, say your own goodbyes. Don't be afraid to show your emotions to your loved one.
Conversation/ Verbal & Nonverbal Communication	Your loved one may be trying to say "I love you," "I'm sorry," "forgive me," or "thank you." You may need to say this to your loved one as well to resolve unfinished business.	Invite communication of all types. Watch for eye contact, facial expressions, a squeeze of the hand, and attempts to start conversations. As difficult as this may be, you will not regret working through this temporary discomfort to allow this closure for both of you.

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Physical Signs & Symptoms

Symptoms	What To Expect	How To Comfort Your Loved One
Breathing Changes	Breathing can be rapid, shallow panting, or shallow breaths with periods of no breathing. This is caused by decreased circulation.	Elevate your loved one's head, or turn them on their side. Use verbal reassurance and touch to let them know of your presence. Give medicine as prescribed.
Skin Changes	Arms, hands, legs, and feet may feel cold or clammy to the touch. Your loved one may also have an increase in temperature or a fever. Skin may change color, called "mottling" indicating decrease in circulation.	Use a cool cloth on the forehead, and be prepared with layers of breathable sheets and blankets to add and remove based on needs. Listen carefully to needs of your loved one, watch for perspiration or other indicators of temperature discomfort. If fever is present, be sure to let your hospice nurse know.
Agitation/ Restlessness	Due to decrease in oxygen, your loved one may "pick" or pull at linens and clothing or try to get out of bed.	Do not attempt to restrain or interfere with repetitive movements. Be aware of what is providing too much stimulus and adjust accordingly (visitors, pets, music, TV, lights). Give medicine as prescribed.
Confusion/ Lethargy/ Lack of Responsiveness	The time spent sleeping will increase significantly. They may be difficult to arouse, lethargic and sleepy, or confused or scared about what is happening.	Speak to them in a normal voice, and sit quietly with them. Explain what you are doing clearly. Reassure them of your presence and answer questions honestly. Always assume that your loved one can hear you. Allow them to sleep and prepare for their transition.
Travel Language/Symbolic Language	Your loved one may refer to a trip, making comments such as, "I've packed my bags," "I need to get my shoes on," or "it's time to leave."	Allow your loved one to speak about their reality, which is different from yours, and do not contradict what they tell you. Provide reassurance that they are safe if they seem scared. Listen, be present, and speak in a calm voice.
Elimination/ Incontinence	Urine will decrease, maybe tea colored. Loss of bowel or bladder control may occur as body functions slow down.	Let hospice nurse know if your loved one is uncomfortable. Use bed pads underneath them to change when soiled. Use of barrier cream can help skin block moisture.
Food and Fluid Intake	Your loved one may not want food or fluids.	Do not force them to eat or drink. Respect what their body is telling them what it needs. Ice chips may help with a dry mouth.