

Reaching Out

Eight simple ways to help others with serious illness

You just heard. A neighbor, someone from church, or perhaps even a favorite aunt has been diagnosed with a serious, life-limiting illness. What can you do?

First, know that you are not alone. More than half of all Americans will have a loved one – family member or dear friend – diagnosed with a terminal illness in the coming year. Hospice professionals who work with patients and families every day say that the worst thing you can do is nothing at all.

“Isolation can be a real consequence for seriously-ill individuals and their families when they truly need support,” explains Jacqueline Parker Hatch, Hospice of the Piedmont’s Director of Family Care Services.

You may feel awkward and uncertain, but reaching out makes a real difference for patients and caregivers.

“Often close friends or relatives who may be the first to respond in any other circumstance find themselves trying to avoid the seriously ill,” Hatch continues. “This often stems from their own level of discomfort when trying to figure out what to say or what to do.”

Next, take action. Here are a few simple ways you may be able to help:

- **Be a good listener.** Don’t always feel that you need to talk. You can sit quietly together, offering just your presence or a simple squeeze of the hand, which says you care.
- **Don’t avoid the patient,** but continue to be the friend or family member you have always been.
- **Remember that caregivers need support, too.** Offer to stay with the patient to give the caregiver a break. Or invite the caregiver to take part in outside activities. Be sure to call before you visit, and remember that it’s not always possible to make plans in advance.
- **Keep in touch.** Send a card or note just to say you care or are thinking about the patient and family.
- **Share inspirational thoughts.** Bring your friend a special book, recorded music, a poster, artwork or a special treat to share with caregivers and visitors.



- **Help with simple chores.** Offer transportation for a doctor’s appointment, shopping or other family needs.
- **Keep them in touch.** Bring magazines, newspapers, photos, and news to keep your loved one from feeling the world is passing her by.
- **Don’t be afraid to share emotions,** laughter, sorrow, and fears. And accept that each individual is different, so be sensitive to their needs and wishes. Know that your presence is worth more than words.

There is no perfect script or way to handle every situation, according to Leslie Kalinowski, Hospice of the Piedmont President and CEO. “Most importantly, be yourself and try not to worry about whether you are doing or saying the right things. If you speak and act genuinely from your heart, your compassion and caring will be felt. Your friend or loved one may not remember exactly what you did or said, but they will always remember how you made them feel.”

