

Providing compassionate end-of-life care during the COVID-19 crisis: SUPPORTING THE PATIENT



Show your patients who you are and make the human connection

In the interactions you have with patients, try not to let Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) become a social barrier. Patients in isolation may need to feel a connection with others even more.

- Hello my name is...
- Place a photo of you with your name on the outside of your PPE.

Your presence is your gift

If you're wearing PPE your body language, tone of voice and eye contact has never been more important. Your smile and warmth can be conveyed through your eyes, even if you're wearing a face mask.

Stress is contagious, but so is calm

Be a calming presence for your patients. Move slowly if you can. Enter their room gently. When you feel stressed or overwhelmed, taking 3 deep breaths is a quick way to steady yourself. You can do this each time you wash your hands.

Acknowledge emotions and feelings

Ask how the person is feeling. Provide information, reassurance, words of kindness. Focus on maintaining hope – think about what can be done and what can be done well.

'I can help you make contact with your family'

'I can be here with you if you are frightened'

'I can help to make you feel more comfortable'

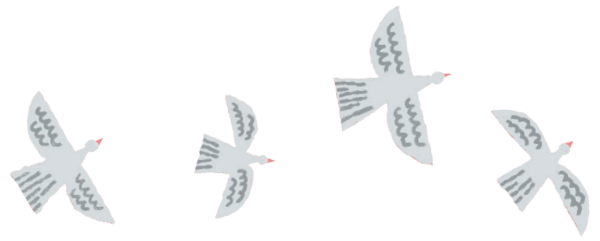
Communicate clearly and honestly

- Use simple language as this helps patients feel less confused.
- Always avoid jargon and euphemisms.
- Check if your patient has a hearing aid or glasses.
- Give your patient time, particularly if they are breathless or weak.
- Sometimes a pen and paper or pictures help.
- Try not to avoid difficult questions. See sample phrases below to open up a conversation.

Sample phrases

- ☰ Is that something you are worried about?
- ☰ Would you like to talk about that?
- ☰ Would it help if I ...?
- ☰ What can I do to help?

- ☰ How are you within yourself?
- ☰ What would give you peace of mind?
- ☰ What do you need me to help you with?
- ☰ I am here with you
- ☰ Is there anything you'd like me to say to your family?



Psychological and spiritual support

In the absence of family members and pastoral care, providing this support is more important than ever. Remember that spirituality may not necessarily mean religion. Where a person does require support with a faith or religious aspect, it is important to consider how you can provide this. You may be able to facilitate a virtual chaplaincy visit.

The Hospice Friendly Hospital Programme have a compilation of prayers, poems called *By Your Side* which might be useful if a patient asks you to support them with spiritual care. This is on the Irish Hospice Foundation Care & Inform website hub.

If visiting is not allowed

- Use the person's mobile phone to keep the connection with family members. Think about how you will access their phone (if they are unable) and pass messages on. Make sure a charger is available at all times.
- Encourage Skype and Facetime to support a connection with the family.
- Ask the person if you can help them make a voice recording or a video or take a photo.
- If the person is unconscious talk to the person or read messages from their family. If you can, set up the phone beside the person's ear and enable family members to speak to their loved one.

Supporting a person who is actively dying

- Can a family member be present?
- If not, can it be arranged for a member of staff to be with the person at all times so they don't die alone?
- Your presence is so important at this time. Sit by your patient's bed and offer a calming presence. Sometimes simply being there breathing with them can be soothing.
- Reduce noise, dim lighting if possible.
- Ask the family if there is anything they would like you to do on their behalf: read a prayer, play a song, say a poem, pass on a message, set up the phone near the patient's ear.
- Always assume the person can hear you.
- Reassure them that you are there with them, even if they are unconscious.

At the time of death, pausing together for a moment in silence at the bedside is a simple but poignant way to honour the person. This would be particularly symbolic where family members were not permitted to be there. It also helps staff to honour the patient's death.

What to do if the person dies without their family present

The details of the person's death are so important for the family. Be prepared to tell the story.

What was it like?

Who was present?

What were their last words?

Did you read to them/pray with them?

Were they comfortable?

Did they open their eyes?

How did you care for them after they died?

How was the death acknowledged? (e.g moment's silence, end-of-life spiral used, etc.)

How long did they stay on the ward for?

What happened next?

At a later date, you might like to send the family a sympathy card.