

what to expect when someone is dying

FOR THE DAYS AND HOURS BEFORE A GOODBYE

IF YOU'RE HOLDING THIS

you don't have to get this right. you just have to be there

We are taught to fight death, to call it a loss or a failure. I've sat beside enough people at the end of life to know it can also be something else: a threshold, crossed slowly, and often more gently than we fear. If you are holding this, someone you love is standing near that threshold. In your own way, so are you.

No two deaths look the same. Some of what follows may happen, some may not, and the order is never fixed. Think of this less as a map and more as a hand on your back.

01 SIGNS THE BODY IS SLOWING DOWN

in the weeks and days before

- Eating and drinking much less, or wanting only sips and small tastes
- Sleeping more of the day, and being harder to wake
- Turning inward, talking less, wanting fewer visitors
- Confusion about time or place, or talking about people who have already died
- Talk of travel or going home, or reaching for things you can't see
- Restlessness, picking at sheets, or moments of agitation

01 SIGNS THE BODY IS SLOWING DOWN, CONTINUED

let them lead. they know the way

We want to feed the people we love. It's how we care. But a dying body is putting down what it no longer needs, and not eating is part of the letting go, not the cause of it. A wet sponge on their lips may be the most loving meal you offer now.

If they talk of trains, packed bags or going home, you don't need to correct them. People have spoken of dying as a journey for as long as we've told stories. They may simply be telling you, in the language of symbols, where they are.

02 THE LAST DAYS AND HOURS



- **Breathing changes.** Breaths may become slower, shallower, or come with long pauses in between. Sometimes there are quick breaths, then a stillness, then breathing again.
- **Noisy breathing.** A rattling sound can happen when they can no longer clear the back of their throat. It is usually harder for us to hear than it is for them to feel. Changing their position can help, and the nurse can talk you through it.
- **Cooler skin.** Hands, feet and knees may feel cool and look blotchy, bluish or purple as circulation draws inward.
- **Less urine,** and it may be darker.
- **Eyes** may stay partly open, and they may not respond to you the way they did.

they can still hear your voice

Hearing is thought to stay with us until very near the end. So keep talking. Say their name. Tell them who is in the room. Say the thing you've been saving. You won't regret saying too much.

03 MAKING THE ROOM GENTLE

small things count

- Keep the light soft and the room calm. Their favourite music, quietly, if it feels right.
- Moisten their lips and mouth, and use a little balm.
- Hold their hand, or simply sit close. Touch can say what words can't.
- Think about who should be there, and how to include children honestly.
- Let people say what they need to say: thank you, I love you, I'm sorry, goodbye.
- Take turns resting. Eat something. Step outside for air.

being there is enough

Some people die in the few minutes when everyone has stepped out to make tea. If that happens, please don't carry it as a failure. Some of us seem to need an empty room to let go.

04 QUESTIONS TO ASK THE CARE TEAM

write their answers here

- [ ] What changes should we expect in the coming days?
- [ ] How will we know if they are in pain, and what can we do about it?
- [ ] What can we do for their comfort ourselves?
- [ ] Who do we call, day or night, if something worries us?
- [ ] What happens when they die? Who do we call first, and is there any rush?
- [ ] Are there wishes, rituals or faith practices we should plan for now?

05 AFTERWARDS

you stayed. that was the gift

When breathing stops, the room changes. If the death was expected, you don't have to call anyone straight away. Sit with them. Hold their hand. Open a window, light a candle, say what you didn't get to say. This is the last time you'll be with their body, so take the time you need. Then call the person your care team named.

Grief isn't a problem to solve. It's the shape love takes when the person is gone. You might feel relief, numbness, guilt, even laughter at the wrong moment. All of it belongs. Let people bring food. Let yourself come apart a little.

NOTES

what the care team said

06 A NOTE BEFORE YOU GO

with you in it,
carolina x

SCAN TO BOOK A
FREE CONVERSATION

This guide is a companion, not medical advice. Your palliative care team knows the person you're caring for best. And if you'd like someone beside you as you walk this, I'm an End-of-Life Doula. I offer a free 20-minute conversation, in Sydney and online across Australia. No question is too small, or too strange.

IF YOU NEED SUPPORT RIGHT NOW

Day or night use the after-hours number they gave you	Your palliative care team
Grief support (SANE, incl. Griefline) Mon to Fri, 10am to 8pm	1800 187 263
Lifeline crisis support 24 hours, 7 days	13 11 14