

How do I help someone... during their illness



"Yet I am always with you; you hold me by my right hand." (Psalm 73:23)

Illness presents a crisis to the ill person, dependent, of course, on the degree of illness. One of our aims is to help the person through their difficulty and to try to understand what the ill person is going through.

About illness

> Illness is a crisis

When a person is significantly ill (s)he is in some form of crisis. Some of the ways show themselves are included below. Anxiety often comes with an illness. The reaction to this can be: • stunned silence or excessive talk

- questioning of God, self and others
- retreating from reality
- panic and tantrums
- anger
- self-blame
- confused thinking

> It causes anxiety

An ill person generally needs assistance in managing anxiety. The anxiety can be about many things. The most personal of these is usually that the person faces the vision of mortality. When the person realises illness (some symptom has occurred e.g. pain in the chest, bleeding, ...) there is anxiety about that symptom. How serious is it? What will happen to me? It is a problem of not knowing that can precipitate the crisis. Strangely, when an illness is diagnosed, some of the reaction can disappear when treatment is specified and hope realised.

> It disrupts the normal pattern of life

Disruption can take many forms. If the person works then work is generally not possible. Who will do the work? If self-employed – who is going to despatch the orders? If a mother – who will look after the children and the family? Who will collect them from school? It is often a family affair because it impacts on the family.

> It can lead to loss of control

When well, a person can normally control the events of their lives. (S)he can organise their home, work, and other activities. If ill, who is going to do this? There is a reliance on others who already have their own commitments.

> It can be costly

While Australian society has Medicare, not all costs are necessarily covered, especially if medical attention is needed urgently but there is a waiting list in the public sector. Private treatment can be very costly. Not all pharmaceutical requirements are met by either Medicare or private insurance funds. A working person may lose their income through extended illness or through being self-employed and being unable to work. It may be difficult for an ill person to visit government funding services to arrange for benefits.

> Medical treatment often uses a different 'language'

Apart from the medical language used in diagnosis that refers to body's internal or external parts, there may be the tests that require an MRI, an EEG or an ECG. You may need a bronchoscopy, an endoscopy or a colonoscopy. What is the difference between chemotherapy, immunotherapy or radiotherapy, or is it radium therapy, or is it radiation therapy? This list is endless and may be daunting for the person who is already under stress. Sometimes a person is not confident enough to ask for more details from the medical staff. A carer can help here by approaching the staff on behalf of the patient.

> It 'infantilises'

(That's a priceless word!) The patient is often told when and what to eat, when to sleep, when to take a shower, when they can go for a walk, when to go to the toilet and in general, when, or when not, to do anything. Patients are organised and directed – just like an infant. And in the process, the patient often loses dignity, especially when personal issues are evident while others are in the same room or ward. In essence, an ill person loses independence.

> It isolates

'You don't really understand how I feel.'

'No one cares. No one has visited me for the last two days.'

Illness can lead to loneliness and the feeling of isolation. Illness leads to self-centred-ness. It can lead to feelings of frustration, impatience and helplessness. This can lead to depression, withdrawal and lack of communication.

> It can be a forerunner of death

Depending on the seriousness of the illness, a person can be faced with the issue of their own mortality. They may not know definitely that they are going to be restored to good health again. In a self-centred state they may be worried about the possibility of not seeing their family again, of not reaching Christmas or a special birthday in the family, and a host of other factors. They may be fearful of the process of death. What kind of pain will there be?

One of our roles can be to assist a person through these difficulties by helping to promote their value as a person and to cope with the impending death, or the long, hard road back to better health.

> It can have some benefits

Here are some possible benefits:

- being allowed to avoid facing a particular problem not related to the illness; gaining attention from people around you where this may not normally be available;
- having an opportunity to rethink your life's directions and purpose, including spirituality;
- not having to meet others' expectations.

What we can do to help?

Below are some things **we can do**

- > Be spiritually aware through meditation and prayer.
- > Check on the background of the person and of their current circumstances.
- > Observe hygiene routines – washing hands before and after a visit.
- > Once you have been aware of the background, have a plan for your visit, and be prepared to adapt.
- > Sit or stand where you and the ill person can communicate comfortably.
- > Allow the ill person to set the mood for your visit so you can observe their state of mind from the outset.
- > Be empathetic, warm and accepting of the ill person's attitudes and expressions, giving emotional support and encouragement.
- > Give your undivided attention.

- Look for non-verbal communication.
- Look for opportunities to explore the ill person's feelings and their spirituality.

Here are some things to avoid:

- prying
- anecdotes
- being judgemental. It is not for us to determine whether a person's action is right or wrong, but rather to help a person explore their own perceptions for themselves.
- arguments, even if the ill person's language is provocative
- preaching – but be prepared to talk about spiritual issues
- manipulating the patient
- being manipulated by the patient
- chiding a patient for the feelings they might express
- encouraging unrealistic expectations of the person.

