

Building support structures

Many people report feeling anxious about approaching someone they know who has a life limiting illness. They may ask

“What do I say or do?”

There are many simple things we can do to help build a support structure for patients:

- Treat them as you would like to be treated. In other words, remember that they are normal people with normal interests, likes and dislikes.
- Other friends or relatives may 'back away', unsure how to behave. Make sure the patient does not become isolated. Regular contact through visits, telephone calls, texts, e-mail etc is very much appreciated. Don't over do it though - phone calls and visits are meant to be appreciated, not dreaded.
- Don't assume that you know what they need, ask. Even with the best of intentions, if we take control of decision making for patients without consulting them, this may be experienced as distressing and unwelcome. Patients deserve to retain as much control over their lives as possible. If you think they need help, ask.
- If your friend or relative is a member of a faith community, they may appreciate you making contact with their Priest, Rabbi, Vicar or Imam. Again, never assume but always ask. Many patients appreciate contact with faith community leaders as they seek to make sense of their illness. Even providing them with the name, address and telephone number of their faith community leader can be helpful, allowing them to make contact at their own pace and in their own time.
- Sometimes patients may appreciate practical support such as a friendly face to accompany them to hospital or to a doctors appointment. Just the presence of a familiar face can be reassuring. Again, don't be afraid to ask.
- Remember that even when we ask, it is important for a patient to feel that they can say 'no' without the risk of causing offence. It will be important to make that clear from the outset.

