



# When Your Loved One Is Dying

by Rev. Percy McCray

In any cancer journey, much is uncertain and often unknown, but if you are concerned that your loved one may be nearing the end of their life on earth, it may comfort you to know that you may see it coming.

Research suggests there may be specific signs — physical, psychological and behavioral — that may indicate when someone is dying. As we look at a few of these, please keep in mind that we are all unique individuals — the way one person experiences the transition from life to death may be quite different from the way someone else does.

As you have opportunity to accompany a loved one on this final journey, you may benefit from the wisdom of ministers, social workers, hospice nurses and other professionals who can help you recognize some of these signs and possibly offer suggestions for what you can do to provide your loved one with as much support as possible.

*Dying may be a dark journey. But it does not have to be a journey without hope.*

**For if we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.**

2 CORINTHIANS 5:1

## The Beginning of the End

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In some cases, people may recognize that their own death may be approaching in the final one to three months before they die. They may gain a new awareness of their mortality. They may begin to withdraw from everyday life and even separate themselves from others — including family members. They may avoid gatherings

and discourage visits, preferring to be alone. Some may try to avoid appearing helpless or needy. For many, this can be a time of remembering, reminiscing and taking time for introspection.

There may be physical changes beyond those related to any health challenges. The dying person may have a reduced appetite and eat smaller portions or skip meals, which may result in noticeable weight loss. They may begin sleeping more.

They may not get out as much as they once did, engage in fewer activities or make significant lifestyle changes. They may begin thinking and talking about death, and they may begin planning to die.

**Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil,  
for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.**

PSALM 23:4

## The End Is Approaching

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It generally may become more apparent during the final week or two that your loved one is dying. There may be unsettling mental changes. The loved one may lose track of time — blurring the present with past events. They may see people in the room that you don't see. They may speak uncharacteristically.

Delusional moments are not uncommon. At this point there may be little to be gained by "correcting" your loved one — even if they seem to be hallucinating — but there is great value in expressing the love you feel toward them.

They may begin sleeping more, perhaps even sleeping most of the time. They may refuse to eat or take their medications. Speaking may decrease.

As the body fails, your loved one may need help with daily activities. Increasing physical weakness is common. There may be other physical indications — a drop in blood pressure or body temperature, increased perspiration, significant fluctuation in their pulse and breathing — to let you know that death may be near.

**My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.**

JOHN 14:2-3

## The End of the Journey

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Often the last few days — or last few hours — before your loved one dies, there may be an encouraging increase in activity. They may start talking more or eating more. This surge of energy may confuse or encourage family members, who interpret this change as a sign their loved one is starting to get better.

Be mindful that this final burst of energy may not last long. Then you may begin to notice new changes in your loved one's breathing. There may be long pauses between breaths, sometimes followed by a series of

rapid breaths. Congestion may affect the sound of their breathing.

You may notice changing skin color as the heart weakens — first their hands and feet may turn purple or blotchy, and then the discoloration may move up their arms and legs. Lips may darken or droop.

Responsiveness may start to decrease. Although their eyes may remain open, your loved one at times may seem to lose focus or even drift away completely.

Keep in mind that hearing may be the last sense to go, so even if your loved one appears unresponsive, it may be worthwhile to continue to talk to them as though they were with you and hear every loving word.

Finally, there will come a moment when the breathing stops, the heart is no longer beating, and your loved one's journey will end.

## Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful servants.

PSALM 116:15

Those final weeks and days can be rich and meaningful — for the one whose life is ending, and for those that live on. It can be a great blessing to have the foresight about what is coming, and to have the time for loved ones to be able to come together and not leave things unsaid or unshared.

Perhaps relationships can be restored. Blessings can be bestowed. Memories can be shared. Just knowing that a

loved one has died at peace can help everyone else be at peace as they move forward in their lives. Thankfully, when we lose a loved one who shares our faith, we do not lose our hope.

While we are on this earth, we may feel sadness and grief, and we look forward one day to the joy of our glorious reunion in the presence of the Lord.

## When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

1 CORINTHIANS 15:54

Information for this article has been drawn from:  
<https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/what-happens-when-someone-dies>

Additional Resources:  
<https://www.cancer.org/treatment/end-of-life-care/hospice-care/who-provides-hospice-care.html>  
<https://www.medicare.gov/what-medicare-covers/what-part-a-covers/how-hospice-works>



Rev. Percy McCray Jr. has spent more than 20 years ministering to cancer patients and their caregivers at Cancer Treatment Centers of America® (CTCA).

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