

Frequently Asked Questions

“Jim, would you talk to her about the realities of her situation, I wouldn’t know what to say?”

“I’m afraid if I tell him the truth, he’ll lose hope and give up.”

“Isn’t it better to just let her believe she is going to get better?”

Talking with someone we love about a terminal diagnosis is understandably a difficult thing to do. And so “How do I talk to my loved one about terminal diagnosis, about death and his or her wishes,” easily becomes the most frequent question I get asked in my work. And the response is always similar. “How would you talk to her about any other difficult topic?” The nature of the relationship determines the approach. But certain basics always apply.

The first is honesty! Sugar coating reality does not change it! Offering hope for a cure when that is unrealistic is unfair, not allowing the person to make peace with God, with family, with friends and with self. It also denies the person the ability to make end of life decisions regarding care and placement, as well as saying the ‘goodbyes’ that help make for a peaceful death.

The second is compassion! Everyone needs to know they are not alone on their journey. All of us are created as relational creatures. This need doesn’t end with a terminal diagnosis. In fact, it often increases. Compassion, however, is not to be confused with sympathy. Feeling sorry for someone (sympathy) is different than being present with/for someone in their pain and suffering (compassion). One is not helpful and feeds negativity; the other suggests that there is additional strength available through loved ones and caring friends.

The third is objectivity! It is discerning how you are feeling and experiencing the news. It is, to the best of one’s ability, acknowledging those feelings and working through them. It is unfair and not helpful to project those fears and questions onto someone who is struggling with her own fears and feelings. Complete objectivity is not likely. The very fact that we care enough to discuss such things with a person suggests an intimacy that is subjective.

Discussing terminal diagnosis is never easy! But whom would you rather do it? Someone who is a loved one or dear friend? Or someone who may know your medical condition, but not necessarily know you? Stepping to the plate at such a time is a privilege and a gift, easing one of the most difficult moments in a person’s life.