

When Your Patient Dies



Individuals that choose to work in the health field choose to do so for a variety of reasons. Often people enter the field as caregivers because they want to have an impact on someone's life. Others choose this career path because they have family members or friends who've been helped by excellent medical care and as a result they want to make a contribution back.

Front line workers develop relationships that are meaningful with their patients. Often they are there helping and caring for patients, in the most intimate ways, when family members cannot. It is a unique relationship, one to be valued and honored.

When a patient dies, front line workers may be denied access to typical means of processing grief (going to a funeral, sharing in the experience with loved ones, finding a way to honor their patient, etc.). They are not given the opportunity to make closure. The relationship that workers

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share with patients is meaningful. Often after a patient dies it can feel like "business as usual," and the worker does not have the opportunity to process the loss.

Suggestions for Grieving Healthcare Workers

Support groups and peer consultation can be vitally meaningful in our personal grieving and healing process, but it is important to use whatever grieving rituals can be most meaningful for you. Find a way to honor the relationship you had with the patient. Often having the opportunity to say out loud, "you mattered to me and I will miss you" can create a sense of healing for the worker.

You may want to express your feelings by keeping a journal with your personal thoughts. Possible areas to explore may be: the meaning that came from the work you did with the patient; how s/he impacted your life; what you'd like others to know about this person if you could talk about him/her; what you would like this patient's family members to know about him/her if you could share this



with them; imagining your patient sitting with you in a place that feels safe and comforting; what you'd like to say to him/her and what s/he might say to you in return.

There is no right or wrong way to grieve or to honor your patient. Please remember that you provided a valuable service and relationship with that person.

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