

NET HEALTH® HOME & HOSPICE

Managing End-of-Life Anxiety With Hospice Patients

Learn ways you can lower anxiety
and improve a patient's quality of life





From the person receiving care to nurses in charge to present and supportive family members, the end-of-life transition for a hospice patient can be an uncertain and difficult time. When patients enter hospice care, it is natural for them to feel vulnerable and nervous, not knowing what to expect in the coming months.

During this period, family members may also look to get a better understanding and greater clarity of their loved one's fragile condition. And while a support network is critical to providing hospice patients with the care they need, it's equally important to recognize the range of emotions an individual may experience with this abrupt, sudden change in their lives.





Stress and anxiety are two common factors that may come into play, and it can be manifested in both physical and emotional manners. In this ebook, we'll offer hospice staff a few suggestions on how to best observe and manage anxiety in a patient who needs ongoing support and care.

Topics we'll cover include:

- ✓ Observing the signs of anxiety
- ✓ Creating a safe and calm environment
- ✓ Being transparent and willing to listen
- ✓ Helping manage physical symptoms
- ✓ Providing counseling and support
- ✓ Offering anxiety-reducing complementary treatment

① Observe the Signs of Anxiety

A study released by the American Journal of Hospice and Palliative Medicine noted that anxiety was reported in 20 to 50 percent of patients with advanced cancer in hospice care. The Journal further noted how anxiety is tied to “increased symptom burden, depression, decreased physical, emotional, cognitive, role and social functioning, and decreased quality of life.”¹

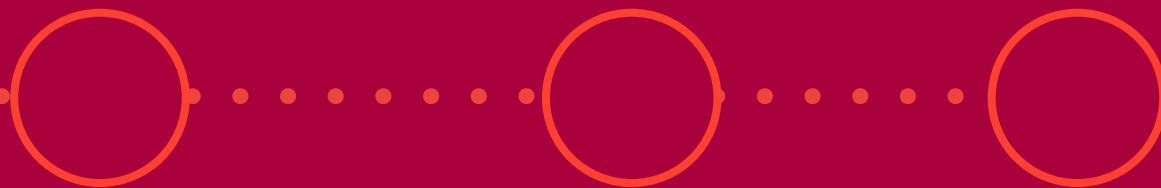


“Anxiety was reported in 20 to 50 percent of patients with advanced cancer in hospice care.”

Terminal anxiety is a bit different from those who aren't experiencing their final days. There are a few key factors that can help staff better recognize when certain anxious behaviors may be at play. The Pathway Home Health and Hospice (PHHH) organization points out that terminal restlessness can be observed by:

- ✓ Behaviors associated with dementia
- ✓ Discomfort and indecision
- ✓ Regular pulling of clothes, bed sheets or IV lines
- ✓ Accusation of wrongdoing in others that doesn't make sense
- ✓ Conversations about deceased family members

PHHH also points out that it's important to observe any signs of aggressive behavior and sudden outbursts, or a lack of attention as potential signs of anxiety.²





② Create a Safe and Calm Environment

Once signs of anxiety have been identified, one of the most crucial steps in supporting a hospice patient's well-being and care is by ensuring there is a safe space around them. This can be done in a collaborative team effort with nurses, social workers, hospice aides and chaplains alike.

The American Journal of Hospice and Palliative Medicine study found that three factors help patients feel safe³, including the:

- Continuous availability of nurses,
- Feeling they are not alone, and
- Transparency about their personal situation and care plan.

As a result, patients who feel safe can better work through some unsettling emotions during a time of utmost need.

③ **Be Transparent and Willing to Listen**

Part of easing a patient's levels of anxiety also requires staff members to be active listeners. The Lippincott Nursing Center, a website that contains peer-reviewed nursing journals, emphasizes the importance of "reassuring hospice patients that making a choice for hospice doesn't mean giving up or choosing death; rather, they're selecting comfort care that can improve quality of life."⁴



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When communicating with hospice patients, IDG teams are encouraged to be fully present with minimal distractions. A compassionate and thoughtful demeanor can also help a patient feel less on guard and more at ease. By paying attention to their body language and tone of voice, while proceeding with honest yet thoughtful information about the patient's condition and treatment, nurses can foster better communication and give patients the peace of mind that they have individuals they can trust by their side.



④ Help Manage Physical Symptoms

In the study published by the American Journal of Hospice and Palliative Medicine, patients expressed that the thought of increased pain in the future was a significant factor to their anxiety. What helped lessen these symptoms was knowing that their levels of pain and discomfort were taken seriously by hospice professionals.⁵ The American Family Physician Journal notes that, while challenging, end-of-life physical symptoms can usually be managed through appropriate medications. Additionally, talking to and supporting the families in this process may be an important element to ensuring them that their loved one is safe and receiving care in the most dignified manner.⁶



5 Provide Counseling and Spiritual Support

While hospices are expected to provide bereavement counseling to families after their loved one has passed, they can also offer support services to the patient in care. For example, VISTAS Online, a publication produced for the American Counseling Association, says that counselors can address the spiritual needs of a patient by helping them with the following: ⁷

- Find meaning in their lives and in their condition
- Create a personal definition of what is an appropriate death to them
- Provide the opportunity for them to reflect on how they can transcend death, either through religion and an afterlife, or through future generations

Hospice chaplains and social workers can also take on a significant role in supporting the patient, as both active listeners and confidantes. The more support a patient receives, the more comfortable they can feel managing their levels of stress, anxiety and discomfort.

⑥ Offer Anxiety-Reducing Complementary Treatment

Complementary therapies can be a great benefit for improving a hospice patient's quality of life. From music therapy to pet therapy to guided relaxation techniques, these activities can reduce feelings of anxiety and stress that often take hold. In a 2009 study published by the U.S. National Library of Medicine – National Institutes of Health, 48 percent of hospice patients turned to complementary therapy as part of their treatment plan and, in turn, it decreased their anxiety and pain, as well as provided them a better sense of control over their illness and treatment decisions.⁸



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to complementary therapy

In the same study, those who participated in music therapy revealed that they experienced less agitation and a sense of “aliveness, resonating with an expanded consciousness.”

By offering complementary treatments as alternative options for end-of-life care, hospice patients may likely feel increased ease and reduced pain as they build trust and natural bonds with the IDG teams that care for them.

A popular quote attributed to editor and author Walter Anderson states that “nothing diminishes anxiety faster than action.” It’s clear that providing a number of support avenues for those transitioning to the end stages of their lives is essential to not only improving quality care, but to also helping patients better manage any not-so-pleasant feelings and emotions should they arise.

A decorative graphic in the bottom left corner consisting of several stylized human figures. Each figure is composed of a vertical line for the body and a rounded rectangle for the head. The figures are arranged in a row, with some having their arms raised or in different poses, creating a sense of movement or a group of people.

**“Nothing diminishes
anxiety faster than action.”**

– Walter Anderson



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