

# Hi, I've got lung cancer.

## *How are you?*

*Conversational tips for the terminally ill.*

If you're suffering from a serious illness, we urge you to be indiscreet. Instead of making small talk at a dinner party, why not start a conversation along these lines: "My doctor told me I've only two years to live. I fully intend to outlive the impostor." Or you might try something like this: "My tumour and I have the same zodiac sign."

Talking openly about your illness is powerful therapy. Because when you open up, everyone (including yourself) learns to cope with the anxiety and uncertainty of your condition. Let's put it another way: not talking about death won't make it go away, talking about it, on the other hand, can bring life back to your relationships with your loved ones.

You might think that being stoic and maintaining a stiff upper lip will help protect your family from their impending loss. We would recommend the opposite: Share your grief. Cry in front of someone and cry with them. It's always okay to cry. (These are, after all, the saddest times of your life.) Witnessing grief gives others the permission to grieve. Crying may help us all gradually come to accept the universal fact that all living things die. It's not, therefore, a matter of *if* you grieve, but *when* you grieve.

One of the greatest acts of kindness we can do for the dying is allowing them to be heard. But we may ask ourselves in panic: 'What do we do? What do we say?' The answer is always to listen. Listen to them cry. Listen to them laugh. Listen to them complain. Listen to them grieve. Listen to them reminisce. Listen to them talk openly about dying. And, then, listen to them cry again. There are no rules, except to play it by ear and listen to what the dying have to say to us. It is, in the end, only in an honest and loving atmosphere that the living and the dying develop the strength to come to terms and accept the unacceptable.

Our culture tends to promote a kind of secrecy, silence and shame towards terminal illness. The dying are seen in the past tense and unwittingly treated as semi-human. While we should never deny that the dying are dying, we often 'bury them alive' by acting as if they are incapable of making their own decisions; by ignoring their thoughts and their opinions, by overlooking their wishes, by withholding information from them and by treating them as if they are little children. Small wonder, then, that at the time they desperately need emotional support and comfort, the severely ill become isolated and unfortunately die alone.

At the Singapore Hospice Council, we believe nobody should have to die alone. Which is why, besides attending to the physical components of pain, we pay rapt attention to a person's non-medical needs as well. One of our chief priorities is the healing of strained relationships, perhaps, between previous spouses, or a parent and an estranged adult child. When we are successful at reconciling a dying person with a loved one, their time together whilst still incredibly sad will, oddly enough, be brimming with joy and meaning.

As hospice is a philosophy of care rather than a specific place of care, palliative care can be given in a day care centre, a hospital ward, an in-patient hospice or even at home. Most patients are, in fact, looked after at home. And you'll be pleased to know that, our hospice services are generously subsidised. Visit [www.lifebeforedeath.org.sg](http://www.lifebeforedeath.org.sg) or call 1800 333 6666 to learn about our comprehensive end-of-life care programme and the needs of the dying. To break the conspiracy of silence against the dying, we need you to speak up knowledgeably.