



The Gift of Being There

Secrets for Visiting a Seriously Ill Loved One

By Susan Apollon

It's been three weeks since Sarah, your best friend since college, found the lump. The days since have been a maelstrom of medical appointments, tests, and tearful phone calls. Yesterday's call brought the grim news: metastasized breast cancer. Sarah's chances of survival, says her oncologist, are tenuous at best. And now, as you huddle miserably in the hotel room in the city where your friend is hospitalized, you can't seem to motivate yourself to get dressed. You're supposed to be visiting her right now . . . but you have no idea what you're going to say.

If you can relate to this scenario, you're not alone. Few prospects are more daunting than facing a loved one who has just received terrible news.

Finding out a friend or family member has a life-threatening illness can knock you off your foundations. It brings all sorts of intense issues—death, dying, loss, love, spirituality—to the surface. Many people have no idea what to do with the powerful emotions that well up. No wonder we don't know how to “be there” for a loved one. We really don't know how to “be there” for ourselves.

If (or as is more likely, when) you're in this situation, I want you to remember two overarching principles: First, no doctor knows how long any patient will live. They just don't. Patients defy the odds every day and real, documented miracle healings have occurred. This knowledge will give you hope. Second, realize that you can make the choice to work through your fear and share pure, unconditional love with your loved one. Giving this gift enriches her life and your own as well.

Here are some more tips for being with a seriously ill friend or family member:

- Realize that intention is everything. To a far greater extent than most people realize, we create our own realities. If your intention is to help your friend laugh and feel good and enjoy her life while you are with her, then clearly state that intention before you leave for the hospital. Hold that intention throughout the visit. If your intention is to rush to the hospital, make perfunctory small talk for ten minutes, and flee before things get too “heavy,” well, you'll achieve that, too. But it won't feel good for either of you.

- Make sure you are in a place of peace before you visit. This is probably the most important tip of all. It's been said so

often that it's almost a cliché, but it is very true: you can't help your loved one if you don't take care of yourself first. You can't be a healing influence if you haven't healed yourself. Get in touch with how you're feeling before you leave for the hospital or the person's home. If you don't feel calm, peaceful, and centered, take fifteen minutes to quiet yourself before you leave. Healing works best when you yourself have your energy aligned with your own soul, when you are connected to your own Source.

Visualize yourself at an energetically high level, a really good feeling place. See yourself meeting your friend or loved one at whatever level he or she is, and then helping the individual move up to your level.

- Stop worrying about what you're going to say. Come from a place of love and the words won't matter. People really do obsess over saying “the right thing.” Frankly, it doesn't matter what you say, as long as you say it from a place of love. Say anything that works for you, as long as it feels good. Focus on your love for the person. Let that love fill your heart and overflow into the room. Deliberately send your love to the person. Believe me, he will feel it.

Okay, so you know you don't need to go in with a script. But what if you really, really need some icebreakers to get you started? Here are a few hints:

- Keep it real. Don't say something you don't really believe, like “I know you will beat this disease.” You don't know that and saying you do creates a sense of disconnect the person can feel.
- Say, “Whatever happens, it will work itself out,” or “Whatever happens, things will fall into place.” You can say this in good conscience if you believe in an afterlife or a master plan. Even if death is imminent, you feel confident that your loved one is headed for a better place.
- Simple phrases like “It's good to see you,” or “I've missed you,” are fine.
- If you're absolutely at a loss for words, it's okay to say so: “Bill, I don't know what to say or do, but I am here and I care about you.”

- Help the person connect with her own intention. If you are visiting a very sick friend and she unleashes a flood of anxiety and worry and pain, listen quietly. Don't try to

silence her. But after she has had her say, ask her, “What is your intention? What do you want to achieve now?” She may say something like, “To get well” or “To enjoy the time I left” or “To have one more Christmas with my family.” Whatever she says, gently point out to her that it feels better to focus on her intention, rather than focusing on her condition or prognosis. You don’t want to give her a lecture, but you can mention that science has proven that where we put our focus determines the reality we create. And even if she doesn’t believe in that, you can point out that it just feels better to focus on her love for her kids or how she’s going to celebrate the holidays than on negative things.

- Keep in mind the healing power of material that leads to laughter, smiles, and “feel good” feelings. Such material can be anecdotes and stories you have been collecting to bring a smile or two to your friend or family member. Seed your conversation with appropriately funny stories and jokes. The more you share of whatever feels good, the more distraction you create, the more endorphins you help your loved one release, and the better he feels. Ask about how other family members are doing, what activities the kids are involved in, whether he has any good TV, book, or movie recommendations. Again, the rationale is that by providing a focus on material other than the person’s own body, you can help him get outside of himself.

- Chatter is overrated. It’s okay to be present without saying a word. You don’t have to fill every moment of your visit with conversation. Just make sure you’re present and not thinking about your next appointment or mentally making your grocery list. You are present when you touch someone on the hand or the shoulder or the face. You are present when you just sit quietly beside her. Focus on filling up with love. If you have an intention to come from a place of love, the person will feel your love. I believe this is true even if your loved one is in a coma or in the last stages of Alzheimer’s disease. We give and receive love on a soul level.

- Breathe. Just breathe. When I am sitting quietly with a patient, I use my breath to help calm him. I take long, deep breaths that slow my body down and allow me to shift my energy. I allow my breath to be audible enough that the patient can hear it. The result is that my breath connects with his. We get in sync. By establishing this connection, I am better able to send love and healing energy to the patient. This is not some sort of special ability, by the way. It happens naturally. Anyone can do it.

- Listen to your intuition. It will tell you how to help your loved one feel better. Quieting yourself not only helps you get calm and centered, it also helps you tap into your intuition, that deep sense of knowing that you were born with. Intuition means listening to your higher self. It means

tapping into your soul’s wisdom. In practical terms, it means knowing what other people need at the moment. This is why you should maintain a peaceful state throughout your visit; it will help you intuitively know what to say and do to make your loved one smile or laugh or feel hopeful.

Even though seeing a loved one sick and possibly near death is gut wrenching, it’s a catalyst for tremendous spiritual growth—if you allow it to be.

Being there, really being there, for someone who is sick yields life lessons you can’t get any other way. Don’t get me wrong, it’s not easy to see sickness and suffering as a blessing. But when you open yourself to the Universe, when you approach every experience with the intention of learning all you can learn and being all you can be, you can transform it into one. Surrender, and pay attention. Even if you ultimately lose your loved one, don’t lose the lesson.

Susan Apollon has worked as a psychotherapist, psychologist and healer for nearly twenty years, treating children and adults who are traumatized, diagnosed with cancer or other life-threatening illnesses, dealing with death and dying, and those who are grieving. She brings to her patients a gentle blend of warmth, compassion, and wisdom gained from surviving her own illnesses and losses; her expertise and training as a wife, mom, teacher, psychologist, researcher, and student of energy, mind, and consciousness; and finally, her own intuitive development.

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