

Mindful Touching as a Means of Comfort

After 26 years of providing massage for dying persons and teaching care givers mindful touching as an integral component to the delivery of everyday care giving tasks; I stay amazed at the profoundly positive outcomes of what seems to be the most organic gesture in the care giving relationship; the act of touching.

Touch is the first sense to develop in our bodies and may be the last sense to fade.

Touch is our instinctive form of communication; an organic need as is food and water, and a natural healing act.

Research from the Touch Research Institute in the Miami School of Medicine, proves that a seemingly simple touch of a hand can stabilize heart rate, lower blood pressure and stimulate the release of endorphins, the body's natural pain suppressors. Therefore, as care givers, we have the ability, through focused or mindful touching, to assist in bringing physical comfort to dying persons.

A very good practice is to bring your awareness to the physical touching aspect of the following care giving tasks and procedures; feeding, dressing, changing, wound care, turning a patient in bed, brushing hair, swabbing a mouth, making a transfer from bed to a chair, etc. These tasks and procedures are touch sessions. They are opportunities for healing and comforting when mindful touch is performed.

Bringing awareness to the touching aspect of care giving also includes being aware that your eye contact and the tone and cadence of your voice are major components to the touch relationship. Bringing a mindful presence into your physical touch can transform the experience of care for both you and the dying person.

Physical comfort; however is only part of the equation. For me the emotional support that may be provided by mindful touching offers a major contribution to the daily coping strategies in hospice care.

Touch provides dying persons with an opportunity for quiet reflection on one's personal life experiences, and may also offer the opportunity for the release of feelings associated with these memories.

Focused or mindful touch may also convey a message of being cared for, being safe, of being worthwhile, and being connected to a greater whole or community, thus creating a sense of belonging, as in the womb.

The feelings of safety and of belonging to a greater whole help the dying person to develop a more positive relationship with his/her physical body and in turn with the dying process. This helps to ease attitudinal symptoms such as anger, depression and fear that complicate the ability to receive care and contribute to the experience of discomfort.

One afternoon a client of mine, Susan, called me from a hospital psychiatric unit and asked me if I could come over and give her a foot massage. Susan had previously tried to commit suicide and was in deep depression. During the massage I noticed tears running down her face and a short while later she opened her eyes and reached out took my hand. “Thank you, Irene,” she said. “This is the first time I’ve loved myself in a very long time.”

One-on-one social contact provided through mindful touching assists in easing feelings of isolation and loneliness.. Easing these stressors, which contribute to the experience of discomfort, in conjunction with the stimulation of endorphins elicits mindful touch as a viable partner in controlling pain.

In some cases the dying person will not have friends and family present to provide the kind of support that encourages feelings of emotional safety and nurturing. Mindful touch can serve as the missing family link by promoting these feelings.

Being our first language, and also possibly the last sense to fade, touch provides a natural alternative method of communication as the dying person loses the ability to utilize verbal language. This eases feelings of helplessness for the dying person, family and health care team thus providing a way of re-establishing hopeful relationships.

Within the fabric of caring, touch is the integral thread that weaves the physical, psychological, and spiritual aspects of the fabric together. Bringing mindfulness to this organic gesture of human contact creates what is truly the essence of comfort care.



Blessings,

Irene Smith
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