

ACCOMPANIMENT THROUGH SERIOUS ILLNESS: A GUIDE TO CONVERSATIONS ON DEATH AND DYING



"Always be ready to account for the hope that is in you"
(1Peter 3:15)

"I want this to end."

"I wish I didn't have to be
here anymore."

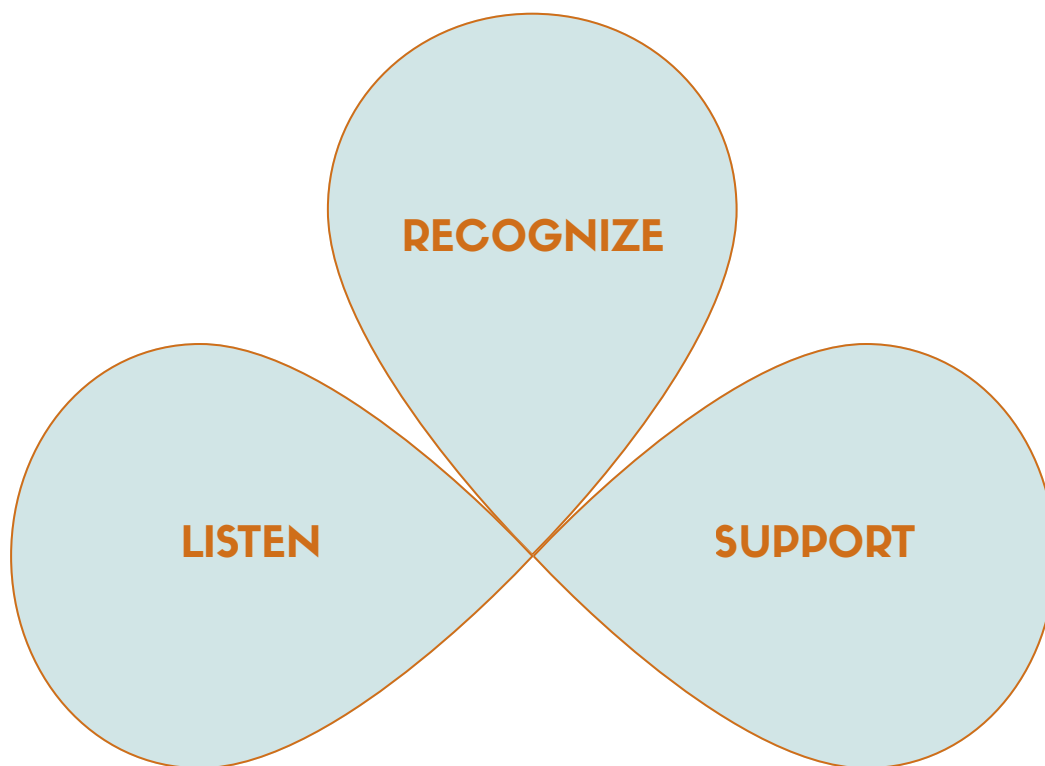
"Why won't God take me?"

"What can you tell me about
Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD)?"

Behind each of these phrases is a plea for recognition, listening, and support.

The experiences of pain and suffering, dependence on others, or being away from home cause many people who are critically ill to reflect on their lives. This can lead to a search for meaning and to questions about what dying will look like. As Christians, we remain committed to providing opportunities for people to explore their questions and to consider what living through their dying could look like.

Recognizing, listening and supporting are all valuable ways to accompany people. Each response is valuable on its own and becomes even more powerful when joined to the other two.



This guide presents three alternative responses to moments in which our neighbours invite us to contemplate their end-of-life journey with them.

As you read through the information on the following pages, you are invited to reflect on your own experiences of death and dying. The example provided on the opposite side presents a situation that could occur in any Catholic parish in Saskatchewan. How would you respond if you were in a similar situation?

On the road to Calvary, Jesus encountered people who had a profound impact on him. How might your responses be shaped by a deeper understanding of Jesus' passion?



RECOGNIZE:

JESUS MEETS HIS MOTHER

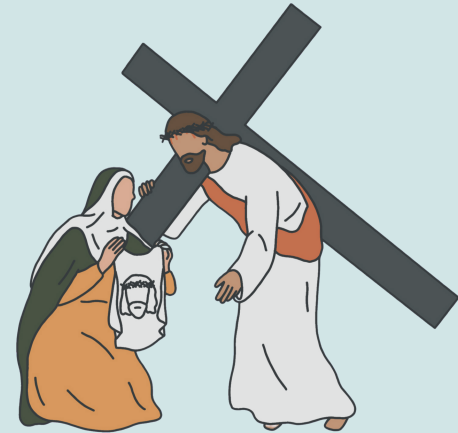
How would Jesus have felt as His mother looked at him? Mary saw her Son, not a criminal sent to his execution. We are also called to recognize all people as beloved children of God. How can we reveal this truth, even in the briefest encounters?

LISTEN:

VERONICA WIPES THE FACE OF JESUS

Although Veronica could not remove the cross from His shoulders, she stood next to Him and used her veil to wipe the sweat, blood and dirt from His face.

How would Jesus have felt as she provided compassion in the only way she could? We are also called to care for each other during moments of suffering. How can we listen to people when we know we cannot change what they are going through?



SUPPORT:

SIMON CARRIES THE CROSS

Simon of Cyrene did not know Jesus, but the soldiers pulled Simon from the crowd and ordered him to carry the cross. How would Jesus have felt as the cross was lifted from His shoulders? Although Simon could not fulfill Jesus' mission, he eased His burden. We are also called to ease the burdens of others. How can we support people as they complete their journey on earth?



“I feel like my road is almost done,” Emma said softly to Joe when he asked her how she was doing after Mass. Joe and Emma had gone to the same parish for years, and although they had never talked about it, Joe knew that Emma had recently started receiving chemotherapy treatments. His first instinct was to say, *“I’ll keep you in my prayers,”* and walk away. However, he knew he was being called to do more.

How Joe responds will depend on many factors, including his relationship to Emma, his own experiences with death and dying, his expertise in having challenging conversations, and the amount of time he can give in a particular moment.



When responding to the suffering of another person, it can be tempting to want to treat their experience as a problem to be solved. This unhelpful response is often driven by our own fear.

A more helpful approach is rooted in an openness to discovering what the person who is suffering needs. Read on to discover more about the helpful and unhelpful ways that we can respond to someone who is suffering.

RECOGNIZE:

How could Joe respond if he cannot listen well in this moment?

HELPFUL RESPONSES:	UNHELPFUL RESPONSES:
Sitting down, even if only for a brief moment. This shows respect for what has been shared.	"Don't talk like that!"
"Those are heavy thoughts to be having. Have you mentioned this to your family, priest or physician?"	"You're telling the wrong person."
"It must be so hard to feel that way. I'm sorry we can't talk for longer today. Could we meet for coffee this week?"	"Have you heard of MAiD?"

There will be many moments when we realize that we are not the right person to respond to another person's suffering. In these moments, it is important to acknowledge what has been shared and to commit to finding someone who can engage in a deeper conversation. This offer can help them to feel recognized as a dignified person, a beloved child of God.

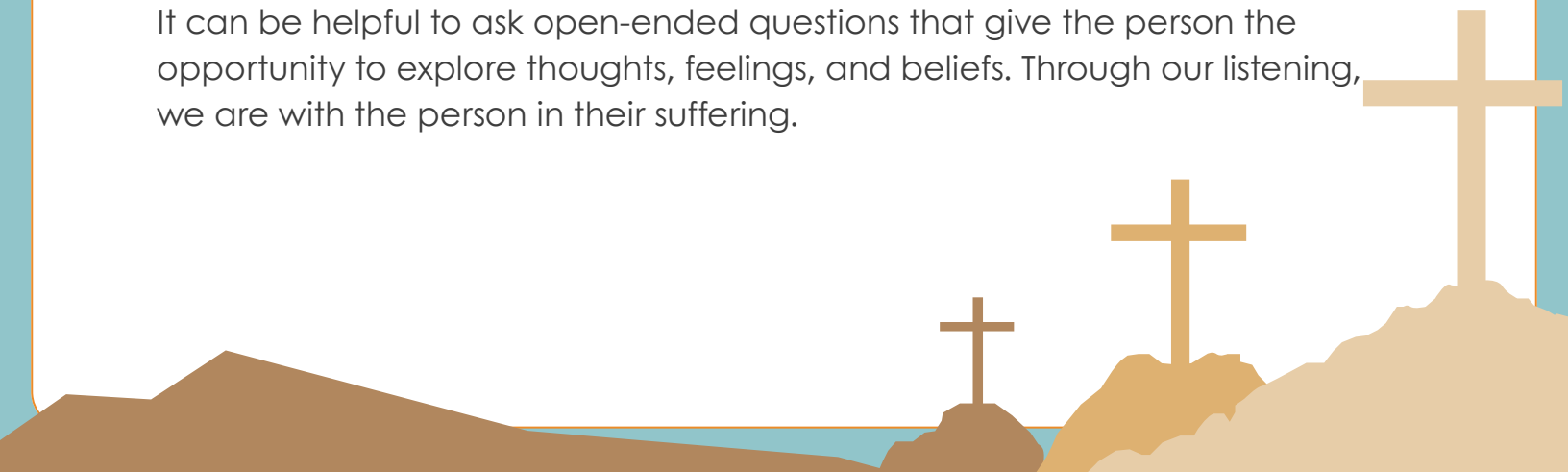
LISTEN:

How could Joe respond if he is able to spend time with Emma?

HELPFUL RESPONSES:	UNHELPFUL RESPONSES:
"You sound exhausted. Can you tell me more about how you're feeling?"	"Lots of people make this work. You can too!"
"Have you been having these thoughts for a while?"	"You just need to put your head down and keep going."
"How do you imagine your life would look if you didn't continue with this treatment?"	"I can't understand why you're receiving treatment."

We may not always have answers when challenging questions come up, but we always have the ability to listen. In these moments, it is important to stay focused on what the other person wants to share.

It can be helpful to ask open-ended questions that give the person the opportunity to explore thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. Through our listening, we are with the person in their suffering.



SUPPORT:

After he has listened, what kind of support can Joe offer Emma?

HELPFUL RESPONSES:	UNHELPFUL RESPONSES:
"What you are going through is so hard. I don't know anyone who can do it alone. Would you be interested in having more support, such as meal drop offs?"	"You can do better than this."
"As you think about what you want the next stage of your life to look like, do you think you have the information you need?"	"You'll feel better in the morning, I promise."
"Would you like me to pray with you?"	"Why are you putting yourself through this?"

Asking for support is a vulnerable experience. In these moments, it is important to care for our neighbour by considering what resources may be needed. These may include access to health care programs like Palliative Care, or something that a parish community can offer them, like a prayer circle or support getting to and from appointments. These supports can greatly ease the burden of the journey.

As we engage in conversations about death and dying, it is good for us to deepen our understanding of Catholic teaching regarding end-of-life care. The Catholic Church supports a palliative approach to care, which emphasizes living through our dying. This approach includes appropriate pain management, declining treatments when their burdens outweigh their benefits, and providing opportunities to find meaning in suffering.

Since all life is a gift from God, the Catholic approach to death and dying does not include intentionally ending a life through euthanasia or assisted suicide (often referred to as Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD) in Canada). The legalization of these practices has made it crucial for us to recognize each other's inherent dignity by affirming: "You are worthy of care." If the person you are listening to seems to be considering MAiD, it may be helpful to ask questions about why this path appears appealing. This may give the person the opportunity to share their fears and to explore what a good death might look like.

Conversations about death and dying are always challenging. It requires bravery and humility to hear another person's suffering and to stay engaged, especially when we know that we cannot change what will happen. In these moments, it is important to ask the Holy Spirit to speak through us as we accompany each other.

For more information



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