

Creating Space for Home Hospice Care

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Home hospice care is a growing trend that empowers hospice patients to be in charge of their dying process while still receiving the support they need for comfort and care. Creating space in your home to accommodate end of life care for a loved one brings both challenges and blessings. It takes thoughtful planning to arrange the space in a way that best meets the needs of the patient, the caregivers, and other members of the household.

Since every patient and situation is unique, the patient's needs and wishes should always be paramount. Considerations such as the size and layout of the house, the age of the patient and other household members are important factors. And, changes in arrangements will inevitably need to be made as the dying process progresses.

Most patients prefer to maintain as much normalcy as possible for as long as possible, like sleeping in their usual bed/room. This can work well in the early stages while they are still mobile, especially if there is a bathroom in close proximity. Safety is a growing concern, as the patient gets weaker. Often it is the inability to negotiate stairs that initiates the move to a hospital bed and relocation to another room or level of the house. It is at this turning point that I offer the following suggestions, although some of them could certainly be incorporated earlier, or even applied in a residential care facility.

Choice of room: It is important that the patient not feel isolated from family and daily activities nor unable to signal the need for help, and at the same time have their desire for peace and privacy honored. How that looks will vary with each individual, depending on age, cultural norms, family circumstances, and personality. The location definitely needs to be convenient for the caregivers and accessible to visitors as well.

Placement of bed: After choosing the most appropriate room, the placement of the bed within it is the next priority. When lying in bed, the patient should be able to see the entrance into the space and the entire room around him. This generally puts the head of the bed in the area of the room farthest away from the door, whether the bed is placed diagonally out from the corner, or close to the corner on either wall. In Feng Shui this is called Command Position. Command Position helps us to feel more at ease and in "command" because we can see what is happening all around us and who is coming and going in our space.

Clutter: Removing clutter and setting things up in an efficient, convenient manner enables the patient to do as much as they can for themselves and also makes it easier for the caregivers to do their job. There is much "paraphernalia" needed for hospice

care, so removing non-essential furniture and other items not serving a useful purpose makes room for the care related items. Patient comfort essentials such as drinking water, tissues, reading glasses, a phone, and self-administered medications, should be organized on a bedside table within easy reach. Supplies needed for cares can be kept on a different table, or better yet, in a convenient cupboard or chest, not “on display.”

Ambiance: While we want the hospice care space to be efficient, we also want it to be pleasant, even beautiful. Create an altar that reflects the spirituality of the patient within easy view of the bed. Icons or statuary depicting or symbolic of a deity, or perhaps a phenomenal nature photo will provide a focal point of comfort and inspiration for your loved one. Photographs of people they have a loving relationship with, who are not able to be physically present, can be hung near the bed or organized in a small, easy to handle album. Appeal to all the senses throughout the space with the use of color, texture, scents, music, favorite food treats (even if they can’t eat them), and lighting. More detail on each of these is provided below.

Lighting: Plenty of natural light is good as long as it can be controlled with blinds or curtains when it gets too intense. Artificial lighting should be bright where needed for reading and task areas, but ambient lighting such as table lamps with low wattage bulbs creates a warm and serene setting for visiting and rest. Candles are not appropriate for hospice rooms because they consume oxygen as they burn, and can cause an explosion if the patient uses supplemental oxygen.

Color: Surround your hospice patient in colors they love with décor, art, bedding, and clothing. Light, bright colors bring in a vibrancy and life force that can lift spirits and energy. Dark colors and earth tones are calm and restful and can create a womb-like environment.

Texture: Different textures add interest and dimension. Soft, silky fabrics in clothing and bedding are soothing, and somewhat slippery, which can be helpful when moving fragile bodies in bed. Rough, nubby surfaces are visually interesting and can be fun to touch, if not too stiff or prickly. Fur, especially while still inhabited by a live animal, is exciting and soothing simultaneously. Incorporating beloved pets into the care scene brings such joy and comfort and is highly encouraged.

Sound: The types of sound introduced may vary greatly over time. Initially the patient may enjoy their usual routine of TV news and programs, rock or country music, the sounds of children at play. Usually, as they begin to withdraw more from the outer world and in their last days and hours, music from their religious tradition or at least something inspirational or soothing is more appropriate. Loud, harsh sounds are not welcome in this environment, particularly if it is the voices of family members engaged in heated disagreement. Remember, that hearing is the last sense to go at the end of life, so as long as your loved one is still breathing, please spare them the painful sound of family arguments. Sharing pleasant or poignant stories, reassurances of love and forgiveness, and letting them know that, although you will miss them, you will be OK help them to let go of their earthly burdens and move on with peace in their hearts.

Scents: Keep artificial fragrances out of the hospice space as much as possible. Ask family members and visitors to refrain from wearing perfumes and colognes. Nothing smells sweeter than clean fresh air, so cracking a window even in cold weather can truly bring in “a breath of fresh air.” Use the purest, most natural products you are able to access for care of the patient. Pure, organically grown essential oils are the best choice for lightly scenting bath water, linens, or diffused in the room. A good quality lavender (*lavendula officinalis* or *augustifolia*) is the most universally perfect essential oil because of its versatility, mildness, and amazing healing qualities.

Tasty Treats: As the appetite begins to wane it is fair game to tempt your loved one with some of their favorite foods in small (sometimes minute) amounts, not necessarily for the nutritional value, just for the sensory pleasure of it. A raspberry with a speck of whipped cream savored on the tongue may elicit memories of carefree summer days of berry picking. A light smear of chocolate mousse on the lips incites thoughts of valentine hearts filled with delectable goodies. A bowl of washed and polished fruit is a feast for the eyes as well as a handy snack for patient or caregiver. Food is a symbol of hospitality and life sustaining energy---use it to good advantage.

The days and nights of caring for a dying loved one are long and hard. It is crucial for you as a caregiver to ask for and accept the help that will make it possible for you to accomplish the daunting task you have before you. You must also create your own sanctuary space where you can go to rest and be rejuvenated, whether for a few minutes, hours, or days. Incorporating Feng Shui principles into your respite space can support you in carrying this sacred work through to the finish.