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# Providing Emotional Support to the Family

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**Providing emotional support is one of the most important things that you can do for family members who have a loved one with a serious illness. The power of your caring presence may make a difference for the family members and they may always remember how much you helped them at one of life's most difficult times.**

### **What you can do to provide emotional support**

- Know your patient's history and current situation – this helps to build the family's trust and lets them know that you really care about their situation.
- Some family members often find comfort in reminiscing about their life with their loved one. Ask them what they used to do together or about memories that hold special meaning for them. Recognize the importance of helping the family know that their story telling and personal dialogue with the patient are extremely helpful and kept confidential.
- Support hopeful but realistic goals, such as looking forward to a special event or visit that the patient will be able to attend. It is appropriate to sit in silence.
- Acknowledge emotions with caring responses such as "It must be so hard for you." Avoid saying things like "I know how you feel" – no one ever really knows what it is like for someone else. It is important to be genuine, to listen, and be aware of your body language. Do not add your personal stories. This is about the patient and his/her family.
- Allow family members time to cry and comfort them. It is alright to share your emotions and cry with the family as long as the family does not have to comfort you.
- Understand that some people express their frustration with anger, or with angry accusations, or other expressions. Do not take these personally. Acknowledge their emotions with caring responses such as "It must be frustrating for you." Report these comments to your team.
- Remember that each family member responds to having a loved one with a serious illness in his/her own way. There is not a "right way" to express emotion.
- Ask family members how *they* are feeling. Sometimes when we are busy caring for the patient, we may overlook supporting the family.
- Sit with them as they tell you how they are doing and listen attentively to what they say.
- Observe how the family uses touch to communicate with each other. You may provide comfort through the use of touch if it is acceptable to the family member. Touch can be supportive for some people but may be culturally inappropriate for others. This may help you understand if it is appropriate to hold a hand or put an arm around a shoulder. Always ask for permission to touch the person.
- Ask the family member "What can I do for you and your loved one *today*?"
- Give the family member time to ask questions and if needed, let them know you will get help from the team to get their questions answered.
- Realize that people have their own way to cope, some may choose to be silent, or they may prefer to keep their feelings private and may not want outside support. Respect their style. Report changes in the patients and/or family's emotional state to the interdisciplinary team.

- Be sure the family has phone numbers to reach the office or the on-call service at any time. Do not give your personal phone number to the patient or family.
- Maintain your professional boundaries.

**Other HPNA Teaching Sheets on are available at [www.HPNA.org](http://www.HPNA.org)**

#### Reference

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