

# How To Help A Friend In Grief

(NAPSA)—Being sensitive to others about the death of a loved one is always important, but particularly so when dealing with those of a different cultural background or faith. They might have specific traditions, ideas and attitudes toward illness and death that affect how they act and feel at this challenging time.

Dr. William Johnson, a medical director for VITAS Innovative Hospice Care® in Chicago, explains that many African-Americans grieve with extended family and friends, and spirituality is important to them. Funerals are a focal point of the grieving process, he adds, providing an occasion to reconnect. Most African-American funerals include pastors from several churches who often speak at the service.

“But what’s really important at these funerals is the food,” says Dr. Johnson. “Family, friends and neighbors will bring traditional soul food, like fried chicken, greens and corn bread to the family’s home. Then everyone gathers afterward to eat and socialize—sometimes late into the night.”

In the Hispanic culture, people tend to return to their religious roots in search of meaning, grief resolution and solace. They also are open with their emotions. It is not unusual for Hispanics to cry openly and express their pain or sorrow. Also in Hispanic families, healthcare decisions often include the extended family, which represents additional challenges to the attending physician caring for his or her patient at the end of life.

“If my patient’s grandson tells me he doesn’t want his grandfather to know he’s dying from cancer, then I would never divulge that information. On the other hand, I would leave the door open to discuss the reasons for this, with conflict resolution and the patient’s best interest in mind,” explains Dr. Freddie Negron, VITAS’ medical director in Greater Miami.

Within Jewish homes the death and grieving rituals can differ, also, depending on whether a family is Orthodox, Conservative or Reform. For instance, after someone dies, Jewish families traditionally sit “shiva” following the funeral. Shiva traditionally involves friends coming to visit the mourners at home to express con-

## Tips On Being Sensitive Toward Terminally Ill Patients and their Families

- First, recognize your friend or loved one is in pain and suffering; be sincere in offering your sympathies. Really listen if he or she needs to talk.
- Next, be aware that different cultures have different ways of responding to the illness or death of a loved one.
- Then, if you are unaware of your friend’s traditions or rituals, ask for information and guidance.
- Finally, respect the differences between your cultures, and the wishes of your friend, even if it seems unfamiliar or unusual.

Source: VITAS Innovative Hospice Care®



dolences and provide emotional support. It also includes rituals like covering mirrors in the mourner’s home, sitting on low stools and wearing a garment that was torn or cut during the funeral. While the traditional period for sitting shiva is seven days following the funeral, Dr. Barry Kinzbruner, VITAS’ national medical director and an ordained orthodox rabbi, explains that the actual length of time that any family sits shiva might vary, with less traditional families sometimes sitting for three days or occasionally less.

Spiritual guidance also often is sought at the end of life, which makes it vital to choose healthcare professionals who are sensitive to the needs of various cultures and ethnic groups. VITAS, which provides spiritual, psychosocial and physical care for terminally ill patients, has clergy of all faiths available for patients and their families.

“Showing friends and family that you can be sensitive to their needs is especially important during a time of illness or crisis,” says Hugh Westbrook, an ordained United Methodist Minister and VITAS Chairman. “If you are uncertain how to best meet those needs, it’s always a good idea to simply ask.”

For more information on hospice care, contact VITAS, the nation’s leading hospice care provider, at 1-800-93-VITAS.