

Notes to the Leader for Life Event 14 – Serious Illness

Our society is notorious for its adoration of youth and health, and its denial of illness and death. This denial creates a barrier between the afflicted person and the rest of society; the person facing this fate seems to have stepped outside of the boundaries of our society even before s/he has actually become debilitated or is dying. The person becomes isolated, set apart from his friends by the conventions of society at the very time s/he most needs our support.

SGM is an ideal place where a member who has received the terrifying news of a terminal or very threatening illness, and is in shock, depressed, or angry, can start the process of facing the news, coming to an acceptance of the situation, and putting things into perspective. Here are some of the many benefits of sharing:

- Giving support and easing distress is a process that benefits both the supporter and the person in difficulty.
- Talking about a terminal illness creates a bond at a time when there is the risk of isolation and estrangement, exactly when friends are most needed.
- Talking about a distressful situation can help relieve the stress.
- Even if we don't have any answers, talking can provide relief.
- It is good to help a person talk about what is distressing to her/him, because thoughts that are shut out might eventually cause harm. Not talking about a fear usually makes it bigger. It has been proven that patients who do not have someone to talk to usually have higher incidences of anxiety and depression.
- Bottled up feelings may also cause shame. Many people are ashamed of their fears and anxieties.
- By listening with open hearts, the group will help reduce the fear, the anxiety and the shame and facilitate the member to regain his/her own sense of perspective.
- The more the group tries to understand the feelings of the person with a threatening illness, the more support it is providing.
- And let's not forget humor. It is one of the very human ways of dealing with things that at first seem impossible to deal with.
- A safe environment within the group could help to ease the transition from "It won't happen to me (although I know one day it might)," to "It really might happen to me," to "It's happening to me."

Encourage Counseling

When you hear about a serious illness affecting a member (or spouse or partner), please encourage the member to contact the ministers, who are available for counseling. Unless the member specifically asks you to keep the information confidential, we ask that you also contact the ministers on your own just to make sure they know. (You can tell the member that you will do this.) Remember that you, as the group leader, may also seek advice from our ministers about how to help with this situation.

Intended Use

Before using the ritual, you should first ask whether the member is open to it on this day or any day. If the member is reluctant, you might gently point out that we are here to minister to each other, to offer caring and support. You might discuss some of the reasons listed above.

Following the ritual, s/he may also have the benefit of hearing from others who have had a similar experience.

This ritual is intended to be used as an addition to the normal content for the day. The goals of the ritual are to:

- Give comfort and acknowledge the fear and pain.
- Give the person a chance to share something about their situation.
- Let the person know they are not alone.

By setting aside time for this ritual, the member knows that s/he will have the group's undivided attention later on and may be able to focus on the intended topic of the session. However, if the member cannot focus on the regular content, use your best judgment about how and when to support him/her.

Two copies of the Order of Worship are printed on each 8 ½ x 11 sheet. You should cut the sheet in half and have copies ready in your notebook so they can be used when the need arises. The ritual should take 15 to 20 minutes.

Preliminaries

Be sure that everyone understands that the sharing is only for the member. Everyone will get a chance to wish them well or offer a few words of comfort late in the ritual.

Resources

- These notes are based on "I don't know what to say. . ." How to help and support someone who is dying by Dr. Robert Buckman, Vintage Books, 1992.
- Kitchen Table Wisdom by Rachel Naomi Remen and Spontaneous Healing by Andrew Weil offer uplifting stories of people dealing with life-threatening illnesses, as well as some wise advice.
- The PlaneTree Health Library is an excellent source of information about any medical condition. 98 North 17th Street, San Jose, CA 95112. (408) 977-4549. www.planetreesanjose.org. It's free (and there is free parking), it's open to the public Tuesday - Saturday including some nights, and individual appointments are also available.