

Tips on having death and dying discussions with culturally diverse families

This factsheet is for anyone supporting a seriously ill person or their family as part of their work role. It provides suggestions for discussions about death and dying with families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, who may or may not speak English.

It is important to be aware of the different perspectives and preferences in relation to understanding illness, receiving bad news, sharing of illness related information, what is expected of family in relation to caring, use of alternative medicines, preferences for end of life and after death care, burial preferences, and bereavement and grief practices.

Avoid making assumptions based on your own culture or on stereotypes. Instead, be open to different perspectives and encourage families to talk about what is important to them.

In any culture, death and dying is a very sensitive topic. Before starting any discussions around death and dying ensure that there is privacy and confidentiality, and that the family feels comfortable. Let the family lead the way by asking open questions about what they already understand, what their concerns are, and what is most important to them. Talk less and listen more until you can understand their perspective, priorities and concerns.



Organise an interpreter for important conversations

Organise an interpreter for important conversations around diagnosis and end of life care discussions so that important information is not missed.

Ask the family what their preferred terms are to talk about end of life

You can mirror the terms that they are using. Some cultures prefer not to use terms 'death', 'dying' or 'died'. They prefer to use 'passing away' or 'getting closer to their final days'. You can look at the English versions of the translated CarerHelp resources for each culture to see the preferred terminology.

Explain the concept of palliative care and hospice

In many cultures these terms are unfamiliar and there is no equivalent translation.



Explore health beliefs at the end of life

Some cultures feel that discussing death and dying means they have given up or will bring bad luck to the sick person and maintaining hope is very important. Ensure they know that the focus is on making sure that the sick person remains as comfortable as possible and that the family also are supported during this difficult time.

Some cultures will be more uncomfortable with sensitive topics and with discussion of bodily functions.

Some cultures feel that it is very important to keep the sick person clean at the end of life and maintain their dignity.

Some cultures will not want to leave the person alone, or even with other relatives. They will feel that it is their obligation to stay with the person. If you feel they would benefit from a break, you may suggest getting a good night's sleep in a nearby bedroom while another family member sits with the sick person.

There are many other relevant and important health beliefs that may be important to the family you are working with and supporting. Take the time to find out what is important to this family.

Explore spiritual or religious perspective around the end of life

Be open to religious or spiritual discussions and ask the family 'what is important for us to know or do during this time?' or 'would you like your faith leader to be present at this time?'

Give families a warning that there will be some difficult conversations

Before you start talking about diagnosis of a terminal condition or other 'bad news', gently let people know that there will be a difficult topic discussed.

Be prepared for emotional reactions

All families, regardless of culture, will have different emotional reactions to stressful situations. Sometimes families will express negative emotions towards the health worker or support worker in relation to the patient's illness or death. This can be difficult for everyone involved. Talk to your manager if you require support.

Useful links

The [ELDAC website](#) has a great summary of culturally and linguistically diverse groups in Australia within aged care.

View the Australian Government Department of Health booklet for [Actions to support older Culturally and Linguistically Diverse people](#).

For resources on a range of topics in multiple languages, visit the [Health Translations Directory](#).

FECCA is a peak national organisation that represents culturally and linguistically diverse people in Australia. The [FECCA website](#) has many good resources and you can also find CALD groups at a state and local level.

[Palliative Care Victoria](#) has several useful resources including a report on ten cultural groups in relation to end of life.

The Centre for Health and Ethnicity has a useful [Cultural Considerations in Health Assessment Tip Sheet](#) for working with migrant and refugee populations to conduct health assessments.

The [SBS Cultural Atlas](#) allows you to search by country. It provides large amounts of useful information about the culture, history, do's and don'ts, etc.

Visit the [National Interpreting and Translation Service website](#) to book an interpreter online or phone 131 450.

PalliAGED has a [Culturally Responsive Care Tip Sheet for Careworkers](#).