



The Role of a Massage Therapist at End of Life Care

To be a healing presence. There comes a point when massage as a therapist knows it is no longer called for. Instead therapists are called to bring forth something that comes from deep within--their ability to simply be present. Rather than revert to prescribed techniques, therapists must trust the simplicity of human compassion and their capacity to offer it to another. A therapist's best resources when serving the dying person doesn't come from the techniques they've studied but from within their own hearts. They become the space-holder, allowing the dying person his/her own process and experience, and sometimes serve as an anchor for family members and other caregivers.

To enhance the quality of life. Doing what is called for in the moment to ease any form of discomfort is the best approach to take. One minute a therapist might be offer a gentle foot massage or hold a hand and the next, moisten dry lips or help turn someone on their side to make breathing easier. Mother Teresa once said, "Let us touch the dying, the poor, the lonely and the unwanted according to the graces we have received and let us not be ashamed or slow to do the humble work." Hospice service is about doing the humble work of each moment as it unfolds.

Therapists must be willing to let go of their idea of what a "regular" session looks like. A session with a dying person may include gentle massage, focused touch or no touch at all. The length of a session varies according to what is called for at the time. The key is sound clinical judgment but also letting the rules go to truly serve the person. Confidence in skills is what allows the therapist to listen to inner guidance and respond accordingly. Sometimes they really have to stop doing and simply BE.

It is essential to have a repertoire of skilled touch approaches that are appropriate when the situation calls for them. Therapists should be knowledgeable about some the techniques that are safe and beneficial. Sometimes the most compassionate thing that can be offered is holding a hand or the feet while focusing attention on the inner wholeness of the person you are touching. It is important that therapists center themselves prior to making any physical contact.

Moving a part of the body for positional change and to ease pressure is a good technique to implement. Change the adjustment of the bed or add support of pillows under the arms or legs. Mindfully adjust the pillows under the head. Lifting a part of the body and holding it up for a moment relieves pressure.

Synchronized breathing is effective to help ease difficult breathing. It involves synchronizing the breath with simple massage strokes. First the therapist synchronizes the rhythm of their own breath with slow effleurage strokes; breathing in as the hands move distally. Then, the therapist breathes out as their hands move proximally. The sound of the breath should be audible. This is a silent interaction. No words are necessary to encourage a natural synchronization with the rhythms of the therapist's breath and touch. If the person cannot tolerate physical contact then the touch can be removed and only the breath should be focused upon.



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