

Not a season to be jolly: How to deal with dying during the holidays

December 19 2018, by Karen Anderson



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Dying doesn't disappear at Christmas. For those who know death will come soon but don't know exactly when, the festive season, when the air is thick with "joy", can be particularly unsettling.

As a psychotherapist working in [palliative care](#), I often see distressed

patients in the lead up to Christmas. Patients can find decorations and carols being played in shopping centres particularly triggering, reminding them this may be their last Christmas.

The [dying](#) person may often face an inner struggle. They may want to be involved in activities but may not have the physical and emotional capacity to deal with the heightened stress and stimulation. Some may prefer to sit quietly and watch proceedings without necessarily being amongst the action, but still feeling like they are a part of things.

Regardless of the the type of life-threatening illness, and whether an infant, child, adolescent, young, middle or older aged person is dying, both the patient and their [family members may experience deep distress](#). You may feel the impending death, and [your family](#) the anticipated loss. These gloomy or morbid feelings might clash with the celebrations of Christmas.

Whether it's you or a loved one [facing dying](#) at this time of year, there are some practical tips available that draw from a wealth of [research](#) and [experience](#).

If you are the one dying

Where possible, plan ahead how you want to spend your Christmas festive period so you don't place additional pressure on yourself. Think about [the most comfortable arrangements](#) for you. Where and with whom do you want to spend Christmas Day? Which is the best time of day for you to manage different activities? Let people close to you know your thoughts.

The [process of dying](#) is unique to each individual. It may be quick or slow, spread over weeks or days. Palliative care specialist at Stanford University, [Dr. James Hallenbeck](#) wrote: "For those who do die

gradually, there's often a final, rapid slide that happens in roughly the last few days of life—a phase known as 'active dying'. A person may begin to lose their senses and desires. First hunger and then thirst are lost. Speech is lost next, followed by vision. The last senses to go are usually hearing and touch."

We have an ideal perception around death, that a dying person wants to be surrounded by family in their final hours. But some people in the active phase of dying may actually [prefer to be alone](#). And while this may be difficult for family members to hear, you can give yourself permission to ask for whatever you would like.

Studies indicate some dying people may feel they're [a burden](#) to [their family](#). Other people have difficulty saying "no" because they don't want to disappoint or hurt others, or they may fear conflict. Know your limitations and don't push beyond these to simply please others.

Have kind consideration for yourself. Remember [you are a person](#) before you're a patient. And remember it's OK to say "no" and forgo invitations.

If you're caring for a loved one who is dying

Essential care demands such as helping the person you are caring for to feed, go to the toilet, and clean themselves, will not disappear at Christmas. If your loved one is [dying at home](#), they may require unrelenting attention.

Be realistic with your expectations. This can be a different and simpler Christmas than others. Allow for spontaneity. Try not to be a martyr and delegate and ask others to help. Doing so enables others to feel they're included and contributing in special ways.

Listen to the person who is dying. Let them speak if and when they can. Gauge their mood and [be guided by them](#). There is value in [being present](#) with the dying person without talking.

Heightened noise and activity, which often go hand in hand with the [holiday season](#), can create distress for a terminally ill person. Ask family and friends to roster their visits over the different days of Christmas so as not to [tire](#), overwhelm or stress the dying person.

People can think children don't understand death and wouldn't be able to cope with the concept, so often they may protect them by hiding it. But children are attuned to the [family](#) emotional dynamics. They know something is happening and they need their feelings validated. It can be helpful to get children involved in taking care of someone who is dying.

Research shows [children do manage](#) themselves well in the face of dying, when adults support them to deal with their responses.

Expect things can change quite suddenly. Have a backup plan ready. Keep emergency contact details readily on hand always.

When dying is happening at Christmas, it's best to allow all feelings to be expressed rather than simply putting on a brave or smiling face. Feelings are a natural response to suffering and what may be a stressful situation.

It's mostly important to remember not to hide your needs and feelings but to speak and [communicate](#) with your loved ones. Especially when dying may be imminent.

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