



Tips and Tricks for Engaging with Loved Ones Who Are Having ELEs

Having a conversation about end-of-life experiences (ELEs) with your loved one doesn't have to feel overwhelming. Many people feel that they are not qualified or trained to talk about ELEs. In reality, it is a conversation that simply requires sensitivity, openness, and courage in exploring the experience together.

Each person's ELE is unique to them, and while there is no standard formula to follow, we do offer some insights, tips, and tricks that you may find helpful when talking with your loved one. We also recommend that you go through our Self-Reflection Exercise to prepare yourself for ELE conversations with your loved one.

Tip 1: "Give Permission" to Talk About ELEs

Many people are waiting for someone to give them an opportunity or "permission" to talk about their ELEs. They may feel that they can't share their experience or that they will be perceived differently, and ultimately decide to hold themselves back. This can be a missed opportunity for connection. Therefore, it can be very helpful to give the dying individual the space to talk about their ELE by being the first to initiate the conversation in a supportive manner. Simply leading with the question, "Have you been dreaming?" can be very powerful.

Tip 2: Validate and Normalize Their ELE

It is very important to validate and normalize ELEs as a common occurrence in the dying process. Research suggests that people are afraid to share their ELEs for fear of judgment, ridicule, or being viewed as losing touch with reality. Therefore, reassurance and willingness to listen is critical. This can also serve as a great opportunity to deepen your connection with the dying individual.

Tip 3: Continue to Listen with Empathy

Empathic listening means you have the sincere intention of understanding the other person. It is required when you wish to bear witness to your loved one's experience in a non-judgmental way. It is really about paying attention to the person who is sharing with you. This requires a willingness to talk less and listen more. It also requires the recognition that in this moment, it's all about the dreamer. Empathic listening allows people to feel safe, acknowledged, and understood, and helps create a safe space in which they can share without fear of judgment or criticism. It is then that your loved one can share authentically what they are experiencing, allowing you to glimpse into their inner world.

Tip 4: Continue to Be an Active Listener

As these experiences are being shared with you, continue to take note of what your loved one is saying in a caring way. Active listening is a process in which you are fully concentrating on what is being said, rather than passively hearing what is said. It involves listening for content, intent, and the feelings of your loved one as they share their ELEs. It is hard work and requires you to be fully present, meaning that you engage your mind on listening to your loved one without focusing on anything else or having your mind drift off. Ask open-ended questions, express (minimal) verbal encouragement, and ask for clarification. Use tracking language like “I see...,” “I hear...,” or “I notice...,” or name emotions with statements such as, “It seems like you’re happy.” Reflect back feelings and content and summarize your loved one’s words to show that you truly want to understand. Continue to show your attentiveness through your non-verbal cues, such as appropriate postures, facial expressions, and eye contact. Actively listening allows you to better understand their experience and build trust.

Tip 5: Be Still and Curious

Resist the urge to fill silence with your thoughts and insights. Allow your loved one to use the silence to process their thoughts internally, and then let them break the silence when they are ready to share. Often, silence allows you to deepen your conversation when your loved one is given the time to reflect and subsequently share more details that otherwise would’ve been lost had you interjected. Throughout this conversation, remaining curious and open (instead of dismissive) combined with being comfortable with silence can help break down imaginary walls between you and your loved one.

Tip 6: Allow Your Loved One to Interpret Their Own Experience

One important thing to remember is to respect and honor the dying person’s needs and be aware of imposing your own beliefs about ELEs, death, and dying. Allow your loved one to make sense of their ELEs in their own way. You do not have to agree with what they believe, but working to understand their perspective is invaluable. If your loved one finds great comfort and meaning in this experience through their own interpretation, honor and respect it.