

## Transitions... A Guide to Approaching the Final Hours of Life

*We hope to help you prepare for some of the natural changes that may occur near the end of life. We also hope that knowing what to expect will reduce fear and worry. Your efforts to provide understanding, care and comfort through this difficult time are commendable and will be time and effort you will be glad to have spent.*



...a partnership between



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**As a person comes closer to dying, you will see three kinds of changes happening;** holding on, closing down and letting go. **Closing down** is a natural process of body systems (heart, lungs, kidneys and others) gradually shutting down. **Letting go** is the emotional, spiritual process of releasing the spirit from the body, the world and loving relationships. Letting go and closing down are normally linked together. The most helpful thing we can do at this time is to support the person with love and understanding.

## Closing Down: Body Changes

These changes can happen in any order; most people do not experience all of them. These signs appear hours or days before death.

A person's vital organs depend on each other. When the body begins to close down, the weakest organ often begins to fail first and it affects all the others. This closing down of the vital organs can contribute to the changes described below.

**Eating and Drinking Less.** The person's appetite declines. The body is conserving energy. Do not urge or force food and drink. Eating and drinking can cause discomfort now.

*What can you do?* Chips of ice or a spoonful of frozen juice might be refreshing. If the person is able to swallow, fluids can be given in small amounts (ask your doctor or VON nurse, if involved).

**Changes in urine.** The person's urine normally decreases and becomes "tea" colored. This is due to less fluid intake as well as slower circulation through the kidneys.

**Incontinence.** The person may lose control of bladder and/or bowel.

*What can you do?* Talk with your doctor or VON nurse, if involved about ways to keep your loved one clean and comfortable.

**Restlessness.** The person may be restless. They might repeat actions such as pulling at bed linen or clothing. This happens, in part, because of slowed oxygen circulation or perhaps due to the build up of toxins in the kidney or liver.

*What can you do?* Allow these to happen - don't try and stop them. To have a calming effect, speak in a quiet, natural way, lightly massage feet or hands, read to the person or play soothing music. Give the person something familiar and soft to hold. Medication may be needed - ask your nurses.

**Disorientation.** The person could seem confused about the time, place and identity of people they know.

*What can you do?* Let the person know what you are doing to do them, i.e. cleaning the mouth. Tell them who you are by name before you speak. Speak softly, clearly and truthfully. When you need to do something important for the

patient's comfort say so, like "it is time to take your medicine," and explain why, "so you won't begin to hurt."

**Sleeping.** The person is likely to spend more time sleeping and appear less alert. They will sometimes be harder to wake. This is normal and is due in part to changes in the body's metabolism.

*What can you do?* Sit with your loved one, hold hands and speak during those times when he or she is most alert. Speak normally even though there may not be an answer. Assume the person can hear you. Speak when you enter the room, say who you are, why you are there. Carry on a conversation as though you are being heard. Hearing is the last sense to disappear.

**Congestion.** The person may make gurgling sounds. These sounds can become very loud. They are caused by secretions in the back of the throat and lungs. Suctioning usually increases the secretions and causes discomfort.

*What can you do?* Gently turn the head to one side and raise the head. This allows the secretions to drain. You may also wipe the mouth with a moist cloth. There are medications your doctor can order that might help dry these secretions. Discuss this with medical staff.

**Temperature Changes.** The person's feet, legs, hands and arms can become increasingly cool to the touch. At the same time color of the skin often changes. The skin sometimes becomes splotchy blue. This is normal. The circulation of blood is slowing and being reserved for vital organs.

*What can you do?* If needed, keep the person warm with a blanket or light cover but *do not use an electric blanket*, as this could burn. The person may feel very warm, a fan and a light covering may help. Sponge the patient with lukewarm or cool washcloth. Change sweat soaked clothing and bed linens.

**Changes in breathing.** The person's regular breathing can change. Breathing can become irregular. For example, shallow breaths may be followed with 5 to 60 seconds or periods of rapid, shallow, pant-like breathing. Breath pattern changes are a normal part of dying and can come with slower circulation.

*What can you do?* Elevate the head and/or turn the person on one side for comfort. Hold hands or speak gently. A fan directed so a light breeze is touching the cheek area may comfort.

## Letting Go: Spiritual Changes

Preparing for death normally involves complex and natural changes in the way the dying person responds to relationships and the world around him or her. You can be enormously helpful through understanding and accepting this transition.

**Decreased Interest in Relationships.** The person's energy will be low and can limit how much they can pay attention to friends and family.

**Withdrawal.** The person may be less alert, withdrawn or unresponsive. This happens when one is detaching from surroundings and relationships and can occur at any stage of “letting go.” Be quietly present.

**Vision-Like Experiences.** The person may speak with others who have already died, or see places you cannot. This is usually **not caused** by hallucination or drug reaction. Affirm these experiences as normal for someone who is dying.

**Restlessness.** The person can be restless or anxious. This might mean that something is still unresolved and prevents them from letting go. You can help calm them by talking about a favorite place or experience the person enjoyed; reading meaningful passages; playing soothing music or giving assurance that it is OK to let go.

**Unusual Communication.** The person might make “out of character” statements, gestures or requests. Such changes show readiness to say “good-bye.”

**Giving Permission.** A dying person may try to hold on in order to be sure people left behind will continue to cope. Assure the person that it is all right to leave when he or she is ready.

**Saying Good-Bye.** When the person is ready to die and you are able to accept the parting, say “good-bye.” This acknowledges and allows the final release. Tears are normal and natural when saying good-bye.

## At the Time of Death

You and your family may need to think about and discuss what you will do if you are present at the time of death.

Signs of death include; no breathing, no heartbeat, the bowel and bladder may empty, eyelids may be slightly open, and the mouth may be open as the jaw relaxes.

If you think your loved one is close to death or has died, call the VON (if they have been involved in your family member’s care) and carry out any arrangements you have made with the doctor in advance. If death has been expected, **do not call 911**, police or ambulance. Call your funeral director when you are ready. They can arrange to have remains taken away and have the doctor sign the certificate of death.

The experience of dying is different for every person and family. It is important to do whatever is helpful at the time. Everyone copes with death in different ways. Do what feels best for you. After your loved one has passed on, take as much time as you need to say your goodbyes.

## A Guide for Post-Death Arrangements

**Funeral Arrangements.** The funeral home director will help you make arrangements. You will meet with him or her soon to plan and prepare an obituary (if this has not already been done).

The director can also assist in the purchase of a burial site. They provide the burial vault, casket, and funeral arrangements. As a wide range of costs are available, be sure to ask the price for each item. Some are optional. If the body has to be transported (plane, train, etc.) to another location, the law requires a transit permit from the country of death and that the body be embalmed.

Cremation can be arranged by most funeral homes if this is what the family chooses.

**Death Certificate.** The funeral director will notify the Department of Vital Statistics for the province. The funeral director can get certified copies of the death certificate for the family. **You need several copies** for closing business matters. (*See also Necessary Documents Checklist*)

**Will.** A will must be filed even if the terms of the will have been satisfied. The first step for filing the will, if you choose to handle it yourself, is to take the will, along with the Certificate of Death, to the Probate Court Office in your area. The clerk will assist you and can offer limited advice. It is not required by law to probate the will, but it must be filed in the country where the death occurred. A lawyer can help with this decision. You may save money in the long run by consulting a lawyer.

**Other Benefits.** Laws governing benefits to survivors change frequently. There may be benefits available for veterans toward a burial plot and marker from Veterans Affairs Canada. Plan to go when you feel well; go armed with patience. (*See also Necessary Documents Checklist*)

## Looking after You

Remember to take care of yourself. If you're tired, you'll have a harder time making decisions and being effective to those who need you.

... Eat light, frequent meals. Go for walks. Rest as often as you can.

If possible, share this time with close family and friends. Take turns and have your own personal time with your loved one.

*In the depth of your hopes and desires lies your silent knowledge of the beyond;  
And like seeds dreaming beneath the snow your heart dreams of spring.  
Trust the dreams, for in them is hidden the gate to eternity.*

**Khalil Gibran**



**For further information on programs and services  
of the AVH Palliative Care Program, please call (902) 542-6303.**

# Necessary Documents: Checklist

Estate planning and management is best done as much as possible prior to critical illness and death. Sometimes this is not possible or has not been done. This checklist provides a reference tool only and is not intended as an exhaustive list, nor will it apply equally in all circumstances. In settling an estate, there are many important issues (including time limits) that may arise. You should seek the advice of a lawyer.

Priority documents that you should have with you when visiting financial and government institutions (see contact info. on reverse):

Document:	Where to Obtain:
Birth Certificate (yours)	Dept of Vital Statistics, Access Nova Scotia, Provincial Government
Social Insurance Number (SIN)	Social Development Canada local office, Federal Government
Marriage Certificate (Female not receiving CPP)	Dept of Vital Statistics, Access Nova Scotia, Provincial Government
Medical Certificate of Death & certified copies	Dept of Vital Statistics, Access Nova Scotia, Provincial Government
Funeral Directors Statement of Death	Local funeral home staff
Copy of most recent Will	Family files, lawyer's office, executor

Forms for the following may be obtained from your funeral home, Access Nova Scotia and your local post office;

<p><b>As soon as possible, complete all government forms pertaining to :</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nova Scotia Vital Statistics</li> <li>• Canada Pension Plan(CPP)Survivor's Pension / CPP Death Benefits forms</li> <li>• Revenue Canada form for preparing income tax returns for deceased persons and/ or the Closing of Business, Partners, Societies</li> <li>• Old Age Security Pensions and Supplements forms</li> <li>• Veterans Affairs forms (members of the Royal Canadian Legion will assist you)</li> <li>• Either return all pension cheques (if you are entitled to the cheques, the government will return them to you, in your name) or do not cash any pension cheques until you receive direction from the pension office.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Contact within sixty days:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Life insurance companies for instructions on obtaining benefits of policies</li> <li>• Dept of Motor Vehicles at Access Nova Scotia (re; transfer of registration and ownership of vehicles, boats, trailers to the estate).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Complete within 60 days to one year:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Request an Annual automatic Debit Account list from the deceased's bank to aid in stopping automatic deductions from the deceased's bank accounts.</li> <li>• Pay bills of the deceased – funeral, credit cards, etc and keep all records for Canada Customs and Revenue Agency and banks.</li> <li>• Close all bank accounts and cancel all credit cards in the deceased's name.</li> <li>• Transfer to the estate all stocks, bonds, RRSP's, RIFF's &amp; Treasury Bills,</li> <li>• Check with a lawyer as to whether or not the will needs to be probated. This will depend on the wording of the will, the type of assets involved and or the type of beneficiaries.</li> </ul>

**Other documents that you may need are:** Birth certificates for the deceased and his/her dependents, provincial health card, life insurance policies, last year's income tax return, stocks, bonds, RIFF's, RRSP's, bank passbooks, safety deposit box keys, credit cards, military discharge papers, real estate and property deeds, loan and mortgage documents, latest pay stubs from employer, all vehicle (auto, boat, trailer, etc.) registrations and insurance policies.

**Important Phone Numbers:**

**ACCESS NOVA SCOTIA:** 1-800-670-4357  
<http://www.gov.ns.ca/snsmr/>

**DEPT OF VITAL STATISTICS:** 1-877-848-2578  
(for births, deaths marriage records)  
<http://www.gov.ns.ca/snsmr/>

**SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT CANADA – CANADA PENSION PLAN & OLD AGE SECURITY OFFICE:** 1-800-277-9914  
[http://www.sdc.gc.ca/en/gateways/nav/top\\_nav/program/isp.shtml](http://www.sdc.gc.ca/en/gateways/nav/top_nav/program/isp.shtml)

**VETERANS AFFAIRS CANADA:** 1-866-522-2122  
<http://www.vac-acc.gc.ca/providers/sub.cfm?source=salute/july2004/fund>

**CANADA REVENUE AGENCY (Revenue Canada):** 1-800-267-6999  
<http://www.cra-arc.gc.ca/tax/individuals/topics-index/d-gen-e.html>

**SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT CANADA (formerly HUMAN RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT CANADA)** 1-800-206-7218  
<http://www.sdc.gc.ca/en/gateways/topics/sxn-gxr.shtml>

**Personal Phone Numbers:**

**Financial institution (s):** \_\_\_\_\_

**Funeral Home:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Insurance Company (ies):** \_\_\_\_\_

**Lawyer:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Credit Card Company (ies):** \_\_\_\_\_

