



# Chaplain Chat

Education and inspiration from the Hamilton Hospice chaplain -- January 2026

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## Navigating Family Dynamics at End-of-Life

End-of-life care can bring out some of the most emotional, vulnerable moments a family can experience and can strain even the strongest relationships. Emotions run high, roles shift, and stress can lead to miscommunication or conflict. But with patience, clear communication, and a shared goal of honoring your loved one's wishes, families can move through this difficult time with greater understanding and peace.

### 1) Acknowledge Different Emotions & Needs

Hospice brings families face-to-face with grief, fear, and sometimes regrets. It is common for each family member to process the situation differently:

- One sibling might focus on comfort care, while another pushes for more medical intervention.
- One family member may micromanage every decision, while another seems distant or avoidant, struggling to accept the situation.
- A spouse may guard the quiet time your loved one craves, while an adult child might want the house to be full of laughter.

Understanding that everyone is grieving in their own way can help you respond with empathy rather than frustration.

### 2) Practice Clear, Respectful Communication

Communication breakdown is one of the biggest sources of family tension during hospice care. When conflicts arise, try to address them directly with the person(s) involved. Avoid the temptation to talk about each other behind backs. Focus on finding solutions. Keep these tips in mind:

#### Use "I" Statements:

- Saying, "I feel overwhelmed with the current care schedule" is more constructive than "You're not doing enough to help."
- Keep the focus on your feelings. For example, "I feel worried we're not doing enough" versus "You're giving up."

#### Be Direct and Honest

- Express your concerns calmly.
- Ask open-ended questions like, "How are you feeling about Mom's care plan?"

#### Stay focused:

- Avoid bringing up unrelated past conflicts.
- Keep conversations focused on the patient's needs and well-being.
- Try to understand the feelings of another.
- Instead of pointing fingers, try acknowledging the pain you share: "I think we're all just trying to do our best in an impossible situation."

### **3) Set Boundaries**

For the patient and caregiver alike, visitors can provide a welcome distraction or a strain, depending on the day. Agree on visiting times that suit your loved one's energy. It is okay to say no.

### **4) Share Responsibilities and Lean on Each Other's Strengths**

Due to factors such as geographic proximity, caregiving abilities, and work obligations, the burden of care for a loved one rarely falls equally on all family members. This can cause resentments and disagreements to arise and risks overwhelming those who are carrying the heaviest load. When possible, share caregiving tasks based on each family members' strengths and availability. Some family members may be best at providing hands-on caregiving of the hospice patient or providing emotional support. Others may play supporting roles such as handling finances, meal preparation, or running errands.

### **5) Focus on Your Loved One**

No one is ever ready to lose someone they deeply love. The hospice journey is about your loved one, no one else. When conflict or disagreements arise, whether about pain management, visitors, or future plans, ask each other "What honors them most right now?"

- Try to remember that you all want what is best for the patient, even if your approaches differ.
- Remember that this time is limited. Focus on connection rather than control.
- Acts of kindness, patience, and collaboration can replace tension with peace—and create meaningful memories, even in difficult times.

### **6) Seek Assistance**

Remember, you are not alone. There are resources and people available to help the patient and the family. The social worker and chaplain are part of the hospice team and are available to provide emotional and spiritual support. Additionally, the social worker can connect families with local resources such as Meals on Wheels and food boxes. She can also set up respite care for the patient to give caregivers a break.

### **Final Thoughts**

Hospice care is not just about the patient—it is about the whole family. The stress of losing a loved one can strain even the strongest relationships. But with trying to understand another's point of view, clear communication, and the support of hospice professionals, families can find unity and shared strength in the midst of sorrow.

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