

## Keeping in touch if you can't be with someone who is so ill that they might die

In this difficult time of coronavirus, we are all restricted from getting together with friends and family in the way we would like. This is particularly painful when someone important to us is so seriously ill that they might die, and we can't be physically near them. Even though they are surrounded by people who are caring gently and kindly for them, it can be very hard to be apart from them. If this is your situation, here are some ways that you and your loved one can feel closer together, even at a distance. These ideas are intended to help whether or not there is a hope that your loved ones will recover.

The Invisible String is a children's book that describes the connections between people, even at a distance. If you have children in the family you might like to have a look at the book. If you like it, you could show it to the children and use it to introduce some of the ideas below, explaining that these are ways of keeping your 'invisible strings' in place.

If your loved one is being cared for in hospital, hospice or a care home, check with staff caring for them which of the ideas below would work at the moment and ask them to let you know if this changes.

### Phones and tablets

If your loved one is going into hospital or hospice, try and make sure they take a phone or tablet and charger with them. If their screen is locked with a pin number, think about taking this off, or sharing it with healthcare staff so that they can support your loved one to make a phone or video call.

If your loved one will be speaking by video with children in the family, remember to prepare the child for what they may look like, particularly if there have been any changes since the last time the child saw them. Prepare them for what they might see in the room (e.g. if there is any medical equipment such as oxygen tubes, you can explain that it is there to help them breathe). If your loved one is very poorly and you do not want children to see them like this, you could consider a phone call instead.

If children are talking on the phone or video call, encourage them to say goodbye at the end of the conversation. This ensures they will always have had the opportunity to do this, just in case they don't have the opportunity to do this again. You don't have to be obvious about this, simply just remind them at the end of the call to "say goodbye now" as they usually would if they were on the telephone.

### Recording a message

If you're not sure about what to say on the phone, or your loved one is too poorly or tired to speak to you, you could record a voice or video message. You could share some special messages about how much you love the person and how you are thinking of them. Maybe share some family jokes or memories, or read them a story. Or you could just tell them about your day, what you've been up to, what you had for dinner, who you've spoken to. Children in

the family could record individual messages and then a joint one. When you send the message to their phone, they can listen to it or watch it as often as they want.

## Sounds of home

Sometimes it's the little things about home that are comforting: the dog barking, the microwave pinging, children thundering down the stairs. You could make a recording of some of the sounds that are special to your home that will help your loved one feel connected.

## Listening to music

If you have a special family song or piece of music, you could ask the healthcare staff to play this to your loved one at an agreed time of day. You can listen to it at home at the same time, so you are listening together.

## Writing a message

You could send in a letter or card for your loved one to read, or for someone to read out to them. It could just be a chatty letter, or it could include important things you'd like to say to them. Sometimes it is hard to find the right words, particularly if your relationship with the person has been difficult at times, or if you're not used to talking about deep things. If you're looking for help to start you off, try completing and saving Julie Stokes' Little Box of Big Thoughts.

If you're writing a short message you could write it in a card, or if you're good at crafts you could try making this origami heart and writing your message inside. Children could draw pictures for the person and you could make a collage of family photos. Rather than posting things in, you could take photos of them and send them via phone.

## Hearts and bracelets

You could cut a heart shape from any material such as an old piece of clothing. The heart could then be attached to your loved one's night clothes to be with them at all times: a nurse can do this for you. That way they will still have you close to them. Children could also make friendship bracelets or simple plaits with coloured threads that represent things they love about the person.

## Something to hold

You could send something comforting in for your loved one to keep close. It might be a cuddly toy or something that can represent you and your family at home. Or maybe a blanket, jumper or something else that is comforting to touch. Children could give it a cuddle first, and then it could be given to your loved one to keep close to them. You could give it a spray of your favourite aftershave or perfume so that it smells of you. Scents are powerful reminders. You would put scented flowers, dried herbs or leaves in the middle of a circle of fabric to make a little bag. Gather the fabric in and tie it with a ribbon or string: no sewing needed.

## Pairs

If you have two of the same thing, you could keep one at home and send one to be with your loved one. Perhaps two cuddly toys, two pebbles from your garden, two ornaments, or even

two mugs with the same design. If one of these is near each of you, it can help you feel connected.

## Beyond the door visualisation

This is a simple technique you can use together with the person/people caring for your loved one to help them feel connected to you. Ask staff to help you with it.

Over the phone, ask your loved one to look towards the door of their room or the curtain of their cubicle. You can say something like *'Beyond that door, not too far away, I am here, thinking about you, sending you all my/our love. Just beyond that door, you should be able to feel it from where you are, you are not alone. I want you to remember that if you feel worried or lonely later, you are not alone.'* You may prefer to explain this in your own way. This will help your loved one remember the love and connection in their life even when you are not physically there with them.

The person caring for your loved one can also prompt them by reminding them that *'Beyond that door, everyone you love is thinking about you and sending you love.'* They can repeat the simple phrase to help your loved one stay connected and close to you. And when you speak to them on the phone, you can remind them *'We are just beyond the door, thinking of you and sending you love'*.

You may have many ideas that are personal and helpful to you and your family at this very difficult time. Although you may not be able to physically be there, you will help them so much by knowing you are thinking of them and keeping them close to you.

*Acknowledgements: with thanks to Ailsa Hill, Julie Stokes, Alison Meehan, Julie Eke, Donna Hastings, Di Stubbs and Pam Firth.*