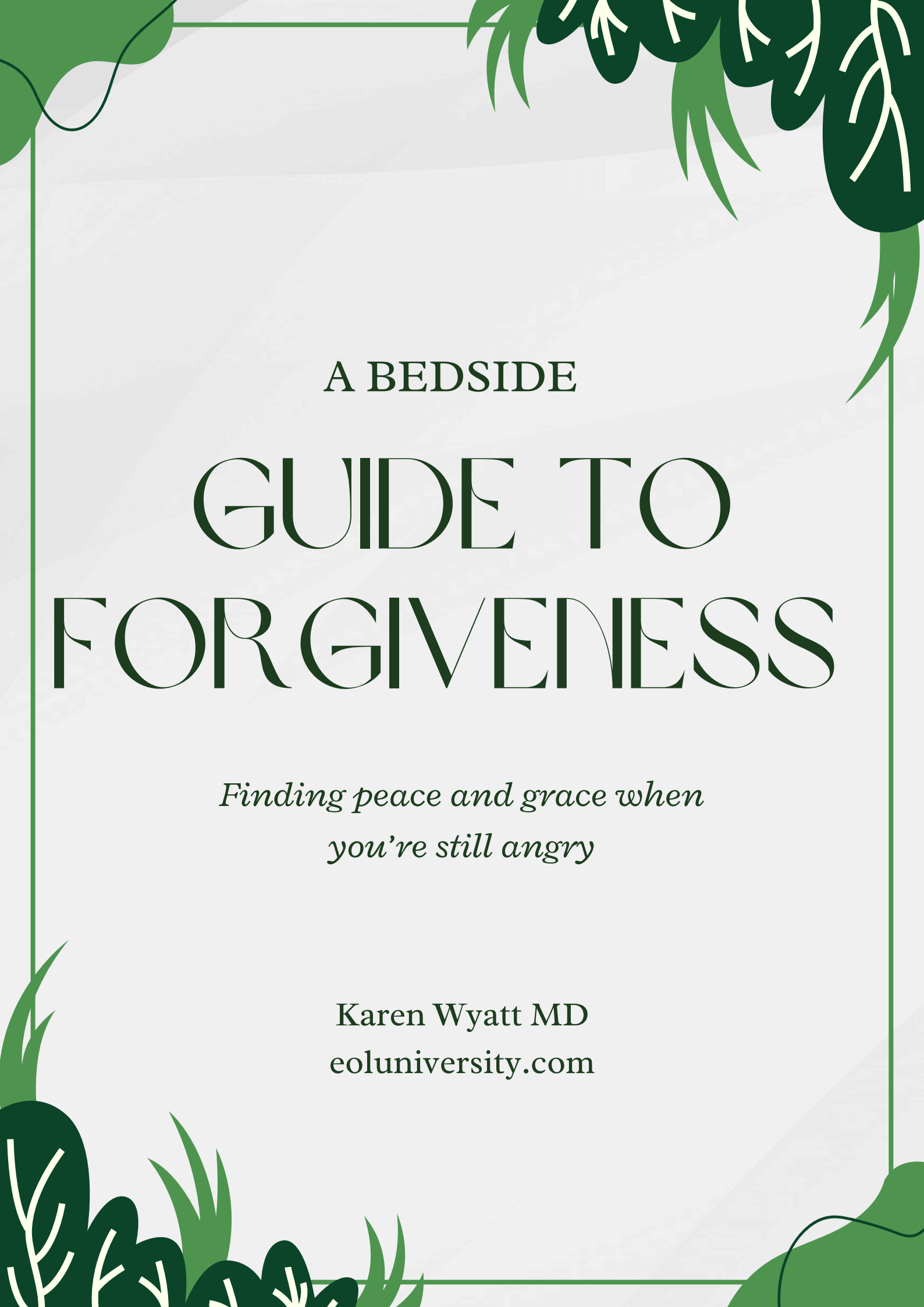
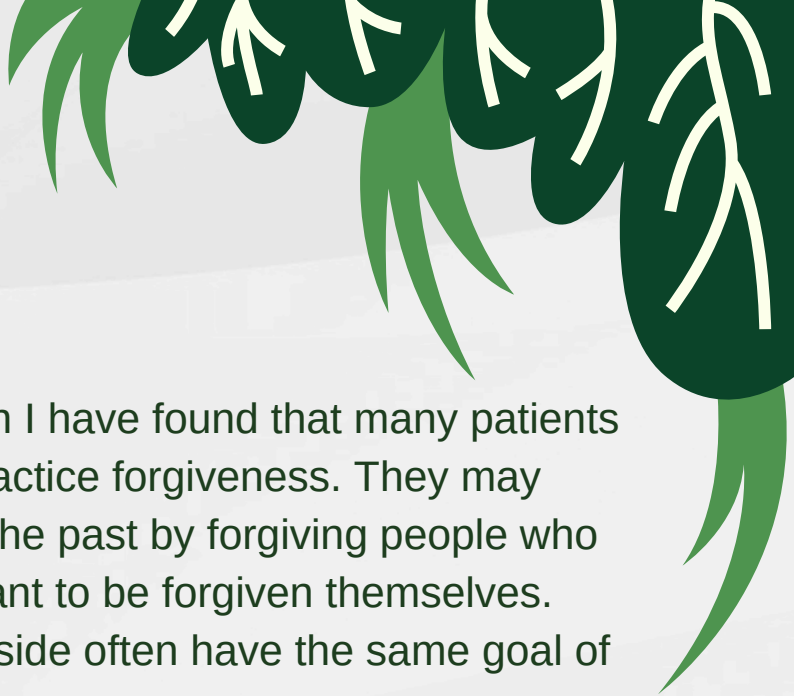




A BEDSIDE GUIDE TO FORGIVENESS

*Finding peace and grace when
you're still angry*

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Introduction

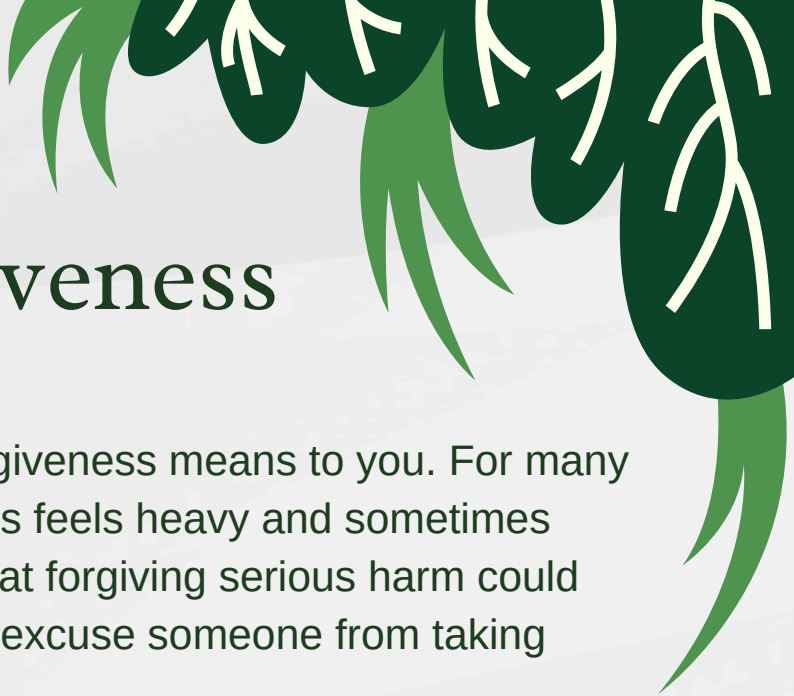
In my work as a hospice physician I have found that many patients at the end of life are longing to practice forgiveness. They may wish to heal old grievances from the past by forgiving people who have done harm and they may want to be forgiven themselves. Loved ones who come to the bedside often have the same goal of achieving some sort of forgiveness.

But no one knows where to begin when time is limited and forgiving a lifetime of pain is a huge task.

However, the end of life is a time like no other. It is a ***threshold time***. The person who is dying is on the threshold of leaving behind their physical existence. And each of their loved ones is also on a threshold—nothing will be the same again after that threshold is crossed.

During this brief window of time when families and friends gather to say a final goodbye, small shifts can make a huge difference. It's not necessary to resolve every issue or rush the process of forgiveness. In this guide we'll discuss some simple practices for loosening resentment and making room for peace ... if you still feel angry or hurt. These practices can be utilized by loved ones sitting vigil or by death workers assisting families as they confront past wounds that arise at the end of life.





Defining Forgiveness

It's helpful to think about what forgiveness means to you. For many of us to ask for or offer forgiveness feels heavy and sometimes unjustified. There may be fears that forgiving serious harm could allow it to happen again and may excuse someone from taking responsibility for their actions.

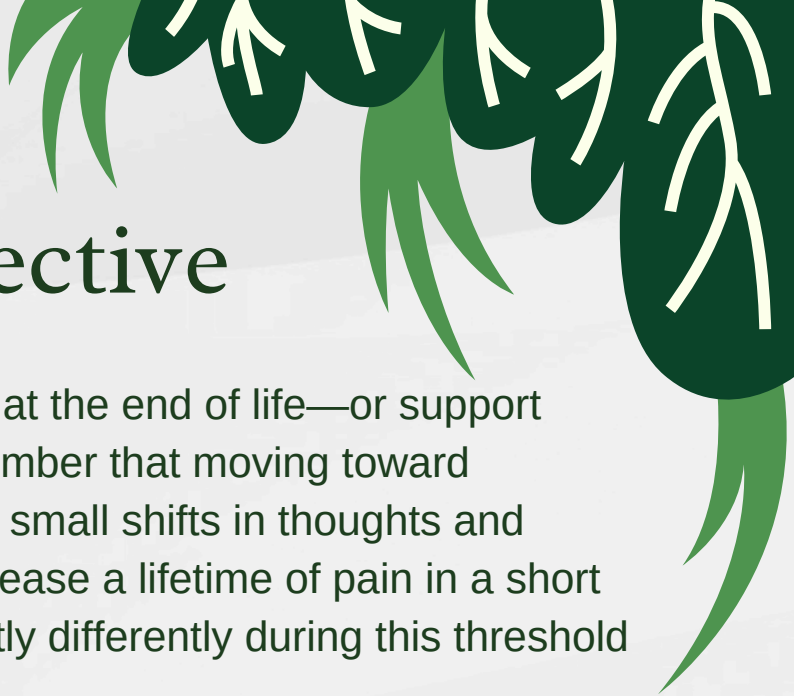
For the purpose of this handout forgiveness doesn't have to mean changing your judgment about what happened. It doesn't necessarily mean excusing what happened, deciding it didn't matter, forgetting it, trusting someone again, reconciling, removing necessary boundaries, or even feeling warmly toward the other person.

Here forgiveness means ***loosening the hold the past has on the present***—finding a way to live with what happened without allowing it to control what happens now.

And the end of life threshold is a time when we can see change if we can loosen—even just a tiny amount—our assumptions, our resentments, our certainty, our old family roles.

Forgiveness doesn't have to transform the past. It creates more freedom in the present moment.





Shifting Perspective

As you come together with family at the end of life—or support families as a death worker—remember that moving toward forgiveness can happen with very small shifts in thoughts and behavior. Rather than trying to release a lifetime of pain in a short time, focus on seeing things slightly differently during this threshold time.

Hold Lightly What You Know

The stories you have held over the years form your own perspective on the past and also on the identities of your family members. But be willing to consider that each person carries their own version of those stories and also that they may have changed over time.

Be curious to see if and how others have changed rather than holding them rigidly in the role they used to play. Look for evidence of “the good” instead of seeing only signs that nothing has changed.

Don't Rehearse the Old Story

Try not to fall into old alliances from the past with other family members. Avoid the temptation to label other people, gossip, scapegoat, and retell the stories that keep everyone trapped in their old roles. Try to keep your mind open to each person.

Find Grace Within Grief

Remember that everyone is feeling uncomfortable at this threshold. You are each grieving in your own way and experiencing some combination of sadness, fear, guilt, relief, confusion, anger, exhaustion, and more. Be slow to anger in this situation and be gentle with yourself, as well.

Ask Rather than Assume

You can't know what someone else is thinking or feeling without listening. Don't assume you know what others want or are motivated by but be willing to ask first and to hear what they have to say.

This includes the person who is dying. Though they may have felt strongly about something or someone in the past, they may see it differently now. So ask: Who do you want to see? What would you like to talk about?

Notice When Your Younger Self is Triggered

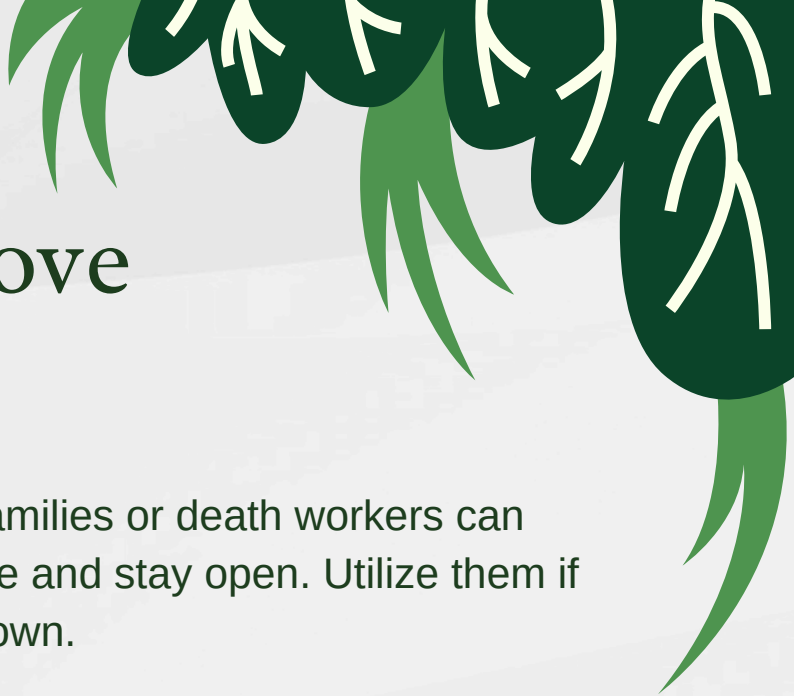
One of the common experiences of returning to a complicated family during a threshold time is to be transported back to childhood or adolescence and re-experience all the trauma and frustration that occurred at those ages.

But it's impossible to remain rational while reliving the past so follow these steps: recognize that the emotions of your younger self are rising to the surface; pause and acknowledge that those feelings are important; choose to carry that history with you rather than letting it take over your behavior.

Leave Room for Surprise

Entering this end-of-life threshold can change people, sometimes subtly and sometimes in very noticeable ways. But change doesn't always happen. Sometimes our predictions about how our loved ones will respond based on past evidence turn out to be true. But if we arrive already certain about how bad this situation might become we may miss the tiny wonderful changes that can happen: someone stops arguing, someone reaches for a hand, two people make eye contact that haven't spoken for years, the "always unreliable" person shows up at just the right time.

Threshold times can reveal capacities in people that their families have never seen before. So be open for those little surprises here and there.



Practices to Move Toward Peace

These are simple practices that families or death workers can utilize as small reminders to pause and stay open. Utilize them if they seem helpful or create your own.

Threshold Blessing

Place a small sign on the door with a blessing that reminds visitors to tend to their own emotions:

***“Enter with an open heart and mind.
Set aside grievances for another time and place.
Be open to surprise.”***

Mantra: “May I meet whatever arises.”

Have a short mantra you can repeat to yourself throughout the day to remember why you are there. Asking to meet what arises doesn't demand that everything be perfect. It acknowledges that situations will arise that you didn't anticipate and requests that you be able to meet those challenging moments. You could write your mantra on a piece of paper and post it on the door or wall as a reminder.

Other mantras:

“It doesn't have to be perfect.”

“This day will never come again.”

“Leave room for tiny surprises.”

“I can be angry at someone and love them at the same time.”

“The past no longer exists and the future hasn't arrived yet ... there is only this present moment.”

“Right here ... right now ... I'm okay.”



Practices ... cont'd.

The Holding Stone

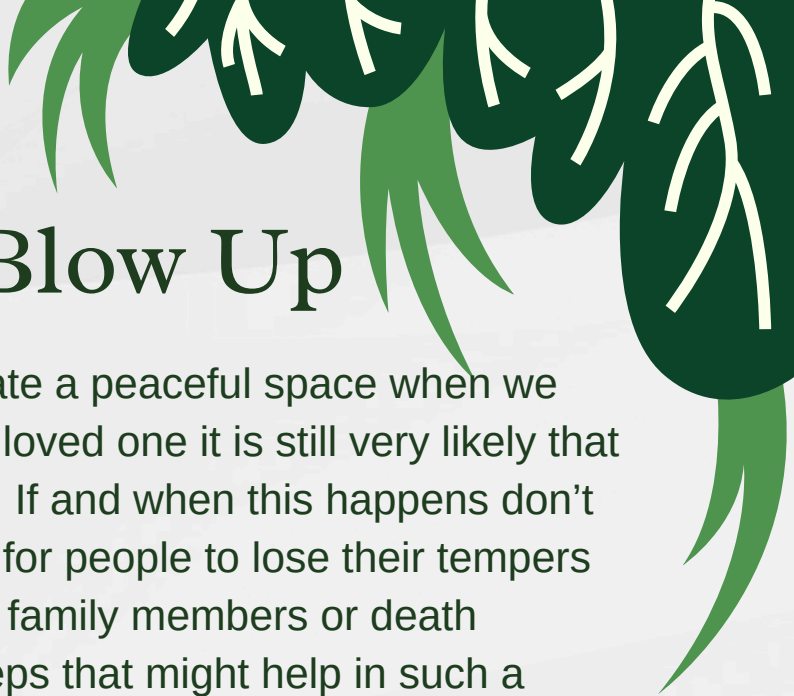
A small practice a death worker might introduce: have a basket of smooth stones near the door with a sign that invites people to take one and carry it throughout the day. The sign might say something like this:

“Take a stone if you'd like.
Carry it as a reminder that
everything you feel is welcome,
but not everything needs to be resolved right now.
When emotions rise, hold the stone.
Take a breath. Pause before speaking.
The next moment is still available.
When you leave, return the stone
or take it with you.”

Untying the Knot

Place a ribbon or string in a prominent place—on a table or bookshelf or hanging from a door. When someone feels a stressful memory or thought arise they can tie a knot (or several) in the ribbon to represent what is left unresolved for now.

Later if that issue subsides or has been dealt with they can untie knots in the ribbon as a symbol of releasing or letting go of something painful from the past. After the death the family can sit together with the ribbon and ask what if anything needs to be spoken or untied at that time.



When Things Blow Up

No matter how hard we try to create a peaceful space when we come together to care for a dying loved one it is still very likely that things will boil over at some point. If and when this happens don't panic. Remember that it's normal for people to lose their tempers when under this much stress. For family members or death workers here are some simple steps that might help in such a situation:

Tend to the Basic Needs First

Lack of sleep and food can elevate minor tensions into a crisis. Make sure everyone remembers to eat something and drink water. Find out who might need rest or a break in the near future.

Create Space

Separate from one another for awhile. Send someone on an errand or out for a walk; agree to divide the time into shifts so that there are fewer people in the house or room at one time.

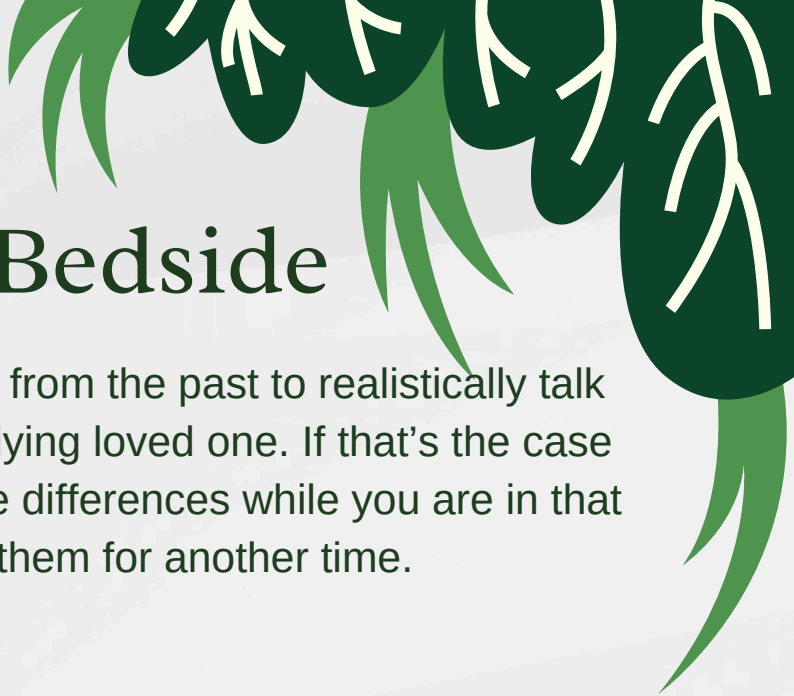
Interrupt the Argument Sooner Rather than Later

Suggest the conversation be tabled for now and saved for a better time when everyone is rested. Set a temporary boundary that protects the possibility of future reconnection. Refocus attention on the needs of the dying person.

Repair Quickly and Simply

Try a simple apology ("I shouldn't have said that") or agree to disagree for now. Acknowledge that everyone is exhausted and grieving and ask to start again.

Remember that one bad moment doesn't ruin the whole experience.



Words for the Bedside

Sometimes there's too much pain from the past to realistically talk through as you are sitting with a dying loved one. If that's the case you can choose to set aside those differences while you are in that sacred space and agree to leave them for another time.

You don't have to talk about it.

But if you have an issue with the dying person that you feel needs to be resolved use your best judgment about what to say or not say. Remember that two things can be true at once: **you can still be intensely angry at this person and also still love them.** It's okay to express love in any way that you can and choose in the moment how much anger should be spoken.

Sometimes a simple look, hand squeeze, or a whispered "I'm sorry" can be enough to break down a wall of resentment. Saying "I was badly hurt" can be a brief but powerful way to express deeper emotions when there is no room for a discussion. Here are some examples of things you might say.

"Things haven't been perfect, but we are here together now."

"You have given me what you could and I'm grateful."

"You have loved us well. You have given us the tools we need to carry on. You will always be in our hearts."

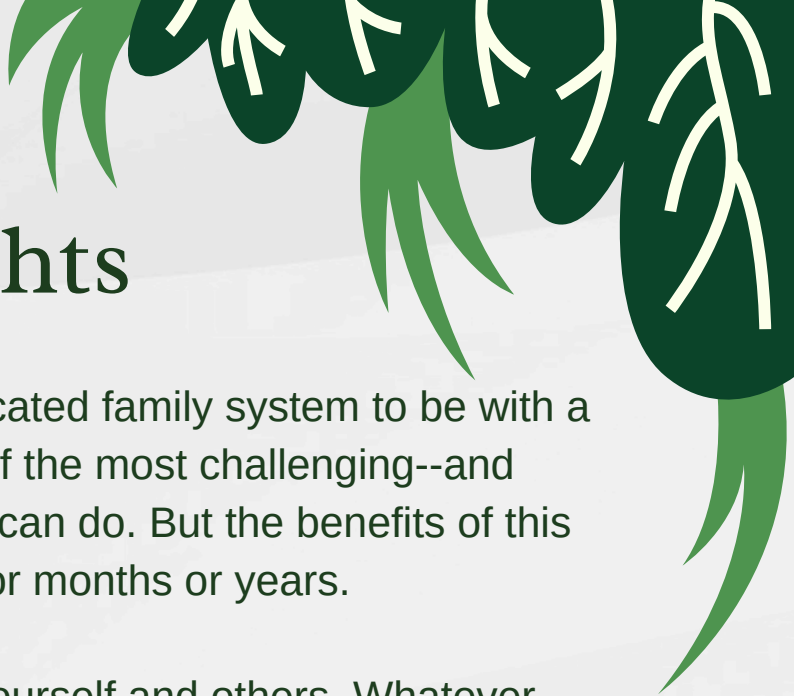
"Your work here has mattered."

"Our relationship isn't disappearing."

"I don't know exactly how I'll do this without you, and I know it will be hard. But I will find my way."

"I love you. I'll carry that love with me."

"You have done well with the life you were given."



Closing Thoughts

Gathering together within a complicated family system to be with a loved one at the end of life is one of the most challenging--and potentially most fruitful--things you can do. But the benefits of this threshold time may not be visible for months or years.

Be patient. Have compassion for yourself and others. Whatever has happened during this time together may have released something from the past and planted seeds for the future. Even the tiniest shift now can bring about big changes eventually.

Be grateful for this opportunity to sit at the threshold. Be prepared for the next time you are asked to gather together. Be kind.

The Prayer of Faith

We trust that beyond absence there is a presence.
That beyond the pain there can be healing.
That beyond the brokenness there can be wholeness.
That beyond the anger there may be peace.
That beyond the hurting there may be forgiveness.
That beyond the silence there may be the word.
That beyond the word there may be understanding.
That through understanding there is love.

-Author unknown.

