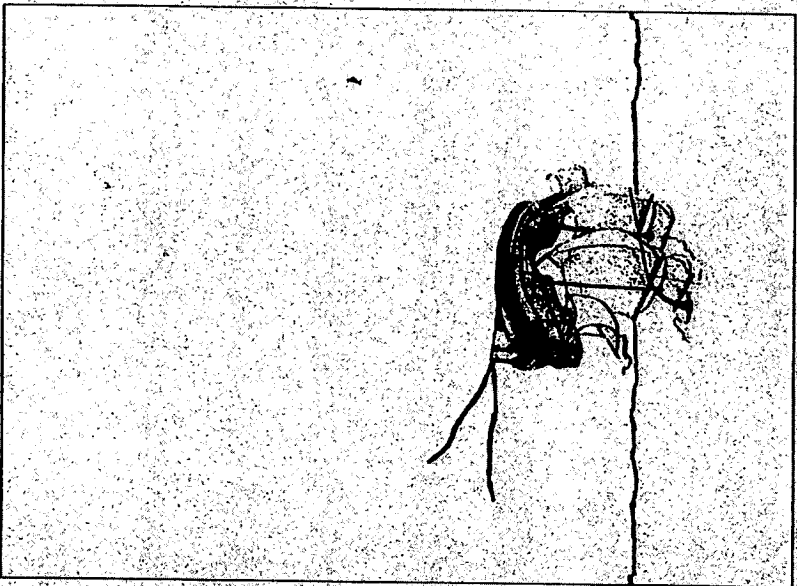


# GONE FROM MY SIGHT



## The Dying Experience

Barbara Karnes, RN

### GONE FROM MY SIGHT

Each person approaches death in their own way, bringing to this last experience their own uniqueness. What is listed here is simply a guideline, a road map. Like any map, there are many roads arriving at the same destination, many ways to enter the same city.

Use this guideline while remembering there is nothing concrete here; all is very, very flexible. Any one of the signs in this booklet may be present; all may be present; none may be present. For some, it will take months to separate from their physical body, for others, only minutes.

Death comes in its own time, in its own way.

Death is as unique as the individual who is experiencing it.

If the following signs were to be put on a timetable, a very flexible timetable, we could say these changes begin one to three months before death occurs. The actual dying process often begins within the two weeks prior to death. There is a shift that occurs within a person that takes them from a mental processing of death to a true comprehension and belief in their own mortality. Unfortunately, this understanding is not always shared with others.

## **ONE TO THREE MONTHS PRIOR TO DEATH**

### **WITHDRAWAL**

As the knowledge that "yes, I am dying" becomes real, a person begins to withdraw from the world around them. This is the beginning of separation, first from the world—

no more interest in newspapers or television, then from people—no more neighbors visiting: "Tell Aunt Jessie I don't feel like company today," and finally from the children, grandchildren and perhaps even those persons most loved.

This is becoming a time of withdrawing from everything outside of one's self and going inside. Inside where there is sorting out, evaluating one's self and one's life. But inside there is only room for one.

This processing of one's life is usually done with the eyes closed, so sleep increases. A morning nap is added to the usual afternoon nap. Staying in bed all day and spending more time asleep than awake becomes the norm. This appears to be just sleep but know that important work is going on inside on a level of which "outsiders" aren't aware.

With this withdrawal comes less of a need to communicate with others. Words are seen as being connected with the physical life that is being left behind. Words lose their importance; touch and wordlessness take on more meaning.

## **FOOD**

Food is the way we energize our body. It is the means by which we keep our body going, moving, alive. We eat to live. When a body is preparing to die, it is perfectly natural that eating should stop. This is one of the hardest concepts for a family to accept.

There is a gradual decrease in eating habits. Nothing tastes good. Cravings come and go. Liquids are preferred to solids. "I just don't feel like eating." Meats are the first to go, followed by vegetables and other hard-

to-digest foods, until even soft foods are no longer eaten.

It is okay not to eat. A different kind of energy is needed now. A spiritual energy, not a physical one, will sustain from here on.

## **ONE TO TWO WEEKS PRIOR TO DEATH**

### **DISORIENTATION**

Sleeping is most of the time now. A person can't seem to keep their eyes open. They can, however, be awakened from that sleep. There is literally one foot in each world. A person often becomes confused, talking to people, and about places and events that are unknown to others. They may see and converse with loved ones who have died before them. There may be picking at the bedclothes and agitated arm movements. There is a seeming aimlessness to

all physical activity. Focus is changing from this world to the next; they are losing their grounding to earth.

### PHYSICAL CHANGES

There are beginning changes that show the physical body is losing its ability to maintain itself.

**The blood pressure** often lowers.

There are changes in the **pulse beat** either increasing from a normal of eighty to upward of one hundred fifty, or decreasing anywhere down to zero.

The **body temperature** fluctuates between fever and cold.

There is **increased perspiration**, often with clamminess.

The **skin color** changes: flushed with the fever, bluish with the cold. A pale yellowish pallor (not to be confused with jaundice) often accompanies approaching death. The nail beds, hands, and feet are often pale and bluish because the heart can't circulate the blood through the body at a normal flow.

**Breathing changes** also occur.

Respiration may increase from a normal sixteen to twenty, to upward of forty or fifty breaths every minute, or decrease to nine or even six breaths a minute. There can be a puffing, a blowing of the lips on exhaling, or actual stopping of the rhythmic breathing only to resume. This generally occurs during sleep. Congestion can also occur, a rattly sound in

the lungs and upper throat. There might be coughing with this but generally nothing can be brought up. All of these breathing changes and congestion have a tendency to come and go. One minute, any or all of these symptoms may be present, the next minute, breathing may clear and be even.

#### ONE TO TWO DAYS, TO HOURS PRIOR TO DEATH

Sometimes there is a **surge of energy**. A person may talk clearly and alertly when before there had been disorientation. A favorite meal might be asked for and eaten when nothing had been eaten for days. A person might sit in the living room with relatives and visit when they hadn't wanted to be with anyone for quite a while. The spiritual energy for transition from this world to the next has arrived and it is used for a time of

physical expression before moving on. The surge of energy is not always as noticeable as the above examples, but in hindsight, it can usually be recognized.

The **one to two weeks'** signs that were present earlier become more intense as death approaches.

**Restlessness** can further increase due to lack of oxygen in the blood.

The **breathing patterns** become slower and more irregular. Breathing often stops for ten to fifteen and even thirty to forty-five seconds before resuming.

**Congestion** can be very loud. It can be affected by positioning on one side or the other. It still comes and goes.

The **eyes** may be open or semi-open but not seeing. There is a glassy look to them, often tearing.

The **hands and feet** now become purplish. The knees, ankles, and elbows are blotchy. The underside of the arms, legs, back and buttocks also can be blotchy.

Generally, a person becomes **non-responsive** (unable to respond to their environment) sometime prior to death.

How we approach death is going to depend upon our fear of life, how much we participated in that life, and how willing we are to let go of this known expression to venture into a new one. Fear and unfinished business are two big factors in determining how much resistance we put into meeting death.

The separation becomes complete when breathing stops. What appears to be the last breath is often followed by one or two long spaced breaths and then the physical body is empty. The owner is no longer in need of a heavy, nonfunctioning vehicle.

The have entered a new city, a new life.

## SUMMARY OF GUIDELINES

### ONE TO THREE MONTHS

Withdrawal from the world and people  
Decreased food intake  
Increase in sleep  
Going inside self  
Less communication

### ONE TO TWO WEEKS

Disorientation  
Agitation  
Talking with the unseen  
Confusion  
Picking at clothes

### Physical

Decreased blood pressure  
Pulse increase or decrease  
Skin color changes: pale, bluish  
Increased perspiration  
Respiration irregularities  
Congestion  
Sleeping but responding  
Complaints of body tired and heavy  
Not eating, taking little fluids  
Body temperature: hot, cold

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### DAYS OR HOURS

Intensification of one to two weeks' signs  
Surge of energy  
Decrease in blood pressure  
Eyes glassy, tearing, half open  
Irregular breathing: stop, start  
Restlessness or no activity  
Purplish, blotchy knees, feet, hands  
Pulse weak and hard to find  
Decreased urine output  
May wet or stool the bed

### MINUTES

"Fish out of water" breathing  
Cannot be awakened

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I am standing upon the seashore. A ship at my side spreads her white sails to the morning breeze and starts for the blue ocean. She is an object of beauty and strength. I stand and watch her until at length she hangs like a speck of white cloud just where the sea and sky come to mingle with each other.

Then someone at my side says: "There, she is gone!"

"Gone where?"

Gone from my sight. That is all. She is just as large in mast and hull and spar as she was when she left my side and she is just as able to bear the load of living freight to her destined port.

Her diminished size is in me, not in her. And just at the moment when someone at my side says: "There, she is gone!" There are other eyes watching her coming, and other voices ready to take up the glad shout: "Here she comes!"

And that is dying.

—Henry Van Dyke