

Touching Lives™

7 Ways to celebrate life

by Marlene Prost

Peering into the past and examining the events that gave life meaning can be a surprisingly uplifting experience. Many families find that celebrating the life of a terminally ill loved one brings everyone closer. It can inspire candid talk and laughter. What's more, the process gives the ill person, who may be feeling vulnerable, a sense of control over his or her own legacy.

These seven loving ideas can help you all cherish old memories while creating new ones.

1 Create a memorial DVD

Thanks to video and digital technology, families can select photographs, slides, and action shots of their loved one and put them to favorite music on a DVD that the "star" can enjoy now.

Helping to plan the DVD gives a dying person a sense of control at a time when they are losing control over many things, said Carol Weaver, director of enrichment at a hospice for the past 10 years. "They're leaving a living legacy for their children and grandchildren," she explains. "And it's something for family members to keep and cherish."

2 Record a life review
We all want to know that our life mattered. That's why the formal "life review" has become a popular process. Prompted by prepared questions, a dying loved one is encouraged to talk about life experiences, from early childhood on, while the family records the conversation.

"Just give suggestions, like when were you born? What was the favorite toy you played with? What are you afraid of?" Weaver says. "Not just facts and figures. Evoking emotions presents a more comprehensive view of their life."

3 Share a personal message
Sometimes it's awkward to tell even your most beloved relative or friend how you really feel. Another way: Make an audio or video recording of yourself sharing reminiscences and feelings. Weaver recalls a young woman whose taciturn grandfather wouldn't let her talk about her feelings for him. Putting them on tape, she told Weaver, allowed her the opportunity to have closure.

"Patients are reassured that their life had meaning, and that they are loved and respected," she adds—even those who are reluctant to hear it face-to-face.