

Nearing Death Awareness — Clinical Guide

Callanan & Kelley framework, symbolic communication patterns, how to interpret and respond

Overview

Nearing death awareness (NDA) is a term coined by hospice nurses Maggie Callanan and Patricia Kelley in their foundational 1992 text, *Final Gifts*. It describes a pattern of symbolic communication in the days before death — often about travel, preparation, reunion, or transition — that may be interpreted literally by clinicians and metaphorically (or literally) by those who study end-of-life experiences.

NDA is distinct from deathbed visions, though the two may overlap. While deathbed visions involve seeing deceased relatives or other figures, NDA is primarily about communication — the patient trying to describe something they are experiencing or prepare for something they sense is coming.

The Callanan & Kelley Framework

Callanan and Kelley identified two primary categories of nearing death awareness:

1. Attempts to Describe What Is Being Experienced

- Travel language: "I need my passport," "The train is coming," "I have a ticket"
- Preparation language: "I need to pack," "Is everything ready?"
- Descriptions of places: "It's so beautiful there," "I can see the garden"
- Descriptions of people: "My mother is here," "Who is that man by the door?"
- Time references: "I'm going soon," "It's almost time"

2. Requests to Complete Unfinished Business

- Asking to see a specific person (often someone not yet contacted)
- Needing to resolve a conflict or say something specific to someone
- Requesting specific religious or spiritual rituals
- Wanting to be in a specific place or position
- Asking for permission to go

Clinical Response Guide

When patients exhibit nearing death awareness, the following approach is recommended:

- Listen carefully to symbolic language — do not dismiss as confusion
- Ask gentle clarifying questions: "Tell me more about what you see" or "Where are you going?"

- Share the communication with family — they often understand the references
- Respond to requests to complete unfinished business — facilitate the visit, the conversation, the ritual
- Give permission: some patients need to hear "It's okay to go" from specific family members
- Do not argue with or correct symbolic language — the patient is communicating something real to them
- Document the communication — these patterns contribute to our understanding

Common Symbolic Themes

Theme	Example Language	Possible Meaning
Travel / journey	"I need to catch the bus"	Sensing approaching death
Preparation	"Are my bags packed?"	Getting ready to die
Reunion	"My sister is waiting for me"	Seeing deceased relatives
Permission	"Can I go now?"	Needing family's blessing
Beautiful place	"The flowers are so beautiful"	Describing what they perceive
Timing	"Not yet, but soon"	Awareness of approaching death
Transition	"I'm going through the door"	Describing the dying process

Peer-Reviewed Citations

1. Callanan M, Kelley P. *Final Gifts: Understanding the Special Awareness, Needs, and Communications of the Dying*. Bantam Books; 1992.
2. Fenwick P, Fenwick E. *The Art of Dying*. Continuum; 2006.
3. Brayne S, Lovelace H, Fenwick P. *End-of-Life Experiences and the Dying Process in a Gloucestershire Nursing Home*. OMEGA — *Journal of Death and Dying*. 2008.
4. Kerr CW, Donnelly JP, Wright ST, et al. *End-of-Life Dreams and Visions: A Longitudinal Study of Hospice Patients' Experiences*. *Journal of Palliative Medicine*. 2014;17(3):296–303.
5. Fenwick P, Brayne S. *End-of-Life Experiences: Reaching the Boundaries of Consciousness*. Springer; 2011.

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