

Naturopathic Comfort Care at End-of-Life: An introduction for doulas serving at life's thresholds *With Beth Barbeau*

Palliative care is a specialized approach to the treatment of patients with a serious or life-threatening illness which strives to improve quality of life and provide relief from the symptoms, pain and stress for the patient and their family.

Naturopathic health care dovetails beautifully with palliative care, as the naturopathic toolbox need not be an 'all or nothing' approach and can often smooth and soften the dying process where medicine falters. Naturopathic comfort care ...

- Can help moderate:
 - Emotional extremes, such as fear, anxiety, and restlessness
 - Side effects of medication or disease process, such as edema or constipation
- Offers benign and accessible self-care options for the family.
 - Remedies and products are available OTC (e.g. health food stores).
 - May be used topically, diffused, or in many other simple and effective ways if there are concerns or barriers to oral use.

Holistic comfort care encompasses nearly anything that offers solace or relief to this client and their family—fresh air, gentle music or song, natural light, candlelight (though not with O2, try a salt lamp), bouquet of flowers, singing bowls, loving presence, or the company of a beloved pet. Naturopathic comfort care includes modalities such as homeopathy, flower remedies, botanical medicine, essential oils, Reiki, therapeutic touch, or tuning forks. To a large degree, the indication for a naturopathic remedy is based less on the disease diagnosis, instead guided by the nuances of emotions, mental state, and symptom picture regardless of the cause.

Here are some examples of naturopathic strategies that can be helpful at end-of-life, with brief summaries of their primary actions in this season. Working with an experienced naturopath, homeopath, herbalist, functional medicine doctor or others well-versed in these modalities will help families benefit from the most nuanced balance and support.

Homeopathy

Homeopathy is a safe, gentle, and natural therapeutic method which uses highly diluted natural substances to relieve symptoms and help the body rebalance. It offers relief for the wide range of physical and emotional symptoms that can cause distress at end-of-life, including fear, pain, nausea, insomnia, and even shortness of breath. Homeopathic remedies don't interact with pain or other conventional medications, bringing many gentle benefits to even the most sensitive or fragile individual.

General dosing in this situation could be summarized as

- Potency 30C as long as it helps, move higher (200C) if needed
- Every 5-20 minutes in mouth or in water (pellets directly or dissolved in water/stir between doses) until relief is obtained. If no change is noted after several doses, it's likely that another remedy would be a better match and more effective.

Homeopathic Remedies

Arnica montana—(Key word) Bruised

Sore, bruised feeling; must move from side to side.

Aconitum napellus—Fear

Acute anxiety, fear of dying, and restlessness, often with a feeling of terror or panic; also, if fright is resulting in sudden high blood pressure.

Antimonium tart—Wet lungs

Rattling breathlessness, severe respiratory distress, difficulty expectorating, sensation of drowning or suffocation; anxiety from struggling to breathe or 'weight on the chest'.

Apis—Swelling

Edema or acute swelling, often puffy and generalized; skin may be red or shiny, swollen, and tight; hot inflammation or edema of joints.

Arsenicum album—Restless

Anxious, wants to get up and walk around; craves sips of water but thirst not quenched; obsessive worries about leaving things undone or family's welfare; fear of dying.

Carbo vegetabilis—Collapse

Collapsed state; labored breathing; in need of oxygen; needs a window open or constant fanning; abdomen distended with gas, cold sweat.

Ignatia amara—Grief

Grief and sadness; broken heart; anguish; lump in the throat; may help high blood pressure caused by emotional upset, grief, or trauma.

Magnesia phosphorica—Cramp

Pain from muscle spasms/cramping; radiating or neurologic pain; wants to double over with pain; tired & exhausted; better with pressure and warmth.

Natrum Muriaticum—Fluid balance

Brings fluid balance when there is excessive moisture in any part of the system, such as fluid retention in swollen legs or feet; craves salt; dislikes heat.

Nux vomica—Nausea

Nausea or vomiting; low pain tolerance; very sensitive to noise; worse in morning and with eating, better after nap and evening. Also, primary remedy for opioid-induced constipation, addressing sluggish bowel movement, abdominal cramping, and side effects of pain meds like morphine that slow gastrointestinal motility.

Pulsatilla—Emotional

Emotional sensitivity, clinginess, much weeping; restlessness, respiratory discomfort; symptoms constantly changing.

Additional Resource:

<https://homeosource.org/symptoms/homeopathy-for-hospice-and-palliative-care/>

Flower Essences

Flower essences are highly diluted energetic extracts of flowers used to support emotional, mental and spiritual well-being. They are particularly brilliant during the season of dying, which many approach with great dread, fear or sorrow. Because flower essences are the vibrational imprints of flowers, they do not interact with medication and are gentle enough for the most fragile individuals. These liquid preparations are highly effective in any application:

- Orally—a few drops in the mouth, between gum and cheek, or in water that is sipped
- Topically—in the warm water of a sponge bath, misted on the pillowcase, or applied on the wrist, soles of feet, forehead, or base of neck
- Airborne—mixed with water and misted via a small spray bottle or diffuser.

Flower remedies**Angel's Trumpet**

Supports spiritual surrender, opening the heart to the spiritual world, and deep peace. Angel's Trumpet strengthens the soul's ability to prepare for passage into the spiritual world; often used in combination with Angelica, addressing loneliness and fear of death.

Angelica

As the end-of-life journey progresses, the veil thins between the earthly and spiritual realms, and it's common for dying to speak of seeing angels, guides, or those that have passed on before them. Angelica is particularly indicated if this is frightening for them, or for their care providers if it's frightening to *them*.

Gorse

For those who have lost all hope, given up the fight and feel that there is no light at the end; consider when there are feelings of extreme hopelessness and despair.

Honeysuckle

Supports coming into the present and letting go, no matter how hard that may be; for over-attachment to memories.

Olive

For those who are exhausted after prolonged periods of strain through personal difficulties, an intense lengthy illness, or nursing someone else for a long time.

Rescue Remedy

Rescue Remedy is a 5-flower essence blend that promotes calm and clarity, helping to relieve stress, grief, overwhelm, shock, or trauma. It's the most well-known and commonly used Bach flower remedy, available at most health food stores.

Willow

Helps ease feelings of being short-changed by life, or feelings of resentment and bitterness; it helps one to regain a sense of humor.

[FES/Flower Essence Services](#)

High quality brand offering several lovely 'hospice blends', such as Compassionate Care Giver, Grief Relief, and Peaceful.

Essential Oils

Essential oils are the volatile, aromatic, non-water-soluble liquids obtained by steam or hydro-distillation of botanicals, any part of the plant may be used. It's crucial to select essential oils from reliable sources that consistently process the plant material in a proper manner, the cheaper ones lose medicinal qualities by being extracted through heat or petrochemicals.

These oils can be used in diffusion, gentle massage blends, or just sniffed for end-of-life care, providing soothing effects to both the patient and caregivers. They are potent; use sparingly, check for patient sensitivities, and always dilute especially in palliative settings.

Angelica

Angelica has a calming effect on the nervous system and an ability to help relieve tension, anxiety, and panic episodes, making it valuable for end-of-life emotional support. Additionally, angelica oil has physical benefits relevant to maintaining comfort in dying patients such as being an expectorant, antispasmodic, and diuretic, any of which may support respiratory comfort. Studies show it can reduce high heart rate and blood pressure when diffused and inhaled.

Clary Sage

Clary sage is a valuable aid for reducing anxiety and tension; here's evidence that it can lower abnormally high systolic and/or diastolic blood pressure related to tension. (Not for use with estrogen-dependent cancers.)

Frankincense

Frankincense is noted for helping to ease transitions with its grounding, spiritual, and calming properties. Historically considered a sacred oil, it promotes a sense of peace and encourages deeper introspection and spiritual connection when facing fear, loss, or transition.

Lavender

Lavender works to quickly calm strong emotions and ground the nervous system by bringing awareness back into the moment. It's widely valued for its soothing effects, helping to release pent up emotions while allowing energy to move and flow through the body. Lavender can help restore balance, reduce anxiety, improve sleep quality, ease agitation, provide comfort for both emotional and physical distress, and even reduce fast heart rates and lower blood pressure.

Sandalwood

A traditional oil used at transition, sandalwood has a calming, centering effect that supports emotional peace and spiritual well-being. Its earthy aroma is often used to quiet the mind, help reduce agitation, and facilitate meditation or restful states near end-of-life. Also known for lowering cortisol (stress hormone), it can support relaxation and a sense of letting go.

Ylang Ylang

With its sweet fragrance, Ylang Ylang can bring comfort, promote feelings of joy, and ease emotional pain connected to loss. It's appreciated for reducing stress, improving mood, and supporting emotional equilibrium.

Additional Resource:

[REVIVE](#) has high quality *and* fairly priced essential oils (note: affiliate link).

Botanical Medicine/Herbology

A plant is considered an 'herb' in botanical medicine if any part (bark, root, flower, leaf, or whole plant) is used for its scent, flavor or therapeutic properties. Herbs offer relief, nurturing, and support through the dying and grief process for both patient and family and are typically used in this season as a tea (maybe a few together) or tincture (single concentrate).

Chamomile (*Matricaria chamomilla*)

Many families are reassured by the familiarity of chamomile, which brings gentle calming, soothing, and healing properties to end-of-life care. It has mild analgesic properties, making it useful managing light pain or headaches. Its mild sedative qualities may help relieve insomnia, disturbed sleep, and restlessness; topically it's anti-inflammatory and soothing to wounds and sores, helpful in reducing symptoms of oral mucositis.

Lemon Balm (*Melissa officinalis*)

Wonderful gentle nervine lifts depression and sadness, especially when grief has taken over.

Marshmallow Root (*Althaea officinalis*)

A well-regarded medicinal and nourishing herb. Its mucilage soothes, hydrates and heals mucous membranes (including those damaged by caustic treatments like chemotherapy); forms a protective barrier on delicate tissues: and can ease painful symptoms in the digestive tract, respiratory tract, and urinary system common in hospice patients.

Motherwort (*Leonurus cardiaca*)

Motherwort is a gentle nervine and heart tonic traditionally used to relieve anxiety, nervous tension, and ‘emotional’ heart sensations such as palpitations where stress or emotional upheaval are contributing factors; it embodies the archetype of a nurturing, supportive “mother’s hug” for the heart and nerves.

Skullcap (*Scutellaria lateriflora*)

Skullcap is relaxing for the nervous system and brain, helping to quiet thoughts and bring rest or focus on the present; especially useful when the brain can’t stop whirling thoughts or relieving a painful experience.

Additional Resource:

<https://www.evolutionaryherbalism.com/2018/07/13/herbs-for-grief/>

General Resources:

- *The Art of Being a Healing Presence: A Guide for Those in Caring Relationships*, by James E. Miller
- [Barbara Karnes RN](#), hospice pioneer offering compassionate end-of-life education designed to guide families and professionals through the final stages of life, with a fantastic blog, booklets, more. (See her videos in your Lifespan resources.)
- [The Threshold Choir](#): Singing for those at the thresholds of life

Beth S. Barbeau, CPM, LM, is a homebirth midwife and educator with 40+ years of experience in holistic maternity care and naturopathic family health. She and her sister Laura (a doula) extensively used holistic modalities through their mother’s nine-month home hospice journey, followed by after-death home care. Beth also pioneered the Holistic Doula Program at The Naturopathic Institute and taught Death and Dying within their Certified Naturopath curriculum. In 2007 she founded *Indigo Forest: Health Births, Healthy Lives* where she focuses on practical, evidence-informed courses, and resources to empower families and professionals.