

Terminal illness

Supporting a child through a loved one's terminal illness is incredibly difficult. Every child's reaction to terminal illness and loved ones passing away will be different, but below are some general suggestions of what to expect from an autistic child coping with a loved one being terminally ill, and some things you can do help your child cope with what's happening.

Your child's reactions may not be what you expect

It's common for autistic children to take a while to process emotional news, and it tends to take longer the more emotion the child needs to work through. Your child may have no reaction that you can see to news about their relative's condition, which can make it seem like they don't care. Some children handle big emotions by going still and blank on the outside – they stop focussing on what they're doing with their face and body so that they can put all their energy towards the new feelings. Others take a while to process what they've been told, and may have a big emotional reaction hours, days, or even weeks after the initial conversation.

Your child may need support dealing with uncertainty

Even under normal circumstances, most autistic children need clear timelines and concrete information about what is going to happen. This is likely to increase when what's happening is something as emotionally devastating as a terminally ill relative. Giving your child as much concrete information as possible can help, including walking them through all the steps of how hospital or hospice visits will work, and what will happen at the eventual funeral. (It's absolutely understandable if this is too difficult; you may want to nominate someone else who is familiar with the situation but not as close to the terminally ill person who can talk your child through detailed steps as much as they need. Having a written or visual timeline that your child can refer to by themselves when they feel anxious, without involving you or making you go back over painful details, can also help.)

Your child may ask difficult and painful questions

It's common for autistic children to seek out as much information as possible when faced with stressful and emotional situations, and to need that information repeated. This can lead to children asking over-specific, uncomfortable, and painful questions about what exactly is happening to their ill relative's body, how treatments or pain relief work, what will happen to their body after they die, how specific parts of their illness feel, etc. These questions can come out of nowhere, and may be asked repeatedly even when you've already given an answer. Like with information about timelines and future events, it helps to nominate someone the child can go to with questions, who will know the answers and isn't as close to the ill person. Depending on the specific terminal illness, there are often children's books available that can help to answer questions as well – asking at your local library or in any support groups you are part of should point you in the right direction.

Your child may talk a lot about what things will be like when their relative is gone

Similar to repeated questions about timelines, it's normal for autistic children to want lots of details about what their lives will look like without the terminally ill person. It can seem like the child is being unfeeling, or even looking forward to their relative being gone, but this is not the case at all. Children are still learning how to deal with their big emotions, especially in new and very emotional situations like a relative passing away, and a very common way that autistic people learn to process new emotions and situations is by working out what their lives will look like on the other side of a big change. It's absolutely ok not to know the answers to some of these questions – you can still help your child to work through their feelings by saying you don't know, but the two of you (or the larger family group) can work it out together.

Your child may find a special object more helpful than shared memories

After their relative is gone, making sure your child gets a special object to keep that's connected to the person can really help. Objects tend to hold more meaning to autistic people – having a special object may mean more to your child than verbally sharing memories or connecting with other people around remembering their relative. The immediate aftermath of a relative passing away – the funeral, the reception, usually a lot of people the child doesn't know, often wearing unfamiliar clothes, processing their own grief along with watching a parent or parents grieving – is often overwhelming for autistic children, but an object that they can sit with or carry around with them when they need to can provide the same feeling of connection to their relative without the overwhelm.

For more on supporting your autistic child when someone they love passes away, see our [Death and grieving resource](#) here.

This resource was written by an autistic author (2025)